

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 1 of 101

- [1- Church Services](#)
- [2- Weekly Church Calendar](#)
- [3- ADT Ad](#)
- [4- Rounds Opposes Democrats' \\$1.9 Trillion Spending Bill](#)
- [4- Thune Rejects Partisan and Wasteful Spending Package](#)
- [5- SD News Watch: South Dakota dairy industry expands to serve cheesemakers](#)
- [12- American Standard Ad](#)
- [13- Sunday Extras](#)
- [32- Inogen Ad](#)
- [33- Rep. Johnson's Weekly Column](#)
- [34- Sen. Thune's Weekly Column](#)
- [35- Gov. Noem's Weekly Column](#)
- [36- Life Alert Ad](#)
- [37- Democratic Leaders Column](#)
- [39- Rev. Snyder's Column](#)
- [41- EarthTalk - Passive Solar House](#)
- [42- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)
- [47- MobileHelp Ad](#)
- [48- Yesterday's COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [55- National Debt Relief Ad](#)
- [56- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [57- Weather Pages](#)

"I think togetherness is a very important ingredient to family life."

-Barbara Bush



- [61- Daily Devotional](#)
- [62- Physicians Life Insurance Ad](#)
- [63- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [64- News from the Associated Press](#)

Church Services

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church: Worship in the church at 8:30 a.m. (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/215332349572015/>)

Groton Christian & Missinary Alliance Church: Worship in the church at 10:30 a.m.: (<https://www.facebook.com/GrotonCMA/>)

St. John's Lutheran Church: Worship in the church at 9 a.m. (<https://www.facebook.com/stjohnsgroton/>)

Emmanuel Lutheran Church - Worship inside at 9 a.m.

(<https://www.facebook.com/Emmanuel-Lutheran-Church-GrotonSD-ELCA-636505039852208/>)

United Methodist Church: Worship, at 11 a.m. inside (<https://www.facebook.com/grotonsdumc>)

Buffalo Lake Lutheran Church, rural Eden, 10:30 a.m. Worship inside or stay in vehicle and listen on the FM.

Heaven Bound Ministries of Pierpont has worship on Saturdays at 5:30 p.m. in the basement.

Heaven Bound Ministries of Pierpont / Buffalo Lake Lutheran Church, rural Eden - will have a podcast posted. <https://anchor.fm/paul-irvin-kosel>



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

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 2 of 101

United Methodist Church

Groton and Conde

Sunday, March 7

Communion in Worship (white)
9:00 AM Conde Worship Limited
11:00 AM Groton Worship in person following CDC
Guidelines

Monday, March 8

Groton Lenten Small Group, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 9

Bible Study using social distancing in fellowship
hall, 10 a.m.; Conde Lenten Small Group, 6 p.m.

Wednesday, March 10

Confirmation - 8th graders only, 4 p.m.; UMYF, 7
p.m.

Thursday, March 11

Missions Meeting, 7 p.m.

Sunday, March 14

Conde Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 10 a.m.;
Confirmation Sunday, 11 a.m.; Groton Worship in
person following CDC Guidelines, 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran Church

Groton

Sunday, March 7

9am Worship/Communion
Milestones 7th & 8th grade

Monday, March 8

6:30 am Bible Study

Tuesday, March 9

7pm Church Council

Wednesday, March 10

6pm Confirmation
7pm Lenten Service

Sunday, March 14

9am Worship
Milestones 3yr old's,
2nd gr & 3rd gr

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton &

St. Joseph Catholic

Groton and Turton

Weekend Mass Schedule

Saturday 4:30pm Groton
Sunday 8:30am Groton & 11:00am Turton

Weekday

Tues 5:00pm Turton, W-F 8:30am Groton
Sat 10am Newman Center

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament

Each morning before Weekday Mass at 7:15am
Tues 3:45pm Turton

Confessions:

Sat. 3:45-4:15pm & Sun. 7:45am to 8:15am (G)
Sun. 10:30-10:45am (T)

Heaven Bound Ministries

Pierpont

Buffalo Lake Lutheran

Rural Eden

Saturday, March 6: Worship at Pierpont at 5:30
p.m.

Sunday, March 14: Worship at Pierpont at 5:30
p.m.

**To submit your monthly or weekly church calendar, email to
news@grotonsd.net**

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 3 of 101

Call now to get your ADT security system starting at \$19.99/mo.*



Plus get \$100 off installation[†] when you call today!

*Requires 36-month monitoring contract for intrusion only with a minimum charge of \$28.99 after the 12 month term. Equipment shown requires ADT Secure or higher. Early term. and installation fees apply. Taxes add'l. For full terms and pricing see below.

[†]Requires minimum purchase of \$449.



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DF-CD-NP-Q121

Reply by:

April 15, 2021

We're available 24/7. See if you qualify for same-day service!

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

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DF-CD-NP-Q121

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 4 of 101

Rounds Opposes Democrats' \$1.9 Trillion Spending Bill

WASHINGTON—U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) today issued the following statement after voting against the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief legislation which passed on a partisan basis without Republican support.

"Democrats used the guise of COVID-19 relief to further their left-wing agenda while putting our nation deeper into debt. I voted against this partisan \$1.9 trillion spending bill that reads more like a liberal wish list than targeted pandemic relief.

"Up until this point, we have always found a way to work together on a bipartisan basis to provide COVID-19 relief for the American people. None of the previous five pandemic relief bills received fewer than 90 votes in the United States Senate. This is the first bill that did not pass either chamber with bipartisan support. In fact, it had bipartisan opposition in the House of Representatives.

"My colleagues and I offered a reasonable conservative alternative that targeted relief to those directly impacted by the pandemic and was one-third the price. Unfortunately, Democrats were unwilling to compromise. The legislation passed today is not targeted and is not specific, but rather includes many giveaways to left-wing causes."

Thune Rejects Partisan and Wasteful Spending Package

"This is the first COVID bill to be done in an entirely partisan way, because it isn't designed to end the pandemic – it is a blatant attempt from Democrats to jam through a partisan wish list."

WASHINGTON – U.S. Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) today released the following statement after voting against the partisan \$1.9 trillion spending package:

"Despite President Biden's promises for unity and bipartisan cooperation, the first major bill considered in his presidency is a partisan and wasteful spending bill disguised as 'COVID relief.' One trillion dollars from previous bipartisan COVID bills remains unspent, and much of the spending in this bill won't be spent until long after we expect to be emerging from the pandemic. Less than 10 percent of the Democrats' \$1.9 trillion spending package goes directly to public health funding to end the COVID-19 pandemic, and just one percent is dedicated to getting vaccines to the American people.

"This is the first COVID bill to be done in an entirely partisan way, because it isn't designed to end the pandemic – it is a blatant attempt from Democrats to jam through a partisan wish list."



Inform. Enlighten. Illuminate.

South Dakota dairy industry expands to serve cheesemakers

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

Editor's note: This article is the first in a two-part special report on the rapid growth in the South Dakota dairy industry. The next segment will include a video and photo tour of a fully robotic milking operation and a profile of one of the state's most successful dairy operators.

South Dakota dairy producers have undergone a rapid expansion over the past few years to meet the milk needs of the state's growing cheesemaking industry, bringing a burst of economic prosperity to farm families and farming communities throughout the eastern half of the state.

Milk production in South Dakota rose by 12% from December 2019 to December 2020, and farmers added about 14,000 new dairy cows during that one-year period, according to the USDA National Agricultural Statistic Service. The recent jump in dairy cows and milk production continues a trend of expansion that has evolved over the past decade.

The dairy industry expansion has come in response to South Dakota's emergence as a major player in the burgeoning American cheesemaking industry, which has seen new plants come online and major expansions of existing plants in the state.

Industry experts say the increase in milking cows has come from expansion of longstanding dairies, the launch of milking operations at existing farms that have diversified, and also from the relocation of dairy operations to South Dakota from states such as California.

South Dakota officials have sought for years to strengthen the state's presence in the American dairy industry, and those efforts have dovetailed with the recent expansion of milk-processing capacity at cheese plants and a welcoming regulatory environment to spur the ongoing rise in milk cows in the state.

"We've got a tremendous amount of interest in dairy in South Dakota right now and we're growing to meet the need," said Marv Post, a Volga dairy operator who is chairman of the South Dakota Dairy Producers Association.

The overall economic impact of the dairy industry in South Dakota is difficult to pinpoint, but it remains a relatively small portion of the state's overall \$32.5 billion annual agricultural industry.

An analysis by a professor at South Dakota State University using 2012 data pegged the direct revenue generation of the state dairy industry at \$427 million a year, with about 2,000 full-time jobs, and estimated the total direct and indirect economic impact at about \$650 million a year. Most dairy operators employ a mix of local residents and immigrant workers on visas.

That report put the value of each dairy cow in the state at about \$7,100 a year, though other reports have estimated the overall economic impact of each dairy cow in South Dakota as high as \$26,000



Marv Post

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 6 of 101

a year. The industry has grown by nearly a third since the SDSU figures were released.

Even as the number of dairy cows continues to rise in the state, the number of dairy farms is on a steady decline. As in other agricultural industries, dairy farmers are increasingly using genetics, data monitoring, technology and robotics to boost the production of each individual animal while implementing an economies-of-scale approach to the size of their farms, raising the efficiency and profitability of their operations.

In 2013, South Dakota had 272 milking operations with about 92,000 cows, compared with 171 farms with 127,000

cows in 2020, representing a 37% reduction in farms and a 38% increase in number of animals. The amount of milk produced rose from 2.0 billion pounds in 2013 to 3.1 billion in 2020, a jump of 55% during that eight-year period.

The amount of milk produced by each dairy cow in the U.S. has risen by 11% over the past decade to almost 24,000 pounds per year, an increase attributed to improvements in breeding, milking technology and animal treatment.

Three major cheese producers in eastern South Dakota have created much of the capacity for the expansion of the dairy industry. The launch of Bel Brands in Brookings in 2014 and major expansions completed in 2019 at the Agropur cheese plant in Lake Norden and at the Valley Queen Cheese plant in Milbank created the need for roughly 115,000 more milking cows to meet the expanded production-capacity needs.

Some farms have sought new or expanded state waste-control permits that allow them to house and milk more animals. The KC Dairies farm operated by Edward Kavanaugh in Elkton, for example, has a concentrated animal-feeding operation expansion permit pending with the state to raise the farm's animal limit to a maximum of 2,250 milking cows and 800 head of dairy calves.

The dairy industry supported a bill this legislative session to double the time period for renewal of concentrated animal-feeding permits from five to 10 years; the bill passed and was signed into law in February.

The dairy industry's efficient response to the expansion of cheesemaking operations is close to fully satisfying the current milk-processing capacity at the state's largest cheese plants. But the ability of dairy operators to provide increasing levels of milk presents even greater opportunities for future expansion or diversification of cheese plants that are seeing no slowdown in the demand for cheese and other dairy



A pair of milking cows take a break from eating silage to nuzzle shortly after being milked at the Drumgoon Dairy near Lake Norden, South Dakota. Dairy farmers in South Dakota have added thousands of cows to their operations in recent years to provide milk for the state's growing cheese industry. Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 7 of 101

products among consumers in America and in other countries around the world.

"The milk growth has certainly got our attention, and I can tell you that we're not done growing yet," said Doug Wilke, CEO of Valley Queen Cheese.

Demand for cheese driving dairy growth

FEWER DAIRIES BUT MORE COWS IN SOUTH DAKOTA

As with most agricultural industries, economies of scale, consolidation of farms and improved production efficiency have led dairy operations in South Dakota to become fewer in number but larger in terms of animals and milk produced. This chart shows the number of operating dairies in the state, the total number of milking cows and amount of milk produced in pounds over the past eight years.

YEAR	FARMS	DAIRY COWS	POUNDS MILK
2020	171	127,000	3.1 billion
2019	180	122,000	2.8 billion
2018	207	119,000	2.7 billion
2017	219	116,000	2.6 billion
2016	233	110,000	2.5 billion
2015	256	99,000	2.3 billion
2014	260	95,000	2.1 billion
2013	272	92,000	2.0 billion

Source: S.D. Department of Agriculture

Even though consumer consumption of liquid milk has been on a steady decline in the U.S., falling by 28% from 2000 to 2019, America's appetite for dairy products overall has been on a rapid rise and reached record levels in 2019, according to data from the USDA Economic Research Service.

Per-capita consumption of all dairy products in the U.S. rose by 16% over the past 30 years, from about 560 pounds per year in 1989 to about 650 pounds per year in 2019, according to the USDA. In the past decade alone, per-capita consumption of butter is up 24%, yogurt consumption has risen by 7% and, most important to South Dakota and its cheesemaking industry, per-capita cheese consumption in the U.S. has risen by 19% in the past 10 years.

South Dakota has worked on several fronts to strengthen its dairy industry, which peaked at about 250,000 dairy cows on thousands of mostly small farms in the 1960s, but fell to only about 80,000 cows on a few hundred farms two decades later. The industry began a steady rebound in the early 2000s.

State governors, agricultural commissioners and economic development officials have worked with strong support from educators at SDSU to lure new dairies and producers of dairy products to the state and also to train future farmers to run them.

The recent expansion has been boosted significantly by expansion of milk-processing capacity by several cheesemaking plants in the eastern part of the state.

A big boost to the South Dakota cheesemaking industry came in 2014 when Bel Brands



The Valley Queen Cheese factory in Milbank, South Dakota recently underwent a \$52 million expansion that created the need for millions more pounds of milk from dairy farmers in South Dakota. Photo: Courtesy

Valley Queen Cheese

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 8 of 101

opened its \$140 million, 170,000-square-foot plant in Brookings that can produce 22 million pounds of Mini Babybel cheese rounds each year. The plant requires milk from about 15,000 cows.

The need for milk rose again when two existing cheese plants underwent significant expansions.

Valley Queen spent about \$53 million to expand its capacity by about 25% in 2019, and Agropur underwent a \$252 million expansion that nearly tripled its capacity.

The South Dakota Dairy Drive has been part of the industry stimulation effort and has seized on opportunities to draw the interest of farmers to speed growth of existing dairies or lure new producers to the state.

The program has provided opportunities for South Dakota milk producers to attend events such as the World Dairy Expo and World Ag

Expo and participate in regional educational forums sponsored by the American Dairy Association. Visits to South Dakota were also arranged for farmers considering relocation to the state.

Dairy farmer Rodney Elliott of Lake Norden said such state programs gave him information about the South Dakota dairy industry and local opportunities for development when he was considering a move from Northern Ireland to the United States. Elliott said he went on a state-sponsored trip to South Dakota in 2004 and moved here to buy land and farm in 2006.

Elliott said the state did not give him financial incentives to relocate to South Dakota, but did offer information and technical assistance.

Since then, Elliott has continued to expand his operation, called Drumgoon Dairy, growing from 1,400 milking cows initially to about 6,000 now. His farm produces about 360,000 pounds of milk each day.

Elliott underwent a significant expansion recently, including the addition of robotic milking machines, to produce more milk to accommodate the increases in capacity at both Agropur and Valley Queen.

Elliott said he sees greater opportunities for growth in the South Dakota dairy industry in the future.

"It's a young, vibrant dairy industry that is populated by good, passionate people," he said. "We look at the dairy industry and we can see a bright future here because many of the dairies are new and using the latest technology and very efficient and built for where we live."

Tom Peterson, executive director of the South Dakota Dairy Producers Association, said his group has helped several farmers start new or dairies move their operations to South Dakota, including from California, now the nation's leading state in milk production.



Rodney Elliott, operator of Drumgoon Dairy in Lake Norden, said efforts by the state of South Dakota to educate farmers about opportunities for starting a farm in the state helped him decide to move from Northern Ireland to the Rushmore State in 2006. Elliott recently expanded his milking operation to accommodate expansions by local cheese plants. Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 9 of 101

"We've had several that have relocated from that California market, which has been prevalent of late," Peterson said. "We've had a lot of growth as far as new dairies but many of our existing farmers are adding on, too."

Peterson said farmers who relocated to South Dakota from other states were reluctant to be interviewed because they did not want to discuss their relocation efforts so soon.

The recent growth in the South Dakota dairy industry has also been spurred in part by streamlining of permitting processes for farms and what is seen as a friendly regulatory environment for agricultural operations, Peterson said. Furthermore, the state's strong row-cropping industry provides a ready source of feed for milking cows, he added.

"In South Dakota, we have had a good balance of milk-processor expansion and farmers coming in for a lot of reasons, for regulatory climate and also a close proximity to feed inputs such as soybean meal or corn silage," Peterson said. "A lot of those things they need for animal care are close by in adjacent farms, so it's been kind of a win-win all the way around."

When any agricultural industry or operation expands, the agricultural industry and businesses that support it all benefit in some way, from farmers who grow corn and soybeans as feed for cows to implement-sales centers to trucking companies.

But beyond the direct impact on farmers and the agricultural industry, Peterson said growth in the dairy industry has a wider tangential boost for communities across the state.

"That money rolls around in communities; it helps local restaurants on Main Street, it helps strengthen schools that would be seeing decreasing populations," Peterson said. "It's just a big overall community benefit."

Cheesemaker sees opportunity ahead

Valley Queen Cheese in Milbank has significantly ramped up production and its need for milk over the past few years.

The cheesemaker completed the \$52 million expansion in 2019 that increased milk-processing capacity by about 25%, or roughly by 1 million pounds per day, said Wilke, the CEO. The plant now produces about 200 million pounds of cheese each year.

The plant added about 40 jobs during the expansion and now employs about 315 people with an annual payroll of about \$20 million, Wilke said.

The expansion created a significant need for more milk, and the dairy industry in South Dakota has responded by rapidly increasing production, Wilke said. Most of the increased milk production by producers who serve Valley Queen took place through expansion of existing dairies, Wilke said, though the plant has also had inquiries from farmers outside South Dakota who are considering relocation.

Valley Queen has been in operation for more than 90 years, and for much of the 2000s, the company saw steady production with little significant growth, Wilke said. Demand for cheese was strong and rising, but production growth was held back by limited local supplies of milk.

Valley Queen began its expansion at roughly the same time as the Argopur cheese plant in Lake Norden embarked on a major expansion that tripled the milk-processing capacity at its plant from 3.3 million to 9.3 million pounds per day.

The Argopur expansion was estimated to require milk from about 85,000 more cows within its service area; Valley Queen added capacity for about 15,000 more area cows during its expansion, raising the total

SOUTH DAKOTA 17TH AMONG U.S. STATES IN MILK PRODUCTION

The U.S. dairy industry produced about 218 billion pounds of milk in 2019. Here is a look at top states and Great Plains states in national rank and amount of milk produced.

Source: USDA

STATE	RANK	POUNDS
California	1st	40.6 billion
Wisconsin	2nd	30.6 billion
Idaho	3rd	15.6 billion
Minnesota	8th	9.9 billion
Iowa	12th	5.3 billion
South Dakota	17th	2.8 billion
Nebraska	25th	1.4 billion
North Dakota	35th	326 million
Montana	36th	259 million
Wyoming	40th	147 million

Source: USDA

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 10 of 101



Through selective breeding, use of technology and data monitoring and improved animal care, milk cows such as these at Drumgoon Dairy in Lake Norden, South Dakota are providing more milk than ever before, as much as 24,000 pounds a year each. Photo: Bart

Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

ies until 2023 to ramp up production to meet the full need for milk at Valley Queen, but now the capacity requirement appears likely to be reached in 2022, Wilke said.

"Milk production is running ahead of our forecast," he said.



Doug Wilke

need to about 90,000 cows, according to the companies. Valley Queen now processes about 1.8 billion pounds of milk each year from dairy farmers in South Dakota and Minnesota.

Wilke said he was curious and a bit concerned to see if the dairy industry in South Dakota could respond adequately for the increased need for milk for the three large plants and other smaller producers, such as Dimock Dairy.

In the three years since, he said he has been pleasantly surprised by the rate of expansion of dairies and the increase in the number of milking cows in the state.

"Valley Queen historically has had limited growth as a result of the milk supply being limited in South Dakota, but now we've got an abundant supply of milk and it is growing in our region," he said.

The company thought it would take South Dakota dair-

ies until 2023 to ramp up production to meet the full need for milk at Valley Queen, but now the capacity requirement appears likely to be reached in 2022, Wilke said.

With a consistent, strong supply of milk, and growing consumer demand for cheese and cheese byproducts such as whey and lactose, Valley Queen may soon see options for future expansion, Wilke said. Whey is used in protein bars and drinks, and lactose is an ingredient in candies and infant formulas, he said.

"What that next growth cycle looks like depends on how milk production continues to grow in the region and what our customers desire in terms of products," he said.

"Milk production is running ahead of our forecast ... the milk growth has certainly got our attention, and I can tell you that we're not done growing yet."

-- Doug Wilke, CEO of Valley Queen Cheese in Milbank

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 11 of 101

South Dakota dairy farmers are taking steps to support their industry in the long run, said Post, the Volga dairy farmer who recently accepted a leadership position in the national dairy industry.

Post said many dairy producers in South Dakota participate in the American Dairy Association checkoff program in which farmers donate 10 cents for every 100 pounds of milk produced to be set aside and used for marketing and promotion. That program has generated about \$3.2 million in marketing funds in the past year that can be used to promote dairy operations and products to consumers and potential entrants into the market, Post said.

Post said he was unable to provide details but said another expansion of milk-processing capacity is likely to occur soon in South Dakota that will require milk from another 30,000 to 40,000 cows.

Post said he expects South Dakota milk producers will be able to fill that need for more milk if it arises. "We've proven that every time there's been an expansion in processing, that we will produce the milk to fill that need," he said.



The Agropur cheese plant in Lake Norden, South Dakota nearly tripled its cheesemaking capacity in 2019, creating the need for about 85,000 new milking cows at dairy farms across the state. Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch file

ABOUT BART PFANKUCH



Bart Pfankuch, Rapid City, S.D., is the content director for South Dakota News Watch. A Wisconsin native, he is a former editor of the Rapid City Journal and also worked at newspapers in Florida. Bart has spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and writing coach.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 12 of 101

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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 13 of 101



THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE

*Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord.
His going forth is established as the morning;
He will come to us like the rain,
Like the latter and former rain to the earth.*

HOSEA 6:3

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BIBLE TRIVIA

by Wilson Casey

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

2. From Nehemiah 10, what's the most common starting letter of the numerous names listing priests, Levites, chiefs, and fathers? *C, B, T, H*

3. Which prophet foretold the ministry of John the Baptist? *Levi, Isaiah, Aaron, Mordecai*

4. How did Jesus enter Jerusalem during the "Triumphal Entry"? *On foot, Carried by slaves, On donkey, In golden chariot*

5. From 1 Chronicles 20, Elhanan slew Goliath's ...? *Father, Brother, Mule, Oxen*

6. In which book is the parable of the Good Samaritan? *Matthew, Mark, Luke, John*

ANSWERS: 1) Neither; 2) H; 3) Isaiah; 4) On donkey; 5) Brother; 6) Luke

"Test Your Bible Knowledge," a book with 1,206 multiple-choice questions by columnist Wilson Casey, is available in stores and online.

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Oatmeal-Raisin Muffins

Somehow, muffins seem to fit the bill for a filling breakfast, a tasty snack and even as an offering for dessert. These muffins are no exception!

- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup quick oats
- 1 cup raisins
- Sugar substitute to equal 1/4 cup sugar, suitable for baking
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon apple pie spice
- 1 cup fat-free milk
- 2 tablespoons fat-free sour cream
- 1/2 cup unsweetened applesauce
- 1 egg or equivalent in egg substitute

1. Preheat oven to 375 F. Spray a 12-hole muffin pan with butter-flavored cooking spray or line with paper liners.

2. In large bowl, combine flour, oats, raisins, sugar substitute, baking powder, baking soda and apple pie spice. In a small bowl, combine milk, sour cream, applesauce and egg. Mix well with a fork to combine.

3. Add milk mixture to flour mixture. Mix just until moistened (batter will be lumpy). Evenly divide batter into prepared muffin wells. Bake 18 to 22 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in center of muffin comes out clean.

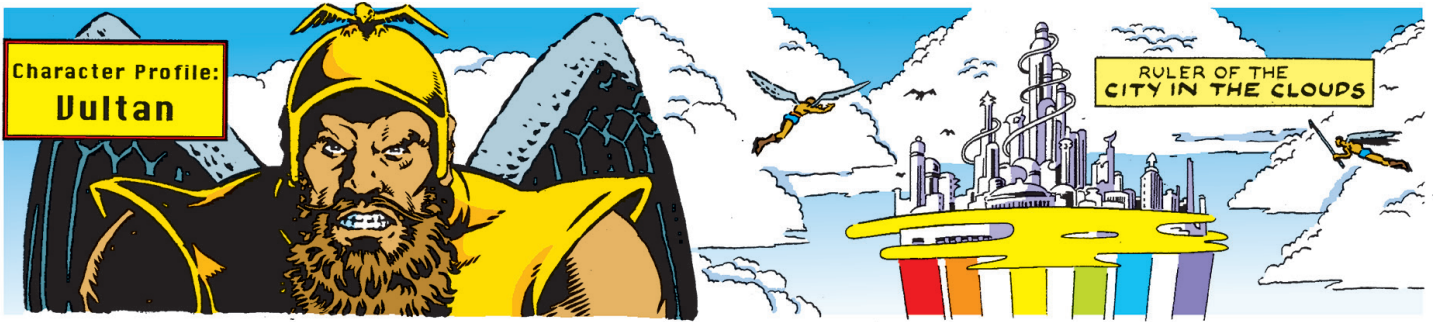
4. Place pan on a wire rack and let set 5 minutes. Remove muffins from pan and continue cooling on rack. Makes 12 servings.

* Each serving equals: About 129 calories, 1g fat, 4g protein, 26g carb., 140g sodium, 2g fiber; Diabetic Exchanges: 1 Starch, 1 Fruit.

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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 15 of 101



FLASH GORDON

By JIM KEEFE
2-28

FLASHBACK:
FLASH, PALE AND DOCTOR ZARKOV ARE REUNITED...

... BUT THEIR GOOD FORTUNE IS SHORT-LIVED AS THEY FALL PREY TO THE TALONS OF KING VULTAN.

FLASH AND HIS COMRADES ARE FORCED TO JOIN THE TORTURED SLAVES OF THE ATOM FURNACES.

IN A DESPERATE ACT, FLASH DESTROYS THE RADIUM SUPPLY WHICH HOLDS THE CITY ALOFT.

ZARKOV AGREES TO SAVE THE CITY, BUT ONLY IF VULTAN PLEDGES THAT HIS PRISONERS BE SET FREE.

VULTAN AGREES.

UPON HEARING OF FLASH'S WHEREABOUTS, MING ARRIVES IN PERSON TO DELIVER THE YOUTH TO HIS TORTURE CHAMBERS.

TAKEN BY THE EARTHMAN'S SPIRIT, VULTAN RALLIES TO HIS SIDE.

VULTAN INVOKES THE ANCIENT LAWS OF MONGO DECREERING THAT FLASH BE ALLOWED TO FIGHT FOR HIS FREEDOM...

A TOURNAMENT OF DEATH!

TO BE CONT'D ~

Play Better Golf with JACK NICKLAUS

TOP GOLFERS OF OLD FOCUSED ON HAND ACTION AS THE KEY SWING ELEMENT.

THE EMPHASIS THESE DAYS HAS SHIFTED MUCH MORE TO BODY ACTION.

THE KEY TO ME, IS A BALANCED USE OF BOTH.

I BEST ACHIEVE THAT WHEN I FOCUS ON CORRECT BODY ACTION, WHICH PROMOTES PROPER HAND ACTION REFLEXIVELY.

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Deep Vein Thrombosis Usually Due to Surgery



DEAR DR. ROACH: I am a 47-year-old woman. Five years ago, I developed a blood clot in my left leg after fracturing my ankle and being immobilized for several months. I was put on a blood thinner, and my ankle healed. Recently that leg started swelling again, and I went for an ultrasound. I was told that I have a chronic DVT, but that I don't need blood thinners. Why do I not need a blood thinner now when I did before? What does "chronic" mean? Why am I getting swelling again five years after the first clot? -- L.S.B.

ANSWER: Blood clots can happen in veins or arteries, but the type that happen due to surgery and immobilization are almost always in the vein.

That's the "V" in "DVT," which stands for "deep vein thrombosis."

A brand-new blood clot has a high risk of propagating further up the vein, and also of breaking off and traveling through the vein into the heart. Most often, the clot will go on into the lungs, then called a "pulmonary embolus." But in the rare case, the clot can go through a patent foramen ovale, which is sometimes called a hole in the heart, and cause a stroke.

Because of the risk of life-threatening complications, acute DVTs are treated with anticoagulants, such as warfarin (Coumadin) or apixaban (Eliquis). This stabilizes the clot, and after a week or two the risk of propagation or embolization becomes much lower. Most people are treated for at least three months for maximum benefit. Treatment does not dissolve the clot, and a follow-up ultrasound will detail changes that show the clot is no longer acute, hence "chronic." The vein itself is scarred and damaged, and never returns to normal.

"Chronic DVT" isn't the best term, since it confuses many, both patients and physicians alike. I prefer scarred, and some experts use "chronic luminal changes" to differentiate it from an acute clot. Whatever it is called, it may still be symptomatic.

Most people with a history of a large clot on one leg will notice that leg swells more than the other in heat or with a large salt load. Even so, anticoagulant treatment is neither necessary nor helpful.

Effective treatment for swelling associated with previous DVT includes salt restriction, compression stockings and leg elevation several times during the day. People with more severe symptoms that do not respond to conservative management may benefit from more aggressive therapies, such as placement of a metal stent to let the blood flow better through the damaged area.

DR. ROACH WRITES: I am often asked about screening tests for pancreatic cancer. Despite the promise of new tests, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recently re-reviewed the available evidence and continues to recommend against screening in the general population. However, it's important to recognize that these recommendations do not apply to people at increased risk for pancreatic cancer, such as those with familial pancreatic cancer or with some genetic syndromes, such as Peutz-Jeghers syndrome. However, it does apply to people with other risk factors for pancreatic cancer, including smokers and those with new-onset diabetes or chronic pancreatitis.

With better screening tests, or with improved treatments for pancreatic cancer, the balance of benefits (it's currently unlikely to find early pancreatic cancer when it can be treated) to harms (false positive results can lead to unnecessary surgery) may shift.

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

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 17 of 101



It's Pi Day! Here's the formula: Take several highly talented leads, mix with a positive or negative force, add a dash of inspiration and turn up the heat — dramatically. No matter how you slice it, movies about the science of numbers are “mathemagically” delicious. And what better treat on Pi Day (3.14 ... March 14) than a heaping helping of math movies? It all adds up to plenty of entertaining couch time.

Hidden Figures — Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer and Janelle Monae play a trio of highly influential Black women in the early space program at NASA, who help to create the science, mathematics and engineering necessary to launch astronaut John Glenn into space and bring him home again, all while breaking past racial barriers.

Stand and Deliver — Based on the real-life story of Jaime Escalante (Edward James Olmos), a high-school teacher at Garfield High in East Los Angeles, this film follows a group of written-off Latino kids who took and passed the AP Calculus exam under Escalante's tutelage.

Good Will Hunting — Written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, this drama centers around Will Hunting (Damon) — a genius autodidact whose working-class roots keep him in trouble. While employed as a janitor at MIT, he anonymously solves an equation posted for the grad students. When he is found out, a professor arranges for Will to study mathematics and receive therapy in lieu of jail time.

A Beautiful Mind — Directed by Ron Howard, this biographical drama of the life of gifted American mathematician John Nash (Russell Crowe)

chronicles his lifelong struggle with schizophrenic hallucinations that led him to believe he was conducting anti-Soviet research on behalf of the Department of Defense.

Moneyball — What can you do when your ball club is not the winningest and has a tiny budget? If you're Billy Beane (Brad Pitt), GM-ing the Oakland A's in the early aughts, you get creative. Turning away from traditional “gut-based” scouting, Beane pulls together a team that almost wins it all using empirical analysis — assigning players a mathematical value stemming from their on-base percentage.



Universal Pictures

Russell Crowe in “A Beautiful Mind”

The Imitation Game — This tense historical drama is based on the life of Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch), who helped turn the tide of World War II by decrypting messages sent by the German Nazis using the Enigma machine.

Agora — Rachel Weisz plays Hypatia, a fourth-century astronomer and mathematician in Alexandria, Egypt. She theorizes with a small group of follower-students while civil and religious unrest threaten the world around them.

The Theory of Everything — The tragically triumphant love story of theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking (Eddie Redmayne) and his wife and partner Jane (Felicity Jones) begins at Cambridge University, where the two meet, and carries through as Hawking is diagnosed with the motor neurone disease that will leave him progressively unable to move.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 18 of 101



1. Name Joan Jett's first No. 1 hit.
2. What song was inspired by the 1962 film "Mutiny on the Bounty"?
3. Which Elvis Presley song was written with the melody of a Civil War song?
4. What kind of music did Santo & Johnny play?
5. Name the song that contains this lyric: "Dig if you will the picture of you and I engaged in a kiss."

Answers

1. The first one was also the only one, "I Love Rock 'n' Roll," in 1982. Her first release was Lesley Gore's "You Don't Own Me" in 1979.
2. "Sun of Jamaica," by Goombay Dance Band in 1979, especially the part played in the film by Marlon Brando, who is mentioned in the lyrics.
3. "Love Me Tender," taken from "Aura Lea," an 1861 ballad. West Point also began using the song, again with different lyrics and title, for graduating classes starting in 1865.
4. Instrumentals, usually on a steel guitar. Their best known was "Sleep Walk" in 1959.
5. "When Doves Cry," by Prince, in 1984. It was Prince's first No. 1 hit on the Top 100 chart. After his death in 2016, the song climbed the chart again, this time going to No. 8.

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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 19 of 101

Just Like Cats & Dogs

by Dave T. Phipps



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GRIN and BEAR IT ^{by} Wagner

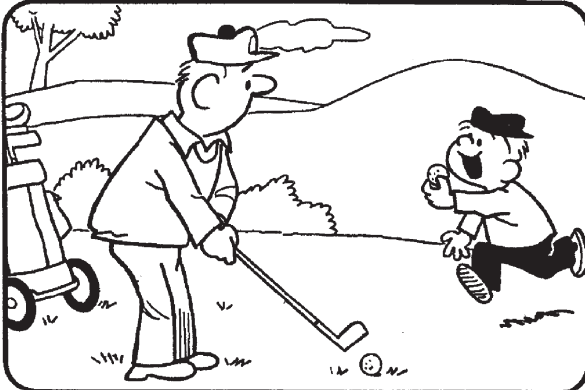


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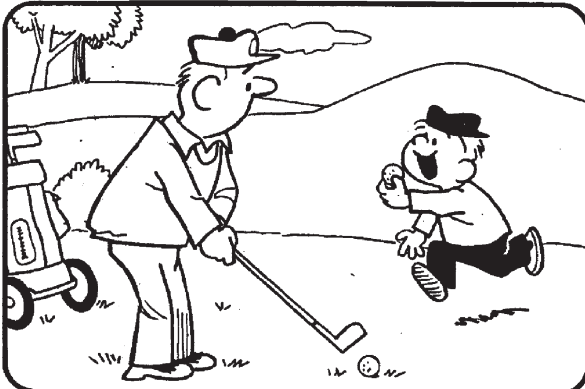
Wagner

HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.



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Differences: 1. Tree is added. 2. Boy's shoes are different. 3. Golf club is missing. 4. Golf shoes are different. 5. Hedge is missing. 6. Zipper is added.



- “When thickening soup, don’t overlook instant mashed potato mix. It’s perfect for making a thin broth into a nice, thick stew sauce, and it’s pretty cheap. It only takes a couple of tablespoons.” — *I.F. in Utah*

- “Cut kitchen sponges into smaller pieces. They clean as well as a larger sponge, and you can dispose of the smaller pieces when they get yucky.” — *O.C. in Michigan*

- Don’t forget to clean out your dryer’s lint trap regularly. It can get clogged up, and that can be a fire hazard. Set a reminder on your phone to vacuum it out once a month.

- If you have high boots, you can use this trick to keep them looking good and upright in storage. Simply use 1-liter soda bottles. They can be empty, or you can poke some small holes

around the bottom and add a little baking soda, which will keep the boots dry and odor free.

- Ficus trees can remove up to 80% formaldehyde in the air. Other great indoor air-cleaning plants include peace lilies, ivies, spider plants and ferns.

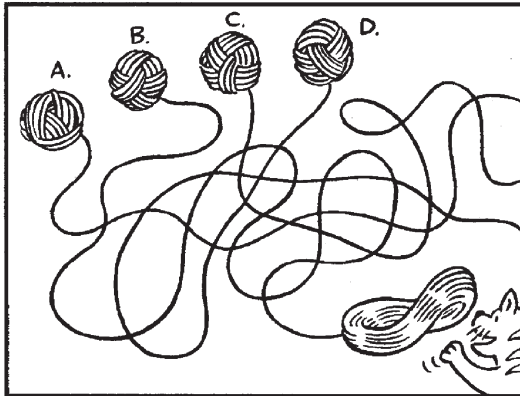
- “Have you overdyed your hair at home? Try washing your hair with a dandruff shampoo. You may have to repeat it, but dandruff shampoo can sometimes get the extra color out of your hair follicles. Make sure that you condition well afterward.” — *B.R. in Georgia*

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

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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 21 of 101



Junior Whirl

by Charles Barry Townsend

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

COLOR SEARCH

HERE'S a colorful find-the-word puzzle for you to work on. Hidden in the diagram at left are the names of 14 colors. They can be read up or down, side to side, or diagonally. Clues are below.

1. Type of sugar.
2. - bean.
3. Deep red.
4. Gardener's thumb color.
5. - snake.
6. Key fruit?
7. Bluish purple.
8. - Panther.
9. Imperial color.
10. - - eye express.
11. "The - Pimpernel"
12. Beach-goer's shade.
13. Type of flower.
14. - jacket (wasp).

A GOOD YARN! Which ball of yarn was wound from the skein of wool in grandmother's knitting basket?

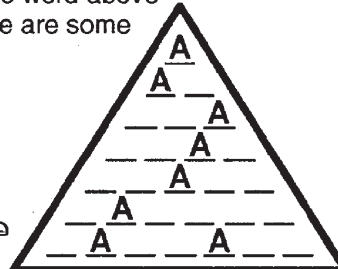
THINK ROMAN! Ten sticks are laid out to form an equation using Roman numerals. As you can see, the equation is incorrect. Can you correct it without moving any of the sticks? P.S.: It's tricky.



If you turn this page upside down, the equation will be correct.

THE "A" PYRAMID! Pictured at right is a word pyramid. Each word, as you go down the pyramid, contains the same letters as the word above it plus a new letter. We give you all of the A's. Here are some hints from the top down.

- 1) Indefinite article (given).
- 2) In or near.
- 3) A drink.
- 4) Type of food.
- 5) Intended to.
- 6) In single file.
- 7) An order.



The words are a, at, tea, meat, meant, tandem, mandate.

Illustrated by David Coulson

Answers: 1. Brown. 2. Coffee. 3. Crimson. 4. Green. 5. Indigo. 6. Lime. 7. Mauve. 8. Tan. 9. Purple. 10. Red. 11. Scarlet. 12. Pink. 9. Purple. 10. Red. 11. Scarlet. 12. Tan. 13. Violet. 14. Yellow.

TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 22 of 101

King Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 Nightwear, for short
- 4 Rm. coolers
- 7 Fable writer
- 12 Decay
- 13 Prefix with athlete
- 14 Preamble
- 15 Mode lead-in
- 16 Soundly defeated
- 18 Zilch
- 19 Berth places
- 20 Retain
- 22 Away from NNW
- 23 Roundish 'do
- 27 Writer Harper
- 29 Sitting room
- 31 Prepared apples for

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

- 45 Striped equine
- 47 Hockey's Bobby
- 48 Performed to the end
- 52 Gun-lobby org.
- 53 Broadcaster
- 54 Code-breaking gp.
- 55 Small barrel
- 56 Musical pace
- 57 Thither
- 58 Billboards
- 9 Pigs' digs
- 10 Metal source
- 11 Group of whales
- 17 Get ready, briefly
- 21 West Point freshman
- 23 Bakery lure
- 24 "Alice" waitress
- 25 Scepter
- 26 Hosp. areas
- 28 College URL ender
- 30 "Eureka!"
- 31 "Evita" narra-
- tor
- 32 Owned by us
- 33 MLB stat
- 36 Raised
- 37 Tenor Enrico
- 40 Deep, lustrous black
- 42 Candymaker Willy
- 43 Goofed
- 44 Pulls
- 45 Goose egg
- 46 — impasse
- 48 Bit of butter
- 49 Fib
- 50 Branch
- 51 "Uh-huh"

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 23 of 101

— King Crossword —

Answers

Solution time: 26 mins.

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

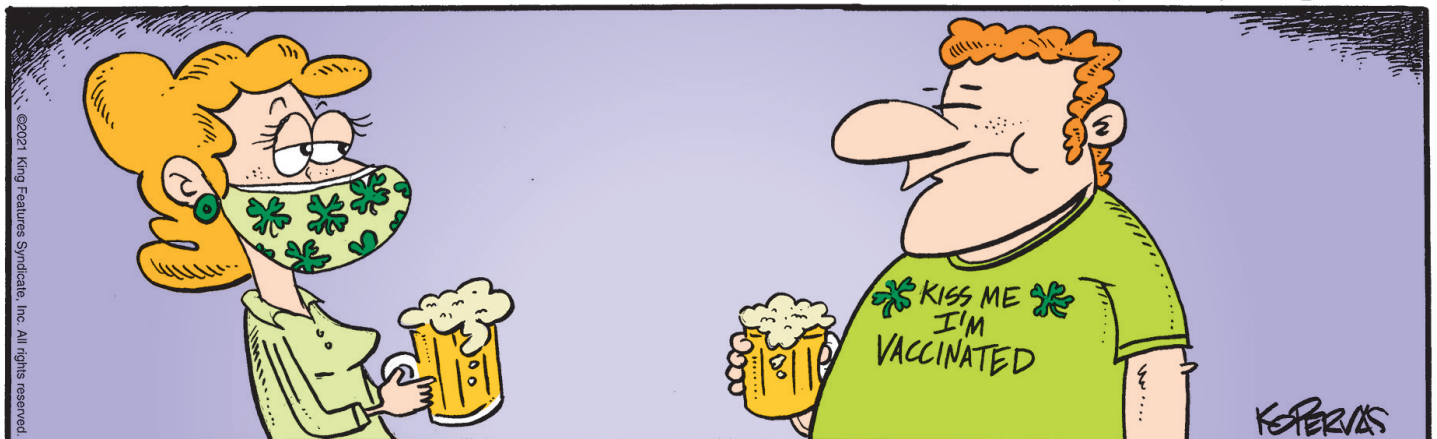
LAFF - A - DAY



"Stop complaining! If you hadn't married me you'd still be working in that laundry!"

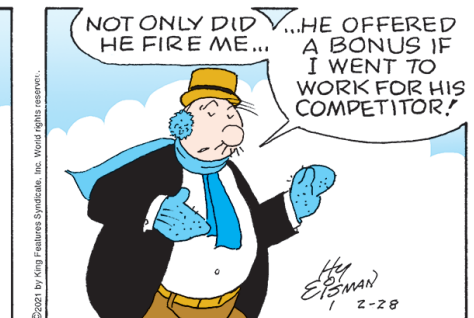
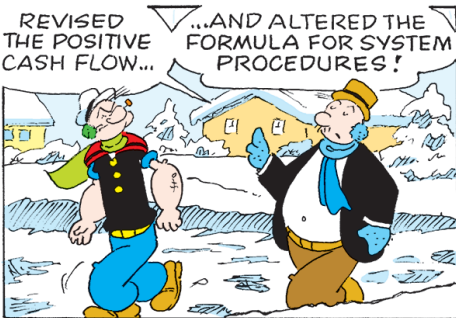
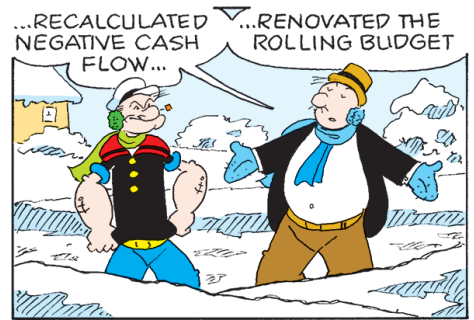
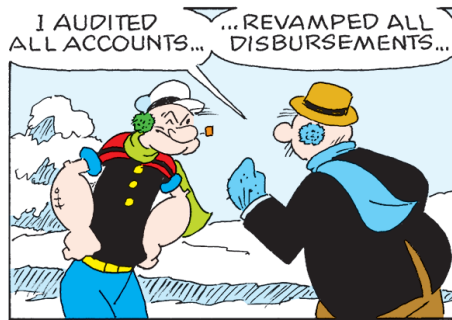
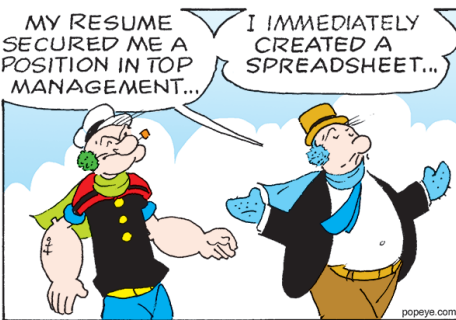
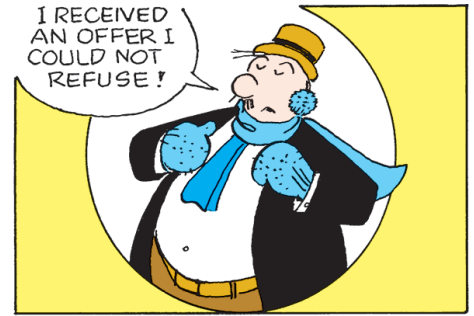
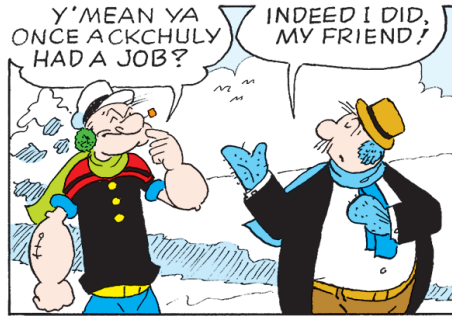
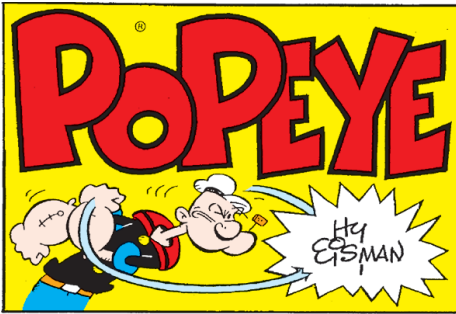
Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



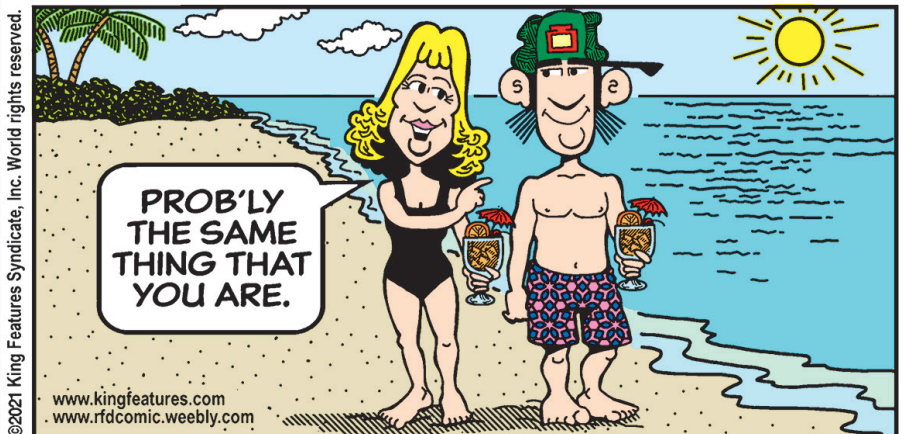
Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 24 of 101



R.F.D.

by Mike Marland



Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 25 of 101



...OR THEY CAN TAKE THEIR CHANCES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BLACK VOID.

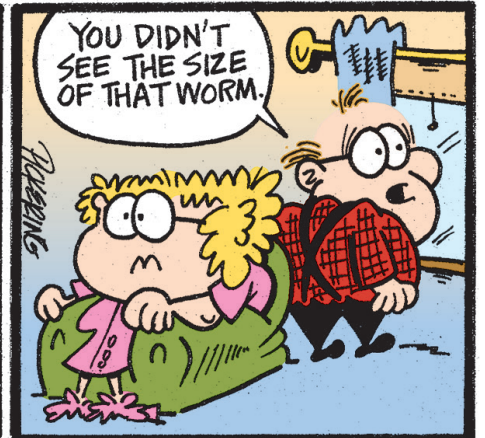
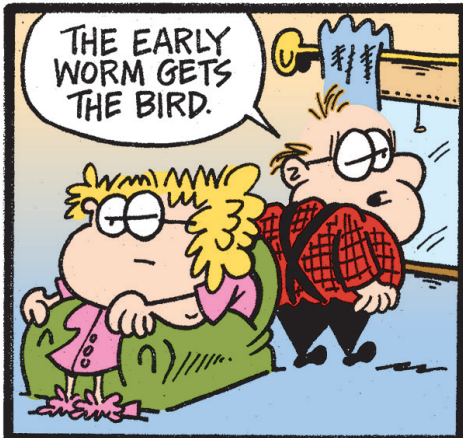
"I AM SORRY, GAWAIN!" YELLS IG, AS HE RELEASES HIS GRIP.

IG, A PRACTICAL SORT, SEES TWO OPTIONS: THEY CAN GIVE THEMSELVES UP TO THE HORRID LITTLE PEOPLE'S MERCIES...



The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



SENIOR NEWS LINE

by Matilda Charles

Here Are 2 New Scams to Watch Out For

They never stop. Scammers are continually busy, and so must we be to stay one step ahead of them. Here are two more scams they're trying to foist on us.

If you're still working and receive W-2 or 1099 forms, look them over very carefully. If it's a 1099-G, that's for unemployment benefits. Did you receive those benefits? If not, it means that a scammer has used your identity to collect benefits. Those 1099-G forms go to the IRS, and that income is taxable.

Contact the unemployment office that issued the 1099-G and have them send a corrected form showing zero unemployment income. If you can't get the corrected form in time, file your taxes without using that 1099-G dollar amount and enclose a note saying you didn't receive unemployment benefits. The IRS is well aware of this problem.

Then send for your credit report, check it and put a freeze on your credit.

In another new scam, if you do an online search for a big box store and the first result on the list says "Ad"

in front of the store name, don't click it. This scam is especially sneaky because if you click on the "Ad" link, you'll initially go to a page that looks very real. It isn't.

Clicking it will take you to a site that may freeze your screen ... and provide you a handy phone number to call to have the problem fixed. The person at the other end is a scammer who will ask for permission to access your computer remotely. If you allow it, he'll put a bug in your computer that locks everything up, and you'll have to pay to get it released.

Instead of doing a search, type in the Internet address of the store you want (call them if you're not sure what it is) and go directly there.

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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 27 of 101

1. The Territorial Cup is a trophy awarded in the college football rivalry series between what two teams?

2. What nickname did Stevie Wonder bestow on Philadelphia 76ers legend Darryl Dawkins?

3. What endurance race did drivers Hurley Haywood and Scott Pruett each win a record five times?

4. Craven Cottage stadium in London is the home ground of what English Premier League football club?

5. Figure skating legend Sonja Henie hailed from what country?

6. What infamous corporation held naming rights to the Houston Astros' stadium from 2000-02?

7. What team selected Purdue running back Mike Alstott in the second round of the 1996 NFL Draft?



by Ryan A. Berenz

Answers

1. The Arizona Wildcats and the Arizona State Sun Devils.

2. Chocolate Thunder.

3. 24 Hours of Daytona.

4. Fulham F.C.

5. Norway.

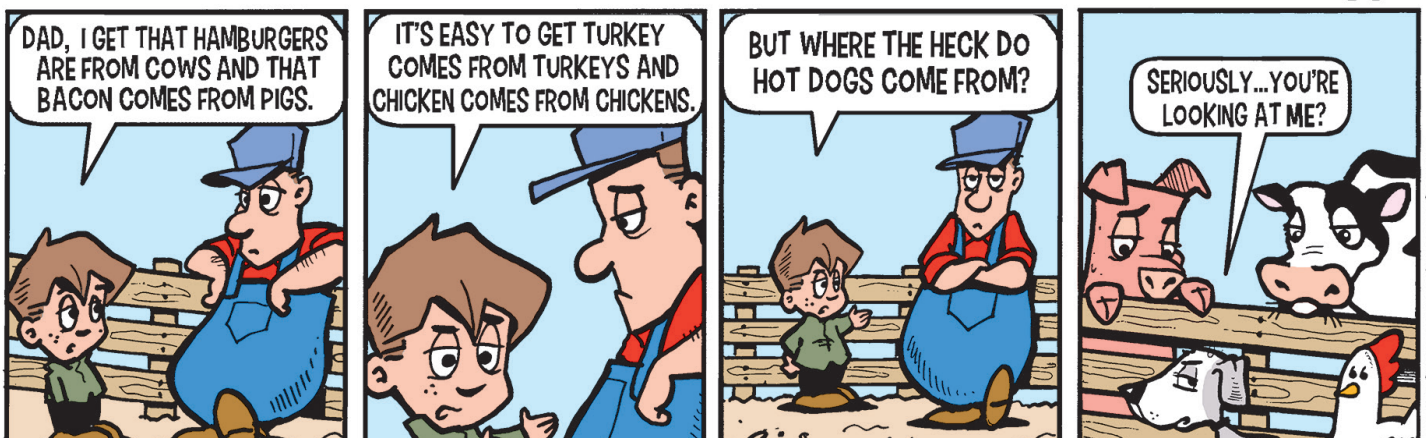
6. Enron.

7. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

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Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



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Taking Your Dog for a Winter Hike

DEAR PAW'S CORNER: I love hiking with my Border Collie mix, "Jess." Even in the dead of winter, we are out in the snow. Jess carries her own supplies in saddlebags sized just for her. The problem is, my girlfriend keeps saying it's dangerous for Jess to be out with me in the wintertime. That she could get hypothermia, or injure her paws on jagged ice and have to be carried out. I really have never had a problem. What's your take? -- *Tim Y., Manchester, New Hampshire*

DEAR TIM: Each dog is different, and a dog that is outdoors frequently can acclimate as the seasons change. It sounds like Jess is pretty well acclimated to the cold, and you probably keep a close eye on her while on the trail to make sure she's not shivering or in distress. Hiking is an activity that keeps

you both warm, even on snowy days.

I do understand your girlfriend's worries. Much bigger dogs than Jess have suffered hypothermia from spending just a few hours in the backyard, unsupervised. And that term, supervision, does make a difference.

Assure your girlfriend that because Jess is with you on the trail, she is under your supervision at all times. If she does get chilly or injures a paw, you'll know about it right away, and will make sure that Jess is safe and that she's warm enough. Her saddlebags should carry food, a drinking bowl, a doggy sweater or emergency blanket, and a small first-aid kit to deal with scraped paws and splinters.

My advice: Keep hiking and enjoy the time spent with Jess!

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

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Strange BUT TRUE

By Lucie Winborne

* Attention, "Lord of the Rings" fans: the dark region on the north pole of Pluto's moon, Charon, is called Mordor.

* A common issue with blood donation -- along with other types of charitable contributions -- is that if donors don't know the recipient, it's harder to convince them that donating is beneficial. Therefore, in an effort to encourage more young people to give blood, Sahlgrenska University Hospital in Gothenburg, Sweden, sends a text when their donation has been dispensed to someone in need, providing proof that it's going to good use.

* The Twitter bird actually has a name -- Larry, after Hall of Fame basketball player Larry Bird.

* In the 18th century, Napoleon Bonaparte and Benjamin Franklin were both defeated at chess by a machine called the Mechanical Turk -- or at least they thought they were. It was later revealed to be quite the elaborate hoax, with a highly skilled chess master hiding inside the "machine" and moving the pieces against the opponent.

* In a move to keep disease-wary Nazis away, Polish doctor Eugene Lazowski faked a typhus outbreak, saving over 8,000 people from slave labor camps and death.

* The longest song title ever is Hoagy Carmichael's 1943 "I'm a Cranky Old Yank in a Clanky Old Tank on the Streets of Yokohama with my Honolulu Mama Doin' Those Beat-o, Beat-o Flat-On-My-Seat-o, Hirohito Blues."

* Duncan Hines was a real person -- a popular restaurant critic who also wrote a book of hotel recommendations.

* Eight of the 10 largest statues in the world are of Buddhas.

* Pittsburgh is the only city where all the major sports teams (MLB, NHL, NFL) have the same colors: black and gold.

Thought for the Day: "Many are stubborn in pursuit of the path they have chosen, few in pursuit of the goal." -- Friedrich Nietzsche

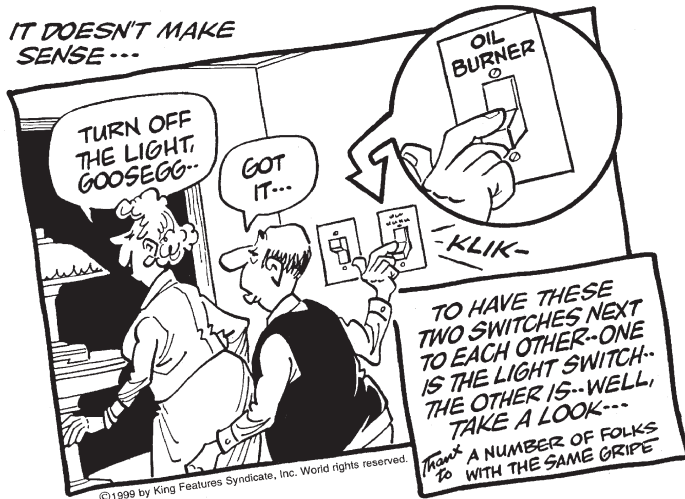
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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 30 of 101

THEY'LL DO IT EVERY TIME

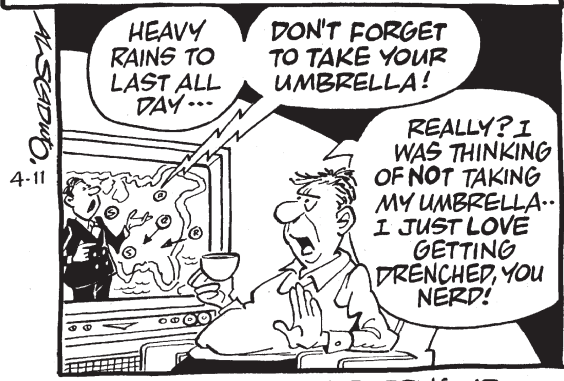
IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE...



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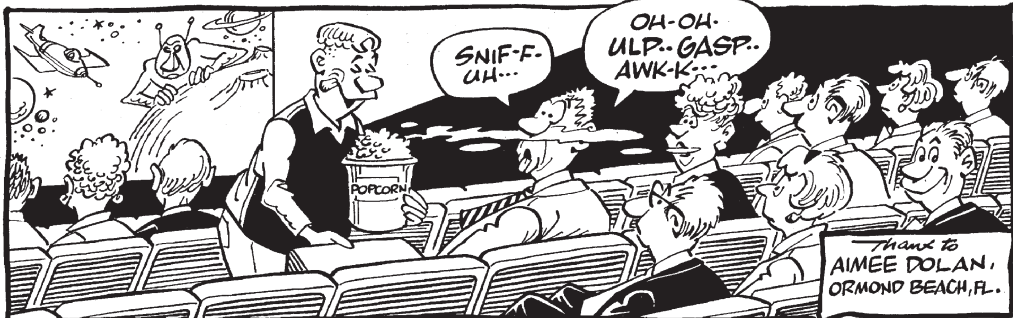
BY AL SCADUTO

J'EVER NOTICE? WEATHER FORECAST..THEY'LL ALWAYS SAY IT...AS IF YOU HAVE TO BE TOLD...



Thank to LISA HOLT, SILVER SPRING, MD

PEOPLE WE CAN DO WITHOUT— THE GUY WHO, IN A THEATER WITH 500 SEATS, SITS RIGHT NEXT TO YOU WITH A TUB OF HOT, BUTTERED POPCORN...AND YOU'RE ON A VERY STRICT DIET... HEH-HEH... ENJOY THE MOVIE...



Thank to AIMEE DOLAN, ORMOND BEACH, FL.

The Garden Bug



The plant called **ox-eye daisy** thrives in a wide range of conditions, but prefers a sunny or part-sun location in soil that is slightly damp. It is commonly found growing along roadways or spread across fields. It is also widely cultivated commercially, popular for home gardens and in flower arranging. It can be invasive and difficult to eradicate. There are some types that begin blooming in early spring, such as the "May Queen" cultivar. — Brenda Weaver

Sources: wikipedia.org, www.missouribotanicalgarden.org, www.sandysplants.com



by Freddy Groves

VA Extends Loan Forbearance Period

Some of you are going to breathe a sigh of relief at this news: The Department of Veterans Affairs moratorium on evictions and foreclosures was due to end March 31, but it's been extended to June 30.

The extension is designed to keep you in your home while you sort out the damaging financial effects of the COVID pandemic.

If you need forbearance (permission to miss payments or send a reduced amount), your lender is expected to grant you that for up to six months. During this time there are to be no late fees or penalties, but interest will accrue. The deadline to ask for forbearance is June 30, 2021.

If you can't make up your missed payments all at once when you have income again, call the mortgage com-

pany. If you're not comfortable doing that, call the VA loan people directly at 877-827-3702.

Your missed payments can't just be pushed to the end of the loan period, but it is possible the loan could be modified. The VA allows loans to be extended under certain situations.

Your credit score won't take a negative hit during forbearance (not making payments), but only if you were current at the time you requested it. If you were already late on payments when you asked for help, then yes, they'll continue to report you as delinquent during the whole period. That's why it's important to stay ahead of the problem by asking for help before things spin out of control.

You have three ways to keep your home: forbearance, a repayment plan or a loan modification.

To talk to the VA about COVID-related loan payment problems, call them at 877-827-3702.

If you're a renter and are in danger of being homeless, call the VA immediately at (877) 424-3838.

You can also go online for additional information: benefits.va.gov/home-loans/cares-act-frequently-asked-questions.asp

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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 33 of 101



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



Unity?

"We can join forces, stop the shouting and lower the temperature. For without unity there is no peace, only bitterness and fury. No progress, only exhausting outrage. No nation, only a state of chaos. This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge, and unity is the path forward."

Those were the words spoken by President Biden the day he was sworn into office.

I was hopeful these were more than just words on Inauguration Day and that maybe, just maybe, we'd see a growing coalition willing to work together. Considering Republicans gained several seats in the House, leaving only a sliver of a majority for Speaker Pelosi, I hoped for the best.

Sadly, these words have fallen flat, and I've been disappointed week after week. It's not in my nature to be discouraged, and I'm not naïve. I know politics is partisan and both parties have a line in the sand they often will not cross, but throughout my first term in Congress both parties proved it was, at times, possible to work together.

We passed five COVID-19 relief bills – FIVE – with broad bipartisan support. Congress doesn't deserve a gold star, but we ended a government shutdown, provided funding for humanitarian relief at the border, fought abuses of biofuel waivers, and set our sights on targeted relief for Americans facing an unprecedented pandemic.

Here are some of the most concerning actions taken by Congress and President Biden since he was sworn in:

➔ A \$1.9 trillion partisan COVID-19 relief bill passed the House. While there is strong bipartisan support for a more modest approach with targeted relief for families, along with investments in vaccine distribution and testing, that compromise approach was rejected.

➔ A sweeping federal takeover of elections, including funding political ads with matching funds from the federal treasury was pushed through the House.

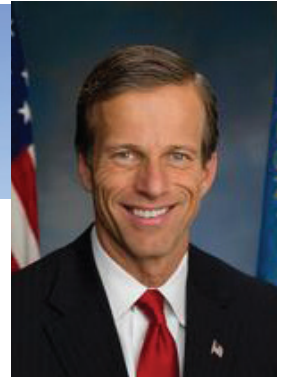
➔ Partisan "police reform" passed by the House that would cut our nation's police force and place harmful restrictions on tactical equipment. There are areas of bipartisan support when it comes to law enforcement, like Sen. Scott's JUSTICE Act, but these proposals were not considered.

➔ President Biden cancelled the Keystone XL Pipeline through an Executive Order. Our commitment to the rule of law was eroded, and jobs were lost.

➔ Relief previously allocated for agriculture producers was put on hold by the Biden Administration.

I believe we can be a Congress known for getting things done that benefit the American people. If unity is the goal, why have the last three months been nothing but one-party rule? Let's make sure we're bringing vaccine distribution across the finish line and getting American businesses and people back on their feet. Let's invest in our nation's infrastructure and rebuild the bridges and roads that have been neglected for too long. And let's work to lower prescription costs for families. Let's start working together.

John Thune
U.S. SENATOR - SOUTH DAKOTA



Putting South Dakota's Priorities First

Serving the state of South Dakota is my greatest honor, and throughout my time in Congress, I've sought out ways to give our state a strong voice in Washington. One of the most important ways I've been able to accomplish that goal is by serving on committees that I believe yield the most effective results for South Dakotans.

Although we are only a couple of months into the 117th Congress, I have already hit the ground running in the three committees on which I serve: the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee; the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee; and the Finance Committee. I am confident that serving on these committees will continue to give me the best opportunity to make sure South Dakotans, and the issues that are important to them, are prioritized in Washington.

Agriculture is South Dakota's top industry, and I'm proud to serve as a longtime member of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Before coming to the Senate, I served on the House Agriculture Committee, so I have long understood how critical it is for our state to have a seat at the table when it comes to negotiating and crafting policies that directly affect our state's economy and our hardworking farmers and ranchers.

It seems like just yesterday that we were working on the 2018 farm bill, but while we only have a few of years before it expires, I have already begun talking with South Dakota's producers and working on new proposals to help ensure they have the safety net and resources they need to be successful. South Dakota's farm and ranch community knows adversity all too well, so I'm committed to providing them as much certainty as possible in the years to come.

I've held several different roles on the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee over the years, including serving as full committee chairman and chairman of the subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation, and the Internet, which has jurisdiction over legislation and other matters relating to the technology and communications industries, which are both critically important to South Dakota.

This Congress, I'll serve as ranking member – the highest ranking Republican – of the same subcommittee, but with a new name: the Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband. Serving as the top Republican on this subcommittee will give me the opportunity to continue my years-long effort to ensure all South Dakotans have access to broadband services, even in the most rural areas of our state. This role will also allow me to build off of my previous work of making 5G a reality for all Americans as well as empowering online consumers and protecting their digital footprint.

And finally, I'll continue serving on the Senate Finance Committee and as ranking member of the Subcommittee on Taxation and IRS Oversight. Senate Democrats will be working hard to fulfill campaign promises by trying to enact the Green New Deal and Medicare for All or repeal or rollback things like the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. As a member of this powerful tax-writing committee, which also has significant government oversight responsibilities, I will do everything in my power to act as a voice of reason to fight this misguided, far-left agenda.

Committees play a key role in shaping and considering most bills before they ever come to the Senate floor for a final vote. Having a voice on these three powerful committees gives me the opportunity to elevate important issues and give South Dakotans a say on the most important policy debates in Washington. Regardless of the issue at hand, you can bet that I will be fighting for South Dakotans every step of the way.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 35 of 101

South Dakota Governor

Kristi Noem



South Dakota: *Under God, the People Rule*

Words and Action

March 10th is a tough day. On March 10, 2020, South Dakota diagnosed our first 5 cases of COVID-19, including our first death. For many of us across the state, life changed that day as we adapted to slow the spread of the virus. For my family, the day had double meaning. March 10, 1994, is also the day that my dad passed away in an accident on our family farm.

My dad was a cowboy. He was the toughest person that I've ever known. Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to grow up and be like him. When he died, I was just 22 years old, and I had to take over as general manager of the family business. The months immediately after he died were filled with unending challenges and hundreds of questions. I remember thinking repeatedly, "I wish I could just ask dad." I had no idea how we were going to keep the family business going without him. But I was determined that we weren't going to fail.

A couple of months after he was killed, I finally got the courage to clean out his pickup. If you have a farmer or rancher in your life, you know that they often live out of their pickups. Everything important can be found in the cab.

I got to his pickup and began pulling items out of the center console and putting them in a box. I found a set of pliers, a Baby Ruth candy bar (that was his favorite), notebooks, pens, tools. And then I found a tiny tape recorder, like the kind that a doctor dictates into.

I pushed the play button and heard my dad's voice.

My eyes started to fill up with tears. I looked down into the console and saw several more tapes, almost a dozen in all. One by one, I put them in the tape recorder and listened to dad talk about crop decisions, soil types, cows, weather, markets, and what to do if we were ever caught in a tough financial situation.

I realized that here in my hands were all the answers that I needed. Straight from him. In his voice.

In that moment, I felt a strange sort of peace settle over me. Scripture talks about a "peace that passes all understanding." It was almost as if God was saying to me, "I will provide. Stop worrying. You will be okay. Your family will be okay. I've got this."

I had the answers; I just needed to get to work.

Dad was the hardest worker that I knew. He led by example, by action. But that day, his words changed everything. I made a decision that day to be like my dad: a person of words and of action, because both matter.

That's why I ran for office. I am committed to always serving the people of this great state with both words and action. I will do what I say, and I will always tell you what I'm doing. That's why I approached this past year the way that I did.

It's been a tough year. Some South Dakota families have experienced the terrible tragedy of losing a loved-one, and my heart breaks for each of them. But no matter how tough the past year was, South Dakotans are so much tougher. And that toughness has gotten us through this marathon, together. May God bless you and your family in 2021.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 36 of 101

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Democratic Leaders Column from Rep. Jamie Smith and Sen. Troy Heinert— Week 8

PIERRE, SD (March 5, 2021) – Greetings from Pierre! The eighth week of the legislative session ended Thursday with Democrats in Pierre working on finding common sense solutions for the people of South Dakota. We have been pleased to see cooperation on some of the bills that have made their way through the legislative process. We have also been disappointed to see the assaults on some of our most vulnerable citizens and some of our most cherished values as South Dakotans.

One issue Democrats have worked on for years in Pierre is a need-based scholarship fund. This week, the House passed SB 171 to provide for the South Dakota Freedom Scholarship. It provides \$50 million to an endowment at the South Dakota Community Foundation, that, along with \$150 million from private sources, will total \$200 million. This fund will provide a permanent endowment for a need-based scholarship program that will include all public, private, and tribal colleges. This is an example of a public-private effort to improve the future of thousands of students and enhance the future of our state.

“Providing low-income students with the opportunity to attend public, tribal, or private non-profit colleges or universities has been a goal of Democrats for a long time. We’re thrilled to see this finally move forward with Republican support,” says House Minority Leader, Jamie Smith. “We hope to see this bill as well as the bill to expand broadband in our state stay whole. We’re looking forward to the Governor signing them into law.”

However, the differences between Democrats and Republicans in Pierre have never been more apparent than this past week. There were a number of bills that failed in their respective committees getting “smoked-out” on the Senate floor. We have also seen an unprecedented Republican assault on the initiated measure process. South Dakota was the first state to adopt the initiative and referendum on a statewide level in part to ensure that we live up to our state motto: “Under God the people rule.”

One bill attacking the measure to put Medicaid expansion on the ballot is HJR 5003. It proposes and submits to the voters at the next primary election a new section to Article XI of the Constitution of the State of South Dakota. It would require a three-fifths vote requirement—a 60% threshold—for certain initiated or Legislature-proposed constitutional amendments and initiated or Legislature-referred measures. The original bill placed this measure on the November 8, 2022 ballot. The amended version places it on the June ballot when far more Republicans vote in primary elections.

“To be clear, this is a systemic assault on the will of the people,” says Senate Minority Leader, Troy Heinert. “The bill to require a 60% threshold for ballot initiatives is undemocratic. You win with 50% plus one. Moving the 60% question to the June 2022 primary would be unfair to the several hundred-thousands of voters who normally only vote in general elections. We are cutting our people off at the knees. This is bad legislation and Democrats urge our legislature to stop the movement of this.”

If voters back the 60% threshold, another vote, like the one on recreational marijuana voters approved with 54% support and that is being challenged by the governor, probably wouldn’t succeed.

“With regard to Amendment A, there has been testimony here that claims voters didn’t read the bill,” says Smith. “I’m insulted that our voters’ intelligence is being questioned. The people knew what they were voting on, and we’ve gotten hundreds of emails in favor of it. The opposition has all come from the governor’s office and our Republican colleagues.”

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 38 of 101

"We do balance our budget in South Dakota," says Heinert. "The majority of people support things like Medicaid expansion and medical marijuana. Our governor hasn't implemented these efforts and people shouldn't have their only means to make them happen taken away."

This week we saw bills that died in committee get new life on the senate floor. According to legislative rules, a bill can be "smoked out" with only one-third of the Senate in support and must be heard at the next legislative day. This will be Monday, March 7. These include HB 1217, restricting transgender girls from competing in sanctioned sports, and HB 1212, clarifying the use of force otherwise known as a "stand your ground" law, and HB 1140 undermining the "open fields doctrine" making it harder for game wardens to stop the poaching of game.

"We trust the committee process, and these bills received fair and thorough hearings in their respective committees where they were defeated," says Heinert. "Not only are they bad for South Dakota, but they are also poorly written, and we shouldn't be wasting the senate's time on them."

Bills that should have received more time and attention, but didn't, include SB 57, revising the state employee health insurance plan that passed the House before the Joint Committee on Appropriations could complete a full hearing on it. When Senator Reynold Nesiba pressed Human Resources Commissioner Darin Steely on where the money is coming from, the commissioner said \$8 million of the \$12 million in savings is really being generated from higher premiums being charged to employees." The bill will be signed into law. Many state employees feel as though their concerns went unheard and that their premiums are likely to increase by far more than their paychecks. Many will go backwards.

On Thursday, Heinert filed SDR 901, a resolution of disapproval to block the governor's proposed merger of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the South Dakota Department of Agriculture (SDDA). "Agriculture is too important in South Dakota and deserves a state department whose resources and expertise are devoted to the promotion of the agricultural industry," he says. "I was happy this bill passed out of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources committee and will be heard on the Senate floor. We should pass it and stop the merger."

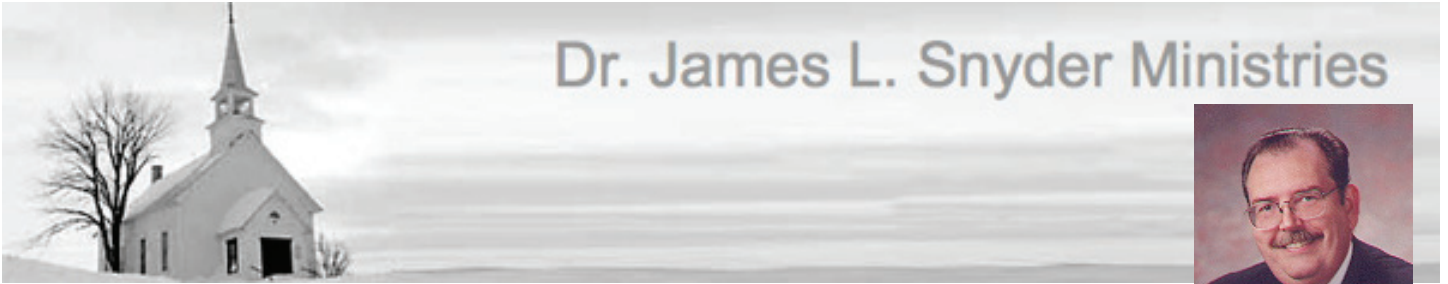
Other good things Democrats have had success with include HB 1189 to establish a tribal flag display in the Capitol rotunda that passed on the senate floor with a majority vote, and HB 1199 to establish the Office of Liaison for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons that passed unanimously out of Senate Judiciary Committee. Democrats in Pierre continue to fight for progress in enhancing our state's inclusivity and helping the most vulnerable. However, our representation in Pierre does not reflect the political make-up of our state. This session has made it clear that we have a lot of work to do to elect more Democrats to the state legislature in 2022.

For instance, in Senate State Affairs this week there was an attempt to remove Democrats from areas like the Board of Regents, Game Fish and Parks, and State Tribal Relations where the Republicans can pick the chair and the vice chair who would have no connection to any tribe.

"What we've seen in Pierre this year is an assault on the minority party," says Heinert. "While we've been able to stop a lot of these bills from moving forward, it's like an eagle who can't fly with one wing significantly bigger than the other. It's bad for South Dakota. We can do better."

We want to hear from you! Please contact us to share your questions or concerns. Our caucus meetings are open to the public the hour before floor session. Your voice matters, and we believe that together, we can create a South Dakota that works for all of us.

Representative Jamie Smith, Jamie.Smith@sdlegislature.gov
Senator Troy Heinert, Troy.Heinert@sdlegislature.gov



Dr. James L. Snyder Ministries



What's so Peasy About Easy?

I am nowhere to be found when it comes to crafts, remodeling, and just plain fixer-uppers. My carpentry skills are nowhere to be found even though I've looked for a long time.

If I try to fix something, I make it worse than it was. Fixing is not my strong suit.

On the other side of the parsonage, we have a different scenario.

If the Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage cannot fix something, it cannot be broken. No matter what it is, it doesn't take her long to figure out how to fix it.

Often she will spend time on the computer searching out a particular project and getting to know what needs to be done to fix it and get it up and running.

I must say, and this is just between you and me, she has saved me quite a bit of money by fixing things up that would cost a lot to have them fixed at a professional place. If there is something wrong with my vehicle, I first present it to my wife. I have yet to find something broken in my vehicle that she cannot fix.

Once there was a fender on my vehicle that was loose and almost falling apart. The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage looked at it, thought about it, and then went into the house and got a huge paperclip, brought it out, and fixed the fender. That was five years ago, and it's still fixed.

When she fixed it, she said, "Well, that was easy-peasy."

She says that every time she fixes something and then looks at me and smiles.

The first 100 times she said that, I didn't think too much of it. But as of late, I've been trying to figure out what in the world she means by "easy-peasy."

I know I could sit down and ask her to explain it to me. I tried it once, and she just looked at me, smiled, and said, "Oh, you silly boy. You know exactly what I mean."

I returned her smile even though I had no idea what in the world she was talking about.

If I ever find out what the phrase "easy-peasy" means, I may be able to understand my wife a little better. No matter what she puts her hands to do, it's easy-peasy for her.

This has been a wonderful relationship for us. If there's something I can break, she can fix it. If there is

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 40 of 101

something that she cannot fix, I simply cannot break it. That has made life rather easy-peasy.

Once in a while, she will ask me to come and help her with something. My job, of course, is to move something too heavy for her to move. And then after I sweat my neck off and move that thing, she will always say, "Well, that was easy-peasy, wasn't it?"

I thought about that for some time and began to realize that sweating my neck off is what she means by "easy-peasy."

The other day I was sitting in my office reflecting on a few things. The wife was out doing some shopping, so I had some quiet time. Sitting there, I looked around and then began to walk through the house, and I couldn't believe how many things had her fingerprint on them.

When something breaks in our home, we don't call a repairman; we just call Ms. Easy-Peasy who can fix anything and everything.

Even when the situation calls for the AC technician to come and fix our AC, she tells him what's wrong and how to fix it.

The last time the AC technician came and fixed our AC, and as he was leaving, she said to him, "Well, that was easy-peasy, wasn't it?" As he went out the front door, he smiled and said, "Yes, it certainly was."

Not everything in life is "easy-peasy." Many things are very difficult, at least from my perspective.

Having someone in the house who can fix and repair everything is quite remarkable, not the least in saving money.

Then I had an excellent thought. How much money could we make if we started our fix-it-up business? I think I would call the business "Ms. Easy-Peasy Unlimited." I could hire her out to fix everything in our neighborhood and beyond.

She could fix everything, and I could count the money she makes. I can count the money; I just can't make money. I think it would be a great business, and every time she would come home from a job, I could say, "Well, that was easy-peasy," as I counted the money for the day.

Of course, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that with such a business I would not see her very often. So much that needs to be fixed out in our world, and she would be gone all the time.

To me, that would not be "easy-peasy." No matter how much money we could make with "Ms. Easy-Peasy Unlimited," it wouldn't be worth not having her around the house all the time.

As I was thinking of this, a verse of Scripture came to my mind. "And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Genesis 2:18).

I'm wondering if maybe that is the reason God gave Adam his Eve.

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From the Editors of E - The Environmental Magazine

Dear EarthTalk: What is a so-called "passive solar" house and can I retrofit my existing house accordingly?

-- Bill C., Raleigh, NC

A passive solar house is typically designed from scratch factoring in several considerations to boost the structure's ability to naturally keep the interior living spaces a comfortable air temperature without using conventional emissions-spewing HVAC appliances.

The concept hinges on having lots of insulation, no air leaks, and large, strategically-oriented south-facing windows that "collect" heat energy (in the form of sunlight) during the day and store it in "thermal mass" (concrete slabs, brick walls, tile floors or other building materials with heat retention capacity). This stored solar energy is then naturally distributed throughout the interior space by natural convection caused by ventilation and the dynamics of colder and warmer air reacting differently to gravity.

While the concept has been kicking around since at least the 1950s, it wasn't until 1991 that Dr. Wolfgang Feist, an Austrian physicist and subsequent founder of the Passivhaus Institut, turned the dream into a reality with the design and construction of the world's first passive solar house in Darmstadt, Germany.

This three-story home was designed from the ground up with thick walls and copious amounts of efficient insulation, and no holes large or small where hot air could escape. The Feist house was also designed to be free of any potential "thermal bridges," where heat could travel through walls to get outside, unlike conventional homes which are framed with wood 2x4s and 4x4s with insulation laid or sprayed in between. Conventional framing typically comprises about 25 percent of the interior walls' surface area. Unlike the insulation around it, the framing sections provide zero insulation value and therefore act as thermal bridges whereby hot air can escape. Passive houses, on the other hand, are designed with solid slabs or with denser framing materials to cut off this insidious form of heat loss.

Siting is also a major design consideration for any passive solar house. Picking a spot that can harvest lots of sunlight (via large south-facing triple-glazed windows) and also take advantage of neighboring shade (like large trees and buildings) to cool the structure off in the heat of summer is also key. Indeed, it is of paramount importance to the building's success in maintaining consistently comfortable indoor air temperatures without electricity or gas/oil no matter the weather outside. Another important aspect of the passive solar design is the incorporation of some kind of heat recovery ventilation (HRV) system that can let fresh air into the building without letting any of the heat out.

Given all of the design, siting and construction factors involved, it's usually not practical to convert a pre-existing conventional house into a passive solar one. But that said, there's no reason not to upgrade what you can at home to at least take advantage of increased efficiencies where it's easy and get as close to passive solar as possible. Upgrade your insulation. Plug holes and other air leaks. Put weather-stripping around doors and windows. The list goes on... While you might not be able to do any and everything to make your house greener, remember that a walk of 100 miles starts with one step.

CONTACTS: Passive House Institute, passivehouse.com; Passive House Accelerator, passivehouseaccelerator.com; International Passive House Association, passivehouse-international.org.



Dr. Wolfgang Feist and family pose in front of the world's first passive solar house, constructed in 1991 in Darmstadt, Germany.

Credit: International Passive House Association.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 42 of 101

#376 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Slow news day, so we'll do the numbers, take a look back, and then talk about mutation. Sorry, this is a long one.

We reported just 59,100 new cases today, bringing us to 28,993,400, which is 0.2% higher than yesterday. Hospitalizations are still decreasing; today we had 42,541 people hospitalized with Covid-19 in the US. We have now lost 523,967 lives to this virus, 0.3% more than yesterday's total. We reported 1606 deaths today.

On March 6, 2020, one year ago today, we'd reported 340 cases in the US in 28 states. I did not have anything reported from the District of Columbia or any of the territories at this point. There were 86 cases in Washington, 79 in California, and 33 in New York. There had been 17 deaths reported, 14 in Washington, two in Florida, and one in California. The Biogen conference in Boston February 26 and 27 was starting to yield consequences with its first three positive tests; this is the conference thought to be the germ for nearly all of Massachusetts spring surge and, according to genomic analysis reported in December, as of November around two percent of all US cases. By now, we were pretty sure that dog who tested positive probably wasn't going to be a big deal; he didn't get sick. We still had a serious and debilitating shortage of testing. Pennsylvania closed some schools. South by Southwest organizers finally saw the handwriting on the wall and cancelled the event. Other cancelations include the Ultra Music Festival and the Calle Ocho Festival in Miami and the EU Ambassador's meeting. Apple and Slack asked employees to work from home. Stores had begun to restrict purchases of toilet paper, hand sanitizer, masks, and disinfectant as shelves emptied and people panic-shopped.

Adults 60 and over and those with underlying health issues were encouraged by Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, and Dr. William Schaffner, professor at Vanderbilt University and adviser to the CDC, interviewing on CNN, to strongly consider avoiding activities that involve crowds. Specifically mentioned were air travel, shopping in crowded stores, church services, big family gatherings. The CDC made its first mention of social distancing on its website.

Worldwide, we had almost 100,329 reported cases and more than 3300 deaths, still mostly in China, although case rates and deaths reports had begun to slow down by now. The virus had spread to more than 80 countries and territories. Italy had over 4500 reported cases, 778 of them in the last 24 hours, and 197 deaths, 49 of whom had died in the last 24 hours—rapid acceleration. The WHO put out a statement saying in part, "This is not a drill."

And we had reports of people asked to isolate who just didn't—a physician in Australia who went to work and saw patients all day after his diagnosis and a health care worker in New Hampshire supposed to stay home until his test results came back who decided to go out anyway and party the night away, potentially exposing hundreds of people, turned out to be positive too. I was already frustrated, writing, "I don't think the public is getting a clear, consistent message that this is serious or that it's going to be difficult to contain, which is purely impossible if people insist on doing stupid things. Once again, this is a question of leadership; leaders need to step up and lead or step back and get out of the way. They're hurting the cause. I'll repeat for those who didn't get it the first time: If you do stupid things, you're quite likely to kill somebody. So stop it already."

We've been talking in bits and pieces lately about viral variants, so I thought it might be time to provide a bit of background for those who weren't with us for the earlier discussions and a refresher for those who were, then pull together just what we're looking at today. So this is what I have for you.

Here's the thing: Viruses mutate. (If you're interested, so do people, but that's another can of worms.) Mutations arise from replication errors that aren't caught by a proofreading mechanism so that the mutation, a change to the viral nucleic acid (RNA in this virus), gets built into its genetic code. Now, this coronavirus doesn't mutate particularly fast, but because every single viral replication event has an infinitesimal, but real, probability of resulting in a mutation, the more replication events we have, the more mutations we can expect to see. It's that simple: More replication means more mutation. Always. No exceptions.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 43 of 101

We need to get over our notion of a "mutant" as some misshapen monster-like creature; the reality is a whole lot more mundane. What can result from a mutation ranges from nothing at all to something pretty significant to inactivation (death) for the virus. The RNA in this coronavirus contains information for making every structural part and constituent of a virus and for assembling it. When the virus invades one of your cells, it uses some of its proteins (those constituents coded by the RNA) to basically take over your cellular machinery and force it to produce large numbers of new virus particles, which make their way out through the cell membrane and scatter out to infect other cells which will also make viruses that spread to more and more cells. Viruses don't carry genetic instructions for recreational activities; every single thing they code for is essential to getting inside your cells, taking them over, making copies of themselves, and escaping to infect more cells. That's all they've got.

The key to all this viral activity is proteins; that's because proteins run all cell operations: You want to build a virus? You need a bunch of proteins that direct the take-over, that direct the copying of viral RNA for the new baby viruses, that direct the assembly of the new viruses, etc. So what nucleic acid actually codes for is protein-making. Proteins are really just long strings of amino acids that twist and bend and tangle into functional proteins with a very specific shape. The whole genetic code is just a bunch of instructions for which amino acids get strung together in what order. That's because the big deal with proteins is their shape: Mess too much with the shape, and the protein won't work right, something that would be a big problem for the virus because every protein is important—no recreational activities, remember? Now what happens to give the proteins the proper shape is that those amino acids along the string are going to interact: An amino acid at one location is attracted to another amino acid somewhere else, so the string folds to enable those two guys to get together. And then there's another attraction between two different parts of the string, and so we get another bend. The formation of loops and hanging ends from all this folding and bending enables new sets of attractions to cause more folding and looping, and the ensuring folds and bends enable new attractions, and so on. Before you know it, you often have this big mess of folds and bends and twists that looks sort of like a ball of yard after the cat gets hold of it. The protein's shape depends on having the correct amino acids at critical points along that string so that you get the appropriate amount and kind of bending and twisting needed to achieve a functional shape. And this means having a good copy of the nucleic acid is important so the right amino acids get strung together in the first place.

Now there's a certain amount of redundancy built into the nucleic acid coding system for amino acids. This redundancy means a particular amino acid might have two or more sets of code which will specify that amino acid and not some other one. So one thing that can happen when there's a mutation is that the code is altered in a way that it still specifies the same amino acid even though the actual code has changed. When that happens, no one notices, and things just go along as they always have. This is a mutation you're not likely to ever even spot—although the sophisticated kinds of tools we have nowadays can often find those too.

Another possibility is that the mutation results in substituting a different amino acid at that location in the string; but if the amino acid isn't one of those that are critical to the final protein shape—not really a participant in all the bending activity, then you probably wouldn't notice this mutation either. As long as the protein still works, the virus stays happy and nothing really changes.

On the other hand, if the amino acid substitution is at a shape-critical location—involved in one of those bends or folds, it will result in a conformational (shape) change in the protein. Now the protein's function could be affected. Sometimes, the protein still works, but maybe not quite as well as before. This may hamper the virus only a little, not enough to matter much, or to the extent that it can't compete successfully with other variants that don't have the mutation. If that happens, the variant probably won't be around long; it's likely to get crowded out by more successful variants. The mutation may cause significant change in the conformation of the protein, and when that happens, most of the time the variant won't do well. Some mutations are called "lethal mutations," and that means just what you think it means; those make the virus incapable of further activity and mark the end of the line for the variant. We're generally not even aware of these because they come and go without ever making anyone sick.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 44 of 101

Very rarely, a mutation causes a conformational change in a protein which might improve its function, at least in certain circumstances; the protein actually works better than the original version. So now we have a variant with a potential advantage—but only if the circumstances match the ones that give the variant an advantage.

I think that's easier to understand if we look at an example that's more familiar to most of us. Let's consider plants growing in the wild. A plant mutation that produces a result especially adapted to dry growing conditions will have no advantage if you try to grow it in Hawaii; it might even be too susceptible to fungus disease which tends to thrive in moist conditions. This sort of mutation trying to grow in Hawaii is not better fitted to the environment than its original wild type and so doesn't really have what scientists call a competitive advantage—something that makes it likely to reproduce better than the others. This mutation might survive, but it's not likely to take over and become the dominant type in Hawaii.

On the other hand, if this dry-adapted plant happens to fetch up in Las Vegas—or even the Central Plains of the US in our dryish summers, it is quite likely to be better fitted to the environment than the original type that needed a more regular supply of water. Dry conditions place what's called selection pressure on plants, and under that pressure, plants adapted to survive better in dry conditions clearly will have a competitive advantage. This new variant lands in a population of wild plants under these conditions, and it is likely to be selected for, that is, the environment "selects" it: It will grow and reproduce more successfully than the original wild-type plant and is likely to become a more dominant type in the population. Does that make sense?

So too with viral variants: The rare mutation that confers some trait which provides a competitive advantage under conditions of selection pressure is quite likely to move into an existing population and sort of take over, becoming more and more frequent in the population. If it's wildly successful, it might replace the wild type entirely.

So now that we've looked at how mutation works, let's think about these viral variants we're dealing with. First thing to understand is, as we discussed above, the more the virus replicates, the more mutations you're going to see. This is simple probability: a one in 10,000 event hardly ever happens—unless you're having a couple million opportunities per day. Then one in 10,000 is going to yield 200 of that rare event each day. Now viral mutation is way, way less common than one in 10,000; but the number of opportunities is the number of viral replications in a single infected host (a huge number) times the number of infected hosts on that day (also a huge number when transmissions are high, like now). See the problem?

The vast majority of those mutation events will either significantly impair or knock that particular virus particle off (at which point we have no further interest in it) or not really make any difference—same or similar protein results. Only the very, very occasional mutation confers a characteristic which might provide a competitive advantage. Even then, that advantage materializes only when there is also selection pressure. Under those conditions, the new variant has potential to give us humans some real trouble. And that's how we ended up where we are today.

Now the original wild-type virus that emerged in Wuhan, China, in November, 2019, is pretty much no longer in circulation. It got replaced fairly early on by a variant with a mutation called D614G; that's the one which has been the predominant variant around the world for months now. [The name, D614G, means that, at position 614 on the viral spike protein, the amino acid glycine (G) got substituted for the amino acid aspartic acid (D).] The official name of this variant is actually B.1, but that doesn't seem to be used much. Even though I've been using these weird lineage names with their combinations of letters and numbers for the other variants, I've been consistently calling it D614G. The mutation appeared in late January or early February, 2020, and was the dominant variant by June. This is that ultra-rare case where the resulting protein worked a little better than the original, and it so happens the protein in question is the one that enables the virus to bind to our cells and enter them. D614G binds more strongly and replicates faster than the wild-type virus, and as a consequence, it took over the world pretty quickly. When researchers applied equal amounts of the two variants—the wild-type and D614G—to the noses of hamsters and ferrets and these experimentally-infected animals were then placed with a healthy animal, a study concluded "the proportion of transmitted SARS-CoV-2 viruses [seen in the second animal] was massively dominated

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 45 of 101

by the D614G variant early on.”

The fact that this variant stayed dominant through the millions of cases seen worldwide until relatively recently illustrates how well-fitted the variant is and also how rarely mutations beneficial to the virus emerge and survive. But with the rate of transmissions we were having, that luck wasn't going to hold forever, and it turns out we're seeing the fruits of that run on our luck just lately. Here's a short tour of the newer variants we're watching now; this won't be all there are, just the ones that most concern us at the moment. It isn't usual to name one until we know it will be what's called a Variant of Concern (VOC).

B.1.1.7: first seen in the UK in December. This is still our biggest worry; it's spreading like crazy. This one's maybe 50 percent more infectious (contagious) than D614G; that means its R_e is 50 percent higher. You may recall that R_e is the virus's reproduction number, the average number of people to whom each case will transmit. There is emerging evidence it might also be more lethal, but we're not sure about that yet. We talked not long ago about what this all means and about how a more transmissible variant is likely to cause more deaths than a more lethal variant. Since this discussion is getting long enough, I'll direct you to my Update #357 posted on February 14 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4436334386382933> for the details. This one is already quite widespread here. Because we're not doing enough surveillance, we can't be sure how common it is, but it is clear we have a problem. The CDC thinks it will be the predominant variant in most of the US within a couple of weeks; that's one of the reasons easing restrictions right now is such a bad idea.

B.1.351, first seen in South Africa in December. This one has the E484K (with the disarming nickname, "eek") mutation that makes a variant better at evading our antibodies. We already have reinfection rate evidence people who have antibodies due to prior natural infection are likely not protected against this one and evidence from in vitro (laboratory) tests that antibodies produced in response to vaccination are also less effective against it. There is also evidence that vaccination still does confer protection against the worst outcomes (hospitalization and death); phase 3 clinical trials of the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine candidate in South Africa where some 90 percent of infections seen were caused by B.1.351 resulted in zero hospitalizations or deaths in vaccinated people. The greater concern at the moment is likely people with prior infections and those who have not been infected, as well as folks who aren't fully vaccinated yet. We think full vaccination is still protective. This one doesn't appear to be anywhere near as prevalent in the US at the moment.

B.1.1.28.1 (or P.1), first seen in Brazil late in 2020. This one also has the E484K mutation. We've seen reinfections with this one too. We're seeing it at low levels in the US now.

B.1.427, first seen in California and reported late in February. This is spreading quite rapidly in that state and has been seen in some other states too. It appears to be somewhere between D614G and B.1.1.7 in transmissibility, that is, more transmissible than the current variant, but not as scary as B.1.1.7. We can't really say whether it makes people sicker or much about antibody coverage; it's early times yet for this one.

B.1.526, first seen in New York City, also in February. This one also has E484K. We don't know much about this one yet, but that eek is always a heads-up situation.

Bottom line: We need to get transmission under control, and we need to do it now. If we cannot, then it very much looks as though we're going to have one more wave of infections with high case numbers and high numbers of deaths. If we can continue to vaccinate at a breakneck pace, I think that could be it for widespread outbreaks; but this doesn't have to happen. We have some ability to control what happens next and how many more of us are going to die. We have to remember that a 50 percent more transmissible virus means we need to undertake more precautions just to stay even with where we are right now; it would take even more than that to bring numbers down. The data suggest 50 percent more transmissibility means you need to reduce your contacts by about one-third to hold things steady. Who wants that? On the other hand, if we can hold this off until (1) more people get vaccinated and (2) warm weather returns so we can do things outdoors—and open windows, we have a shot. Let's pitch in on this effort. I can see better times ahead if we do this right.

This is long enough, so I have just a short story tonight about Sofia Moncayo, who lost her job at a construction company in New York City early in the pandemic. She's five months behind on the rent for

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 46 of 101

the martial arts studio she and her husband own in their neighborhood, and that's a big worry. She might be worried, but she's not short of things to do while unemployed. Back in April while she was still working, Moncayo took charge of the food distribution program at Mosaic West Queens Church. Her program volunteers spend hours twice a week preparing for each distribution event, toting boxes, sorting through food items, making up boxes, clearing snow on the sidewalk out front. She raises money and coordinates efforts to regularly get more than 1000 boxes of food to families. The food comes from restaurants, the USDA Farmers to Families Program, and anywhere else she can find it. She's gone hungry herself in her life, and so Moncayo knows how she wants the people she serves to be treated. She told the AP, "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.'" She wants people to feel welcome, and she wants people to eat. Seems like a good way to pass the time. I hope she gets back on her feet too. Good people deserve good things.

Take care. We'll talk tomorrow.

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Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 48 of 101

County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
▲						
Aurora	454	432	871	15	Minimal	4.2%
Beadle	2785	2632	5890	39	Substantial	24.4%
Bennett	382	370	1178	9	Minimal	2.6%
Bon Homme	1507	1477	2069	25	Minimal	9.3%
Brookings	3614	3515	11985	37	Moderate	1.8%
Brown	5167	5003	12694	89	Moderate	10.3%
Brule	694	678	1879	9	Minimal	9.7%
Buffalo	420	406	898	13	None	0.0%
Butte	984	949	3220	20	Moderate	6.5%
Campbell	131	125	258	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1309	1222	3923	21	Substantial	8.2%
Clark	374	360	951	5	Moderate	23.1%
Clay	1809	1766	5345	15	Moderate	8.2%
Codington	4024	3851	9677	77	Substantial	21.5%
Corson	472	453	997	12	Minimal	9.7%
Custer	761	736	2721	12	Moderate	9.5%
Davison	2967	2873	6555	63	Moderate	7.0%
Day	669	626	1770	28	Substantial	5.9%
Deuel	475	461	1137	8	Minimal	0.0%
Dewey	1421	1382	3819	26	Substantial	7.6%
Douglas	434	416	909	9	Moderate	16.7%
Edmunds	484	464	1052	12	Minimal	4.0%
Fall River	541	506	2624	15	Moderate	9.2%
Faulk	361	345	699	13	Moderate	0.0%
Grant	981	917	2232	38	Substantial	13.4%
Gregory	545	501	1281	30	Moderate	8.3%
Haakon	256	239	536	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	721	661	1773	38	Substantial	26.4%
Hand	341	327	818	6	Moderate	11.1%
Hanson	366	351	717	4	Moderate	28.0%
Harding	91	90	182	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2318	2236	6580	36	Substantial	6.0%
Hutchinson	790	752	2375	26	Moderate	7.5%

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 49 of 101

Hyde	139	137	405	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	280	263	916	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	274	251	554	16	Minimal	10.0%
Jones	85	85	222	0	Minimal	12.5%
Kingsbury	643	616	1673	14	Moderate	3.9%
Lake	1209	1152	3330	17	Substantial	7.6%
Lawrence	2833	2760	8537	45	Moderate	5.9%
Lincoln	7837	7593	20243	77	Substantial	10.1%
Lyman	603	586	1876	10	Minimal	2.8%
Marshall	335	303	1192	5	Substantial	15.4%
McCook	747	710	1617	24	Moderate	4.0%
McPherson	241	231	553	4	Minimal	12.5%
Meade	2614	2526	7702	31	Substantial	11.4%
Mellette	256	245	732	2	Minimal	33.3%
Miner	273	254	578	9	Minimal	7.1%
Minnehaha	28274	27432	78171	334	Substantial	7.6%
Moody	620	590	1752	17	Moderate	5.9%
Oglala Lakota	2064	1994	6637	49	Moderate	7.2%
Pennington	12980	12592	39413	189	Substantial	10.9%
Perkins	348	330	814	14	Minimal	8.0%
Potter	376	363	835	4	Moderate	14.3%
Roberts	1214	1132	4135	36	Substantial	15.7%
Sanborn	335	324	692	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	802	767	2129	25	Minimal	3.0%
Stanley	335	323	936	2	Moderate	0.0%
Sully	137	133	312	3	Minimal	0.0%
Todd	1219	1189	4134	28	Minimal	8.0%
Tripp	705	670	1483	16	Substantial	21.2%
Turner	1071	1005	2725	53	Moderate	7.1%
Union	2000	1921	6268	39	Substantial	6.7%
Walworth	729	698	1828	15	Moderate	7.0%
Yankton	2816	2748	9336	28	Moderate	6.1%
Ziebach	336	326	862	9	Minimal	7.1%
Unassigned	0	0	1809	0		

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 50 of 101

South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4579	0
10-19 years	12814	0
20-29 years	20100	7
30-39 years	18644	18
40-49 years	16195	35
50-59 years	16004	113
60-69 years	12985	250
70-79 years	6930	434
80+ years	5127	1041

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	59030	895
Male	54348	1003

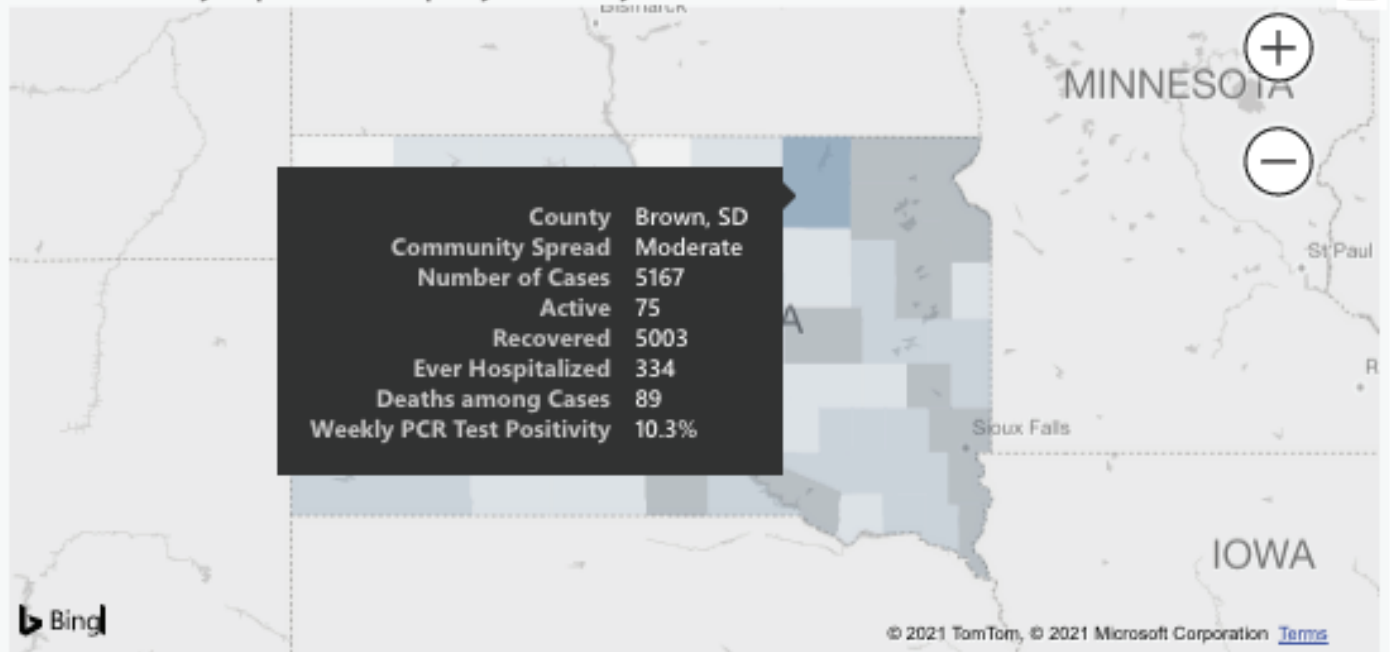
Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 51 of 101

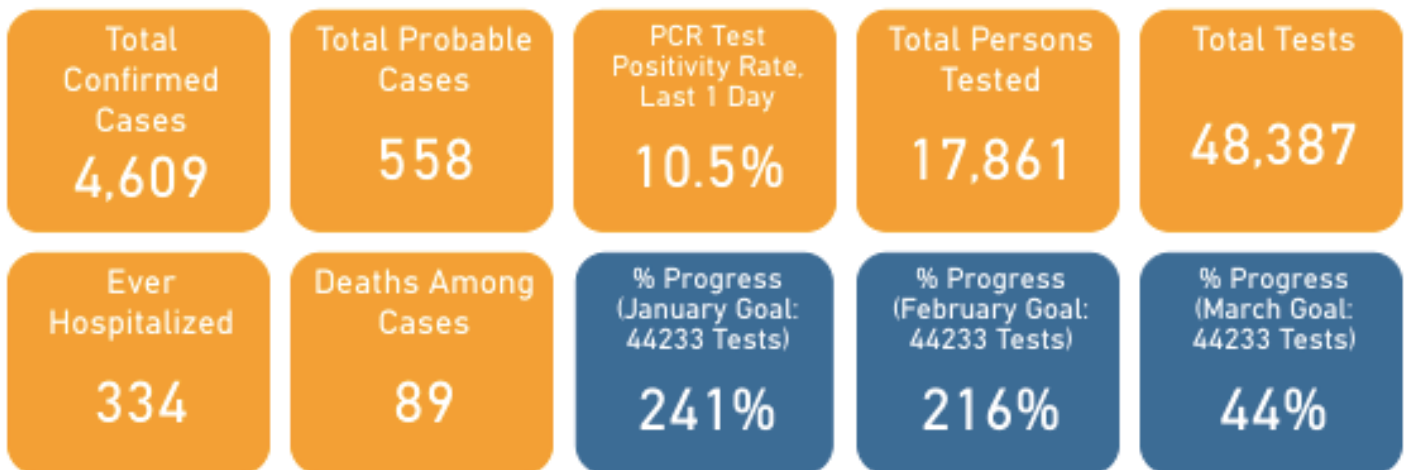
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



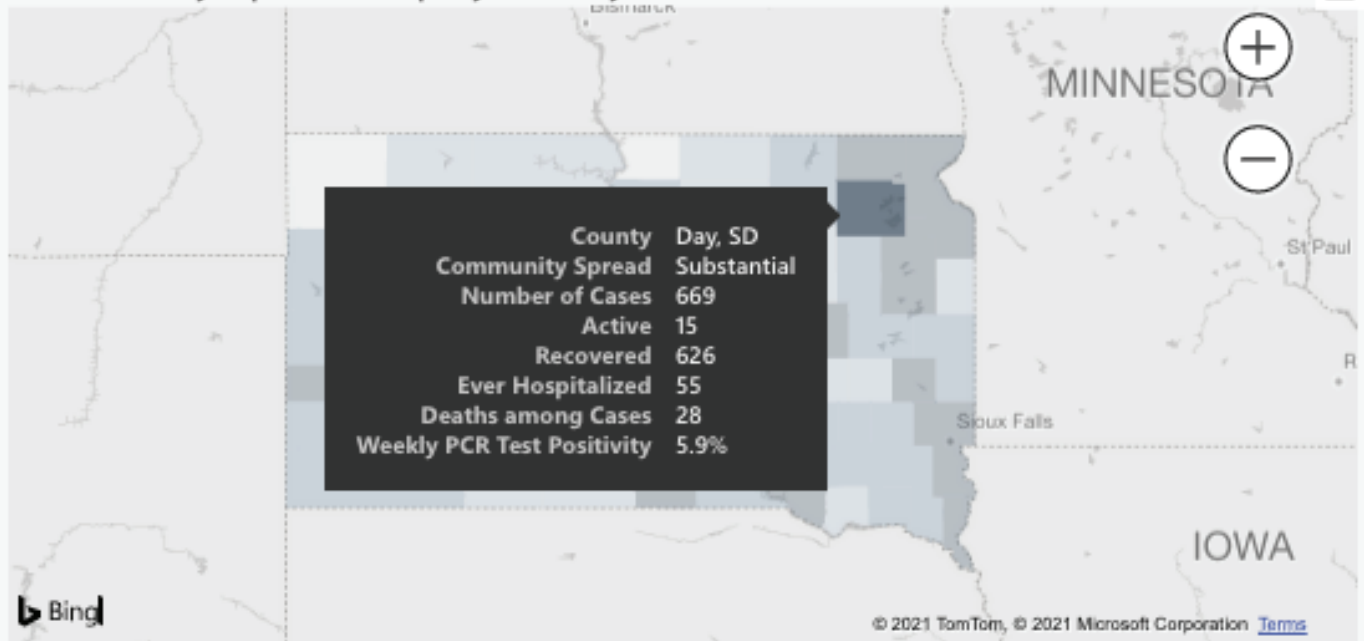
Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 52 of 101

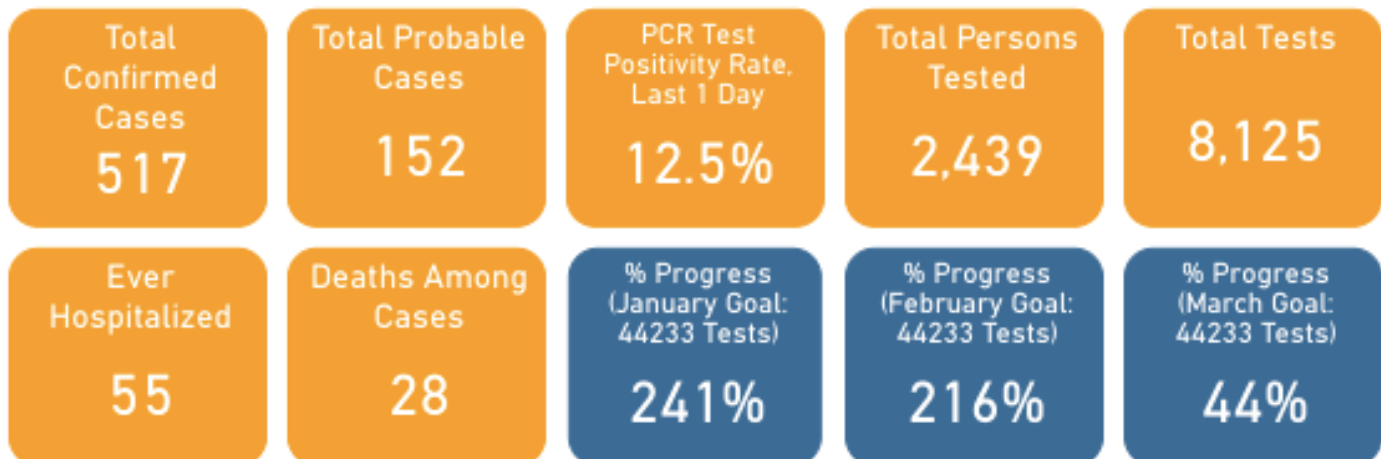
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 53 of 101

Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

255,025

State Allocation

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

165,425

State Allocation

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

31%

State & Federal Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	188
Moderna	127,027
Pfizer	127,810

Doses	# of Recipients
Pfizer - Series Complete	46,402
Moderna - Series Complete	43,198
Moderna - 1 dose	40,631
Pfizer - 1 dose	35,006

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	31.45%
Series Complete	20.46%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 15+ years, includes...

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	659	249	205	454
Beadle	5230	1,838	1,696	3,534
Bennett*	416	112	152	264
Bon Homme*	2722	1,116	803	1,919
Brookings	7382	2,772	2,305	5,077
Brown	11913	3,011	4,451	7,462
Brule*	1549	503	523	1,026
Buffalo*	120	80	20	100
Butte	1760	724	518	1,242
Campbell	872	290	291	581
Charles Mix*	2463	1,031	716	1,747
Clark	979	343	318	661
Clay	3909	1,395	1,257	2,652
Codington*	7948	2,744	2,602	5,346
Corson*	236	92	72	164
Custer*	2270	854	708	1,562
Davison	5902	1,702	2,100	3,802
Day*	2044	722	661	1,383
Deuel	1211	423	394	817
Dewey*	330	72	129	201
Douglas*	967	307	330	637
Edmunds	1060	356	352	708
Fall River*	2201	729	736	1,465
Faulk	811	269	271	540
Grant*	2359	1,175	592	1,767
Gregory*	1349	545	402	947
Haakon*	476	160	158	318

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 54 of 101

Hamlin	1381	503	439	942
Hand	1055	375	340	715
Hanson	367	135	116	251
Harding	81	37	22	59
Hughes*	6381	1,787	2,297	4,084
Hutchinson*	2616	910	853	1,763
Hyde*	442	152	145	297
Jackson*	343	107	118	225
Jerauld	643	309	167	476
Jones*	546	170	188	358
Kingsbury	1877	823	527	1,350
Lake	3149	1,073	1,038	2,111
Lawrence	6584	2,494	2,045	4,539
Lincoln	21615	4,885	8,365	13,250
Lyman*	637	233	202	435
Marshall*	1302	406	448	854
McCook	1758	538	610	1,148
McPherson	203	69	67	136
Meade*	5006	1,650	1,678	3,328
Mellette*	37	17	10	27
Miner	703	227	238	465
Minnehaha*	66483	16,909	24,787	41,696
Moody*	1379	597	391	988
Oglala Lakota*	149	55	47	102
Pennington*	30143	8,291	10,926	19,217
Perkins*	545	281	132	413
Potter	676	308	184	492
Roberts*	3575	1,349	1,113	2,462
Sanborn	786	248	269	517
Spink	2426	864	781	1,645
Stanley*	970	284	343	627
Sully	303	79	112	191
Todd*	144	48	48	96
Tripp*	1722	556	583	1,139
Turner	2919	853	1,033	1,886
Union	2157	1,063	547	1,610
Walworth*	1535	461	537	998
Yankton	8071	1,705	3,183	4,888
Ziebach*	52	16	18	34
Other	5126	1,344	1,891	3,235

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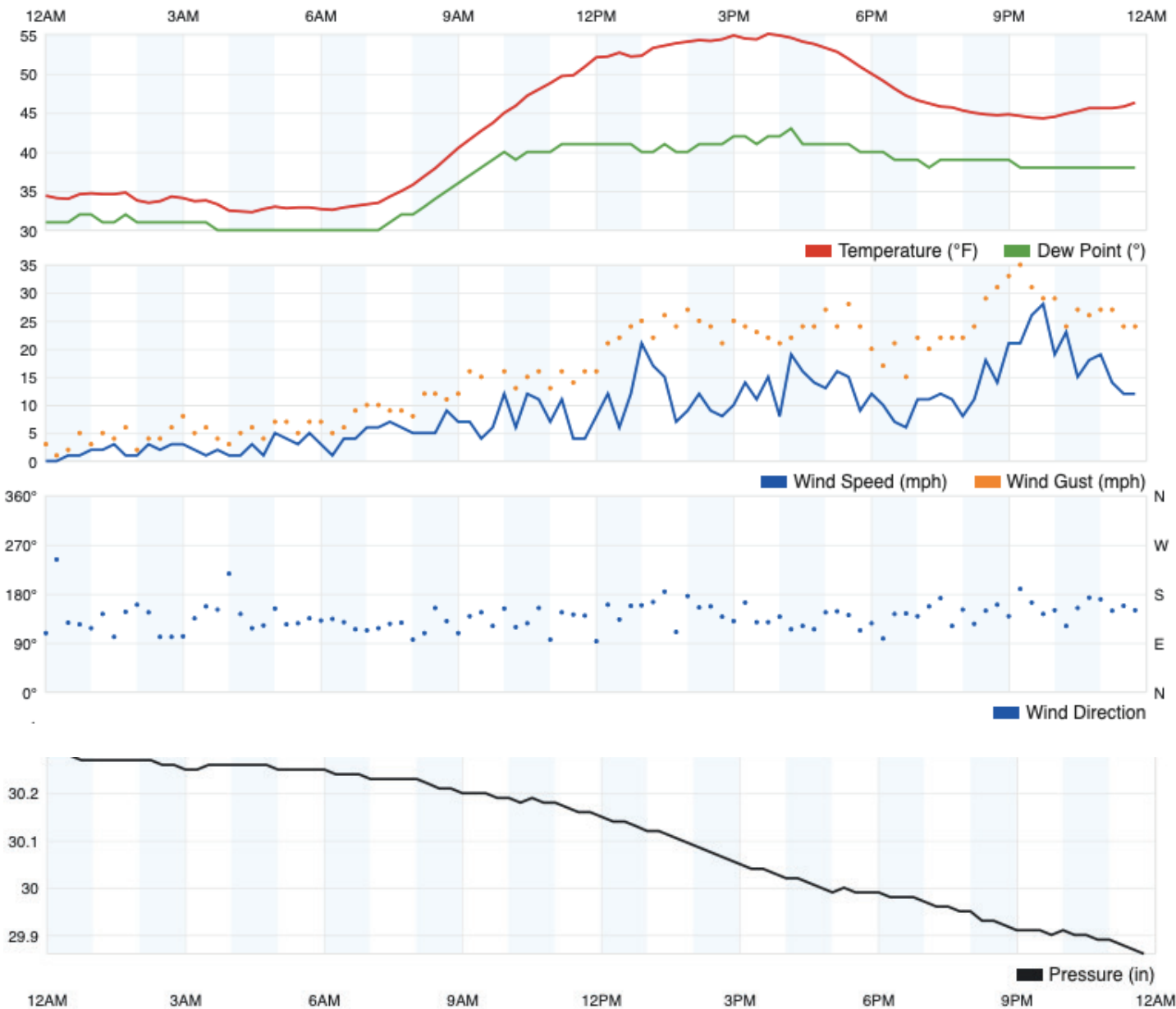
1-855-696-6857



Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 56 of 101

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 57 of 101

Today



Sunny

High: 68 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 30 °F

Monday



Mostly Sunny

High: 64 °F

Monday Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 41 °F

Tuesday



Mostly Sunny

High: 65 °F

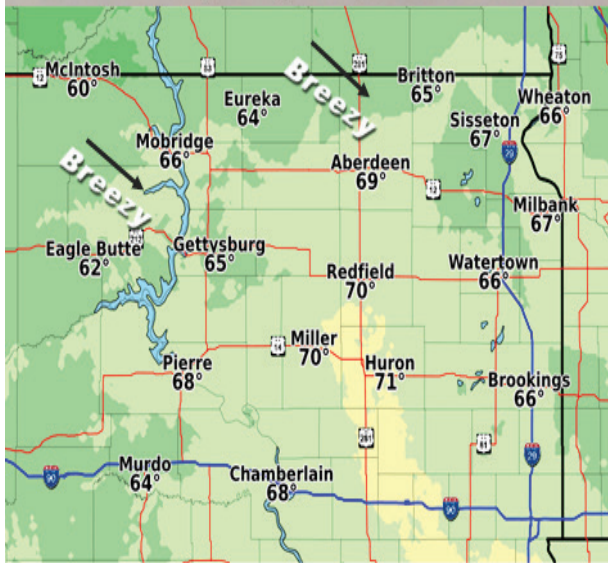


Fire Danger Continues

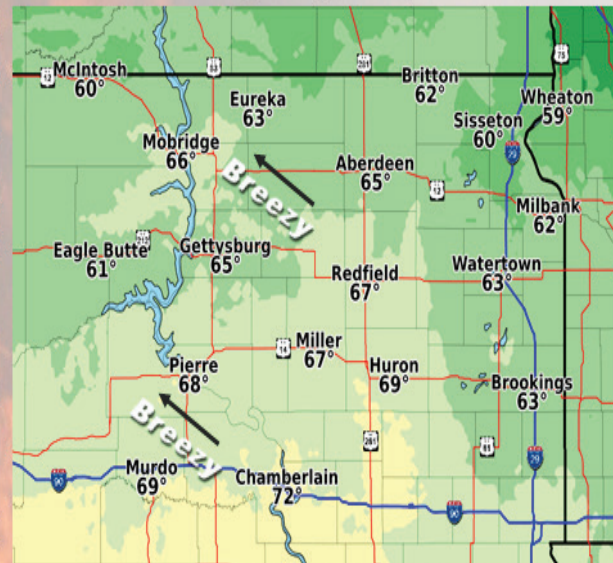


High temps will be 15 to 30+ degrees above normal through Tuesday
Dry air and fuels and gusty winds will result in high to very high fire danger. Please exercise caution!

Today's High Temperatures



Monday's High Temperatures



NWS Aberdeen, SD

Updated: 3/7/2021 5:09 AM CST

Much above average to record-territory high temperatures are expected through Tuesday, in addition to breezy conditions. Be mindful that these conditions are favorable for the development and spreading of fires, especially given the ongoing drought across much of the area. Relatively cooler air arrives mid-week, and precipitation is possible Tuesday night into Wednesday (mostly rain as opposed to snow).

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 58 of 101

Daily Record Highs Sunday - Tuesday

	Sun, March 7 th	Mon, March 8 th	Tue, March 9 th
Aberdeen	*70° in 2016	*58° in 1927	*64° in 1936
Watertown	74° in 2000	67° in 1987	*59° in 1911
Sisseton	70° in 2000 & 1987	68° in 1987	*61° in 1902
Pierre	79° in 2020	*65° in 1977	70° in 2014 & 1936
Mobridge	*64° in 1968	*65° in 1911	73° in 1911

A few of these are in jeopardy, as marked by *

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 59 of 101

Today in Weather History

March 7, 1998: A winter storm tracked across South Dakota, resulting in heavy snow of 6 to 8 inches across most of central South Dakota from the evening of the 6th into the afternoon of the 7th. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Fort Pierre and near Stephan, 7 inches at Blunt, Pierre, and Murdo, and 8 inches across far southern Jones and Lyman counties. Many activities were canceled, and travel was significantly disrupted, especially on Interstate-90.

1717: A series of snowstorms between February 27 and March 7 blanketed the New England colonies with five or more feet of snow.

1970: Last near-total eclipse of the sun in Washington, DC, in this century. Sun was 95% eclipsed.

1997: The worst was finally over for states hit hard by the flooding Ohio River. The river crested on the 6th at Louisville, Kentucky, at 15 feet above flood stage, after topping out at nearly 13 feet at Cincinnati, Ohio, and more than 7 feet at Huntington, West Virginia.

1717 - The Great Snow, a composite of four winter storms to hit the eastern U.S. in nine days, finally came to an end. Snow depths averaged 60 inches following the storm. Up to four feet of snow fell around Boston MA, and snow drifts 25 feet high were reported around Dorchester MA. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1932 - A severe coastal storm set barometric pressure records from Virginia to New England. Block Island RI reported a barometric pressure reading of 28.20 inches. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Forty-five cities in the north central and northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Huron SD hit 80 degrees, and Pickstown SD reached 81 degrees. Rochester MN and Rockford IL smashed their previous record for the date by sixteen degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - High winds along a sharp cold front ushered snow and arctic cold into the Central Rocky Mountain Region and the Northern Plains. Snowfall totals in Utah ranged up to sixteen inches at Brighton. Winds gusted to 66 mph at Rapid City SD. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Blustery northwest winds ushered arctic cold into eastern U.S. Burlington VT reported a record low of 14 degrees below zero. Snow and ice over the Carolinas replaced the 80 degree weather of the previous day. High winds and heavy surf caused five million dollars damage along the North Carolina coast. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A major ice storm left much of Iowa under a thick coat of ice. It was the worst ice storm in at least twenty-five years for Iowa, perhaps the worst of the century. Up to two inches of ice coated much of western and central Iowa, with three inches reported in Crawford County and Carroll County. As much as five inches of ice was reported on some electrical lines. The ice downed 78 towers in a 17-mile stretch of a high voltage feeder near Boone costing three electric utilities fifteen million dollars. Damage to trees was incredible, and clean-up costs alone ran into the millions. Total damage from the storm was more than fifty million dollars. (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

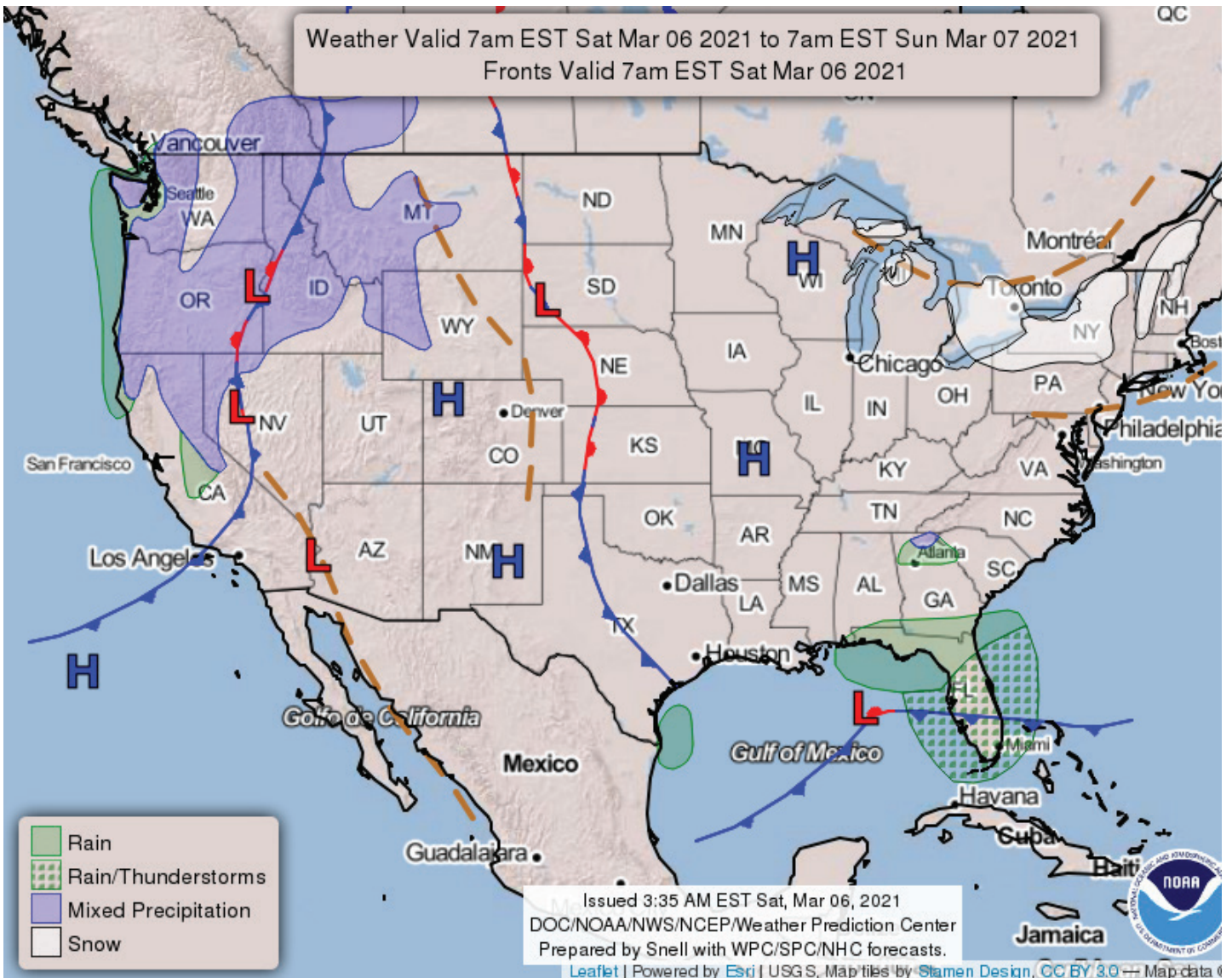
Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 60 of 101

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 55 °F at 3:44 PM
Low Temp: 32 °F at 4:20 AM
Wind: 36 mph at 9:04 PM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 70° in 2016
Record Low: -24° in 1995
Average High: 35°F
Average Low: 16°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.17
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.19
Precip Year to Date: 0.18
Sunset Tonight: 6:29 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:59 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 61 of 101



RIGHT LIVING

When we are born, we know nothing, have no plan to follow, and must be taught how to live. Before us are opportunities and options, choices and consequences that await us. Unfortunately, we do not have any "second chances" in life to live our lives over again. No matter how deep our desire may be or how desperate we are, we cannot relive one second nor retrace one step. Each step is final, and every second gone forever.

David, however, says that the Good Shepherd will "lead us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." Note carefully that He does not simply want us to understand what righteousness is, but that He leads those who are His own "in paths of righteousness for His name's sake" – so we can avoid the many tragedies that we face in life.

This is very important. The "righteousness" that David is speaking of here is not an end in itself. If it were, it would lead us to a state of "self-righteousness" – not godly righteousness. God does not want us to stray or walk in paths that are unrighteous because they will lead us to defeat and destruction, sin and shame. He wants to lead us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Nothing is more important for us. Why?

Because the Shepherd's name – His reputation – is at stake. Like it or not, His name will be respected or rejected, honored or harmed, by the way we live. Our lives say it all.

Alexander the Great once said to one of his soldiers, "Your name is Alexander and my name is Alexander. But you are bringing disgrace to my name. Change your name or change the way you live." So, it's "righteousness for His names sake"

Prayer: Enable, us Father, to walk righteously in Your power for Your Name's sake, to honor You. May we take Your reputation seriously! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. Psalm 23:3

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6238

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 63 of 101

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
- 07/30/2021-08/03/2021 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

News from the Associated Press

Workers worry about safety, stress as states ease mask rules

By LEAH WILLINGHAM, MICHAEL LIEDTKE and ANNE D'INNOCENZIO Associated Press

JACKSON, Mississippi (AP) — Leo Carney worries that bigger crowds and mask-less diners could endanger workers at the Biloxi, Mississippi, seafood restaurant where he manages the kitchen. Maribel Cornejo, who earns \$9.85 an hour as a McDonald's cook in Houston, can't afford to get sick and frets co-workers will become more lax about wearing masks, even though the fast food company requires them.

As more jurisdictions join Texas, Mississippi and other states in lifting mask mandates and easing restrictions on businesses, many essential workers — including bartenders, restaurant servers and retail workers — are relieved by changes that might help the economy but also concerned they could make them less safe amid a pandemic that health experts warn is far from over.

Many business owners on the Mississippi Gulf Coast were glad Gov. Tate Reeves decided to eliminate mask requirements, limits on seating in restaurants and most other binding restrictions. "But the workers themselves... especially ones that have pre-existing conditions, they're scared right now," Carney said.

"This just puts us back in a situation where we're on the frontlines, under the gun again," said Carney, who sees Black Mississippians facing the greatest risks from the decision that took effect Wednesday. COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black and Latino people in the United States, and many Gulf Coast restaurants have a significant number of Black employees.

Public health experts tracking the trajectory of more contagious virus variants have warned that lifting restrictions too soon could lead to another lethal wave of infections. Although vaccination drives are accelerating as drug manufacturers ramp up production, many essential workers are not yet eligible for COVID-19 vaccines in Mississippi and other states.

Alabama's state health officer on Friday advised residents to keep following standard infection-prevention recommendations even though the governor is letting the state's mask mandate expire next month.

"There is nothing magical about the date of April 9. We don't want the public to think that's the day we all stop taking precautions," State Health Officer Scott Harris said.

The governors of Iowa, Montana, North Dakota also have ended mask requirements or plan to suspend them soon. The governor of South Carolina on Friday lifted an executive order requiring face coverings in government office buildings and restaurants, leaving it up to state administrators and restaurant operators to develop their own guidelines.

Governors in several other states, including Michigan and Louisiana, eased the operating limits for bars, restaurants and other businesses in recent days.

The National Retail Federation, the largest retail trade association in the U.S., issued a statement Wednesday encouraging shoppers to wear masks. Some retail chains, including Target and supermarket operator Albertson's, plan to continue requiring them for both customers and workers in states that no longer make them mandatory.

Texas Retailers Association President and CEO George Kelemen said he thinks many members will continue to require workers — but not necessarily customers — to wear masks and other protective gear.

"Retailers know their customers best," he said.

McDonald's cook Cornejo, 43, said the end of Texas' mask mandate next week alarms her because several of her co-workers already were lax about keeping their faces covered. She said co-workers she has asked to pull their masks back over their noses politely acquiesced, but not always for long.

"There are just different attitudes," said Cornejo, whose 19-year-old son began working as a cashier at the same restaurant to help pay the family's bills. "Some say it's just too difficult to keep it on for eight hours, especially when it gets hot."

The director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, encouraged Americans to "do the right thing" by continuing to abide by recommendations for routine mask use and

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 65 of 101

social distancing - even if their states lift restrictions.

Dr. William Schaffner, a professor of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, said individuals who wear masks still risk infection from unmasked shoppers and diners. He called Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's decision to lift COVID-19 restrictions starting March 10 "entirely too soon and entirely too carefree."

While deaths and new confirmed cases have plummeted from their January peaks nationwide, they're still running at high levels, while outbreak indicators in some states have risen in recent weeks. In Mississippi, for example, the 7-day rolling average of the virus positivity rate rose from 11.47% on Feb. 19 to 12.14% on March 5, and the state's 7-day rolling average of daily deaths increase during the same period from 15 per day to 20.71 per day.

Workers in cities that still have mask mandates or jobs at businesses that maintain their own virus-prevention rules anticipate defiance from customers emboldened by their governors' actions and weary of taking precautions.

Molly Brooks, 25, a barista at a Farmers Branch, Texas, coffee shop, said she has regularly dealt with customers who walked out or bullied her and her colleagues when they were asked to wear a mask. Brooks worries how they're going to enforce the rule, which the coffee shop plans to keep in place, now that Texas' governor lifted the statewide mask mandate.

"We are gearing up for the emotional toll that this is going to take," said the 25-year-old barista, who started working for the coffee shop in November while looking for a job in education. "The people who don't want to wear them are still going to fight...and now they are going to have even more ammunition."

Square Books in Oxford, Mississippi, home of the University of Mississippi, will require masks and allow only eight customers at a time. Although General Manager Lyn Roberts believes the rules will make many customers feel safe, bookstore employee Paul Fyke said he observed a change in Oxford almost as soon as the Board of Aldermen chose to follow the governor's lead and did away with the college town's mask mandate.

"I mean, really, even on the drive home, you can kind of already see there were places where, for a lot of people, it was triumph," he said on Thursday, the day after Oxford's mask requirement ended. "They were happy to be removing them."

Still, some workers are cautiously hopeful that fewer restrictions will bring more customers, tips and job security after a year short on all three.

In San Francisco, where the mayor last week announced the return of indoor dining and the reopening of movie theaters and gyms, Dino Keres had no qualms about serving drinks to customers bellying up to the bar inside Sam's Grill.

That's partly because he was about to get his second vaccine dose, but also because nobody on staff was infected when indoor dining was briefly permitted last fall. What's more, masks are required unless people are eating, and indoor seating is limited to 25% of capacity.

"We have already went through this once, and now the timing feels about right to try it again," Keres said Thursday.

Ro Hart, an assistant general manager and hostess at Tony's Pizza Napoletana in San Francisco, said the return of indoor dining in the city provoked a mixture of joy and anxiety.

"We are happy to be bringing in more revenue, but we are little nervous, too, because we have to be more stringent about making sure everyone keeps their masks on when they're not eating," Hart said, adding that she would be far more worried if San Francisco didn't require masks.

"We feel for our brothers and sisters at all those restaurants in Texas," she said.

Associated Press writers Alexandra Olson and Joseph Pisani in New York; David Koenig in Dallas; Dee-Ann Durbin in Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, contributed to this story.

S. Dakota beats W. Illinois 86-69 in Summit League tourney

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 66 of 101

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Stanley Umude scored 24 points as South Dakota defeated Western Illinois 86-69 in the quarterfinals of the Summit League Conference Tourney on Saturday night.

Xavier Fuller added 20 points for the Coyotes. Fuller also had 10 rebounds.

Tasos Kamateros had 17 points, nine rebounds and five assists for South Dakota (14-10). Kruz Perrott-Hunt added 12 points and seven assists.

Colton Sandage had 16 points for the Leathernecks (7-15). Anthony Jones added 13 points. Will Carius had 12 points and nine rebounds.

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

This was generated by Automated Insights, <http://www.automatedinsights.com/ap>, using data from STATS LLC, <https://www.stats.com>

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

03-10-11-15-35

(three, ten, eleven, fifteen, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$56,000

Lotto America

23-33-37-42-47, Star Ball: 1, ASB: 2

(twenty-three, thirty-three, thirty-seven, forty-two, forty-seven; Star Ball: one; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$3.37 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$68 million

Powerball

11-31-50-52-58, Powerball: 18, Power Play: 4

(eleven, thirty-one, fifty, fifty-two, fifty-eight; Powerball: eighteen; Power Play: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$138 million

Winning numbers drawn in 'Dakota Cash' game

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ The winning numbers in Saturday evening's drawing of the South Dakota Lottery's "Dakota Cash" game were:

03-10-11-15-35

(three, ten, eleven, fifteen, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$56,000

Wilson scores 25 to carry S. Dakota St. past Omaha 84-71

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Douglas Wilson had 25 points as South Dakota State defeated Nebraska Omaha 84-71 in the Summit League Conference tourney quarterfinals on Saturday.

Baylor Scheierman had 18 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists for South Dakota State (16-6). Matt Dentlinger added 14 points. Alex Ariens had six rebounds.

South Dakota State posted a season-high 22 assists.

Ayo Akinwale had 26 points for the Mavericks (5-20). Jadin Booth added 13 points. Kyle Luedtke had 10 points.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 67 of 101

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

This was generated by Automated Insights, <http://www.automatedinsights.com/ap>, using data from STATS LLC, <https://www.stats.com>

Saturday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

State Qualifier=

Class AA=

SoDak 16=

Aberdeen Central 57, Rapid City Central 52

Brandon Valley 82, Rapid City Stevens 50

Harrisburg 68, Spearfish 42

Mitchell 66, Watertown 40

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 71, Pierre 41

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 59, Sioux Falls Lincoln 45

Sioux Falls Washington 67, Brookings 38

Yankton 78, Douglas 50

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

Gronowski's video game stats send S. Dakota past W. Illinois

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota State quarterback Mark Gronowski accounted for 317 total yards and four touchdowns and the Jackrabbits trounced Western Illinois 45-10 on Saturday.

He threw for 197 yards and a pair of touchdowns and ran for 120 yards on four carries with two scores. Gronowski's 22-yard touchdown run early in the first quarter was the game's first score.

His 80-yard touchdown run with 4:55 left before halftime gave South Dakota State (2-1, 2-1 Missouri Valley Football Conference) a 35-3 lead.

Gronowski threw a 44-yard touchdown pass to Jadon Janke and a 12-yarder to Mason Leighton for a 42-10 advantage 41 seconds before halftime.

Isaiah Davis ran for 118 yards on nine carries and touchdown for the Jackrabbits as they amassed 531 total yards; 328 of which came on the ground.

Western Illinois' (0-2, 0-2) Connor Sampson threw for 278 yards and a touchdown and was intercepted three times.

More AP college football: <https://apnews.com/tag/Collegefootball>

South Dakota reports 2 more COVID-19 deaths, 149 new cases

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials reported two more deaths from COVID-19 and 149 new cases on Saturday, while the number of active cases in the state has increased for the fifth straight day.

The state said there are currently 2,109 active cases of the virus in the state. That's up from 13 a day earlier and the fifth-consecutive day of increases in active cases.

There have been a total of 1,898 deaths and more than 113,000 cases since the pandemic began. Hospitalizations due to COVID-19 stayed the same on Saturday, with 74 people hospitalized.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 68 of 101

The Argus Leader reports that health department says 89,600 people in South Dakota have completed the full two-dose series of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Filer leads Omaha women to upset of No. 21 South Dakota St

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Josie Filer scored 19 points and grabbed 12 rebounds, and Omaha became the first No. 8 seed to defeat the top seed in the Summit League women's tournament, shutting down 21st-ranked South Dakota State 52-40 on Saturday.

To get their first-ever win over a ranked team, the Mavericks limited SDSU to 22.4% shooting and forced 20 turnovers, ending the Jackrabbits' 18-game winning streak. South Dakota State was 6 of 24 from 3-point range, 7 of 34 inside the arc.

The Jackrabbits did fine defensively but the loss of Summit League player of the year Myah Selland, who missed the last three games of the regular season with a leg injury, finally caught up to them.

The Jackrabbits, who swept Mavericks 62-50 and 64-54 in an 18-0 regular season, came in averaging 71.8 points a game while Omaha allowed 71.4.

In the last game before reeling off 18-straight wins, SDSU scored 48 points, shot 33.3% and had 21 turnovers, all season-worsts.

Mariah Murdie had career highs of six steals and five blocks to go with nine points and five rebounds for Omaha (6-12). Sarah Schmitt had six assists.

Tylee Irvin and Paiton Burckhard scored 10 points apiece for the Jackrabbits (21-3), who had won eight straight in the series and are now 31-4 in the tournament.

Omaha had a 16-4 advantage in points off turnovers with 14 steals and 26-12 on points in the paint. The Mavericks were 2 of 11 from 3-point range, shot just 39% overall and went 14 of 24 from the foul line.

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

Nebraska sheriff found guilty of misconduct

A Nebraska sheriff was found guilty of official misconduct for refusing to accept a man into his jail who was wanted out of South Dakota for kidnapping and sexual assault.

Dawes County Sheriff Karl Dailey was convicted of the misdemeanor charge following a two-day bench trial in January. Judge Randin Roland issued his written ruling Wednesday.

The events unfolded in July 2019 after a woman who had been dropped off at a hospital in Chadron, Nebraska, reported her boyfriend had beaten and raped her at a motel in Crawford, Nebraska. Authorities in Rapid City, South Dakota had sent out an alert earlier that month listing her as missing.

Chadron police notified the Nebraska State Patrol and Dawes County Sheriff's Office for assistance, but did not immediately notify the sheriff himself.

While a trooper was at the motel, the sheriff arrived and advised the trooper that the Dawes County Sheriff's Department would not be booking Nebraska State Patrol prisoners into its jail.

The judge was unconvinced by the sheriff's claim at trial that he did not accept the suspect at the jail due to his medical condition or high-risk status, saying the evidence regarding the sheriff's actions proves otherwise.

A sentencing date has not been set.

Iranian-British national ends 5-year sentence, not yet home

By AMIR VAHDAT and ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — A British-Iranian woman held in an Iranian prison for five years on widely refuted spying charges ended her sentence on Sunday, her lawyer said, although she faces a new trial and cannot yet return home to London.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 69 of 101

The twists and turns of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's years-long case have sparked international outrage and strained already fraught diplomatic ties between Britain and Iran.

Although Zaghari-Ratcliffe officially completed her sentence on Sunday and was allowed to remove her ankle monitor and leave house arrest, her future remains uncertain amid a long-running debt dispute between Britain and Iran and rising regional tensions.

Iranian state-run media reported that she has been summoned to court on March 14 over murky new charges, including "spreading propaganda," which were first announced last fall. Her trial was then indefinitely postponed, stirring hopes for her release when her sentence ended Sunday. Authorities released her on furlough last March due to surging coronavirus pandemic, and she has remained in detention at her parent's home in Tehran since.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe, 43, was sentenced to five years in jail after being convicted of plotting to overthrow Iran's government, a charge that she, her supporters and rights groups vigorously deny. She was taken into custody at the airport with her toddler daughter after visiting family on holiday in the capital of Tehran in 2016. At the time, she was working for Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of the news agency.

The United Nations has described her arrest as arbitrary, and reported that her treatment, including stints in solitary confinement and deprivation of medical care, could amount to torture.

U.K. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab on Sunday welcomed the removal of Zaghari-Ratcliffe's ankle tag but called for her to be allowed to return home.

"Iran's continued treatment of her is intolerable," he said on Twitter. "She must be allowed to return to the UK as soon as possible to be reunited with her family."

The latest setback in Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case comes as Britain and Iran negotiate a spat over a debt of some 400 million pounds (\$530 million) owed to Iran by London, a payment the late Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi made for Chieftain tanks that were never delivered. The shah abandoned the throne in 1979 and the Islamic Revolution installed the clerically overseen system that endures today.

Richard Ratcliffe, who for years has campaigned vocally for his wife's release, has said that Iran was holding Zaghari-Ratcliffe as "collateral" in the dispute. Authorities in London and Tehran deny that Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case is linked to the repayment deal. But a prisoner exchange that freed four American citizens in 2016 saw the U.S. pay a similar sum to Iran the same day of their release.

Her detention also comes as tensions escalate over Iran's tattered atomic deal with world powers. Since former U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the deal in 2018, Iran has been accelerating its breaches of the pact by enriching more uranium than allowed, among other actions. Tehran is seeking to press the other signatories to the deal, including Britain, to help offset the economic devastation wrought by American sanctions.

As for Zaghari-Ratcliffe, it remained unclear what would happen in court next week. Her family and supporters fear the worst.

"We don't know how to interpret being summoned ... Is it that they're just going to finish off all the paperwork and release her and give her passport back? Or is it that they are going to whack her with that second sentence?" Richard Ratcliffe's sister, Rebecca Ratcliffe, told U.K.'s Sky News.

The uncertainty means "there are a few more sleepless nights ahead of us," she added.

In what the U.N. has criticized as an "emerging pattern," Iran has frequently arrested dual citizens in recent years, often using their cases as bargaining chips for money or influence in negotiations with the West, something Tehran denies.

Several other dual nationals, including at least one other British citizen and three Americans, remain in prison. Iran refuses to recognize dual nationality, so detainees like Zaghari-Ratcliffe cannot receive consular assistance.

U.K. lawmaker Tulip Siddiq, who represents Zaghari-Ratcliffe's London district and has been in touch with her family, confirmed the new court date. In the meantime, she said, Zaghari-Ratcliffe's first trip after house arrest will be to see her grandmother.

Associated Press writer Kelvin Chan contributed from London. DeBre reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Where IS ruled, pope calls on Christians to forgive, rebuild

By NICOLE WINFIELD and SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

QARAQOSH, Iraq (AP) — Pope Francis urged Iraq's Christians on Sunday to forgive the injustices committed against them by Muslim extremists and to rebuild as he visited the wrecked shells of churches and met ecstatic crowds in the community's historic heartland, which was nearly erased by the Islamic State group's horrific reign.

At each stop in northern Iraq, the remnants of its Christian population turned out, jubilant, ululating, decked out in colorful dress, though heavy security prevented Francis from plunging into the crowd as he would normally do. Nonetheless, they simply seemed overjoyed that he had come and that they had not been forgotten.

It was a sign of the desperation for support among an ancient community uncertain whether it can hold on. The traditionally Christian towns dotting the Nineveh Plains of the north emptied out in 2014 as Christians — as well as many Muslims — fled the Islamic State group's onslaught. Only a few have returned to their homes since the defeat of IS in Iraq was declared four years ago, and the rest remain scattered elsewhere in Iraq or abroad.

Bells rang out in the town of Qaraqosh as the pope arrived. Speaking to a packed Church of the Immaculate Conception, Francis said "forgiveness" is a key word for Christians.

"The road to a full recovery may still be long, but I ask you, please, not to grow discouraged. What is needed is the ability to forgive, but also the courage not to give up." The Qaraqosh church has been extensively renovated after being vandalized by IS militants during their takeover of the town, making it a symbol of recovery efforts.

Iraq's Christian population, which have exited here since the time of Christ, has dwindled from around 1.5 million before the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that plunged the country into chaos to just a few hundred thousand today.

Francis's visit to Iraq, which was on its last day Sunday, aimed to encourage them to stay and help rebuild the country and restore what he called its "intricately designed carpet" of faith and ethnic groups.

Earlier Sunday, Francis, dressed in white, took to a red carpeted stage in the north's main city, Mosul, surrounded by the grey hollowed-out shells of four churches nearly destroyed in the war to oust IS fighters from the city.

It was a scene that would have been unimaginable years earlier. Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, was at the heart of the IS so-called "caliphate" and witnessed the worst of the group's rule inflicted on Muslims, Christians and others, including beheadings and mass killings.

"How cruel it is that this country, the cradle of civilization, should have been afflicted by so barbarous a blow," Francis said, "with ancient places of worship destroyed and many thousands of people — Muslims, Christians, Yazidis — who were cruelly annihilated by terrorism and others forcibly displaced or killed."

He deviated from his prepared speech to emphasize the plight of Iraq's Yazidi minority, which was subjected to mass killings, abductions and sexual slavery at the hands of IS.

"Today, however, we reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace more powerful than war."

The square where he spoke is home to four different churches — Syriac Catholic, Armenian-Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox and Chaldean — each left in ruins.

IS inflicted atrocities against all communities, including Muslims, during its three-year rule across much of northern and western Iraq. But the Christian minority was hit especially hard. The militants forced them to choose among conversion, death or the payment of a special tax for non-Muslims. Thousands fled, leaving homes and churches that were destroyed or commandeered by the extremists.

Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, became IS's bureaucratic and financial backbone. It took a ferocious

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 71 of 101

nine-month battle to finally free the city in July 2017. Between 9,000 and 11,000 civilians were killed, according to an AP investigation at the time, and the war left a swath of destruction. Many Iraqis have been left on their own to rebuild amid a years-long financial crisis.

The Rev. Raed Kallo was among the few Christians who returned to Mosul after IS was defeated. "My Muslim brothers received me after the liberation of the city with great hospitality and love," he said on stage before the pontiff.

Before IS, he had a parish of 500 Christian families. Now only 70 families remain, he said. "But today I live among 2 million Muslims who call me their Father Raed," he said.

Gutayba Aagha, the Muslim head of the Independent Social and Cultural Council for the Families of Mosul, encouraged other Christians to return.

"In the name of the council, I invite all our Christian brothers to return to this, their city, their properties and their businesses," he said.

Throughout his four-day visit, Francis has delivered a message of interreligious tolerance and fraternity to Muslim leaders, including in a historic meeting Saturday with Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

But Christians say it will take real changes on the ground for them to be able to return and stay, saying they face discrimination and intimidation from Shiite militias on top of the economic hardships suffered by all Iraqis.

Qaraqosh resident Martin Auffee said he was overjoyed by the pope's visit and appreciated that he showed he was with Christians as he urged them to endure and keep up hope.

"But we don't know for how long they can cling onto hope and continue to stay in Iraq because there's a lot of pain, unemployment and uncertainty," the 27-year-old said. "My whole life has been filled with pain, misery, war, persecution and displacement. Things are difficult for those living here."

At Qaraqosh, Francis urged its residents to continue to dream, and forgive.

"Forgiveness is necessary to remain in love, to remain Christian," he said.

He spoke after a resident, Doha Sabah Abdallah, told him how her son and two other young people had been killed in a mortar strike Aug. 6, 2014 as IS was nearing the town. Their death was the alarm for the rest of the residents to flee.

"The martyrdom of these three angels was a clear warning: if it weren't for them, the people of Baghdede would have remained, and would have inevitably fallen into the hands of ISIS," she said, referring to the name of Qaraqosh used by residents. "The deaths of three saved the entire city."

She said now it was for the survivors to "try to forgive the aggressor."

Francis wrapped up the day — and his visit — with a Mass at the stadium in Irbil, in the semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region. An estimated 10,000 people erupted in ululating cheers when he arrived and did a lap around the track in his open-sided popemobile, the first and only time he has used it on this trip due to security concerns.

On the makeshift altar for the Mass was a statue of the Virgin Mary that was restored after IS militants chopped off its head and hands when they took over the ancient Assyrian town of Keramlis, near Mosul, in August 2014.

Few in the crowd wore facemasks, as was the case during all of Francis' visits Sunday in northern Iraq.

Public health experts had expressed concerns ahead of the trip that large gatherings could serve as superspreader events for the coronavirus in a country suffering from a worsening outbreak where few have been vaccinated. The pope and members of his delegation have been vaccinated but most Iraqis have not.

Kullab reported from Baghdad. AP Religion Correspondent Mariam Fam contributed.

UK schools to reopen, backed by frequent virus testing

By KELVIN CHAN Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British students, backed by a robust coronavirus testing program, are gearing up to

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 72 of 101

return to school Monday after a two-month closure, in what Prime Minister Boris Johnson says is a plan to get the country "moving closer to a sense of normality."

The reopening of schools is the first step in the U.K. government's plan to gradually ease COVID-19 restrictions as the country's vaccination drive gains critical mass, with all restrictions lifted by June.

As part of the plan, millions of high school and college students coming back to U.K. classrooms will be tested for the virus for the first few weeks. Authorities want to quickly detect and isolate asymptomatic cases in order to avoid sending entire schools home.

"We are being cautious in our approach so that we do not undo the progress we have made so far," Johnson said in a statement, urging everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated.

High schools and colleges will be allowed to reopen in phases to allow for three rounds of testing. Students will then get kits so they can test themselves twice more at home. The U.K. government has distributed nearly 57 million rapid "lateral flow" test kits to schools across the country, but there are concerns about the accuracy of the tests, which may result in pupils being forced to self-isolate unnecessarily.

A senior public health official, however, said Sunday that the risk of a false positive was very low. More than 5 million rapid tests have been carried out at schools during lockdown, including 1 million last week, the government said.

Evidence from testing over the past eight weeks indicates "the risk of false positives is extremely low, less than 1 in 1,000," Susan Hopkins, the COVID-19 strategic response director for Public Health England, told the BBC. "And a test that returns less than 1 in 1,000 false positives is a very good test."

To help children forced into online learning for months to catch up with their education, officials are considering extending school days, shortening the summer holiday or adding an extra term to the year. British students already have a much shorter summer holiday than American students, usually leaving for summer break after mid-July.

"We're looking at a whole range of measures," U.K. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson told Sky News. "We've got to look at what is going to have the biggest positive impact on children's lives."

Britain has Europe's deadliest coronavirus outbreak, with nearly 125,000 lives lost so far. Its coronavirus vaccination program has, however, raced ahead of the United States and the European Union to give at least a first dose to nearly 22 million of the country's adults so far.

Britain has approved three vaccines for use: those made by Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca, and plans to vaccinate all adults by July.

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

Workers worry about safety, stress as states ease mask rules

By LEAH WILLINGHAM, MICHAEL LIEDTKE and ANNE D'INNOCENZIO Associated Press

JACKSON, Mississippi (AP) — Leo Carney worries that bigger crowds and mask-less diners could endanger workers at the Biloxi, Mississippi, seafood restaurant where he manages the kitchen. Maribel Cornejo, who earns \$9.85 an hour as a McDonald's cook in Houston, can't afford to get sick and frets co-workers will become more lax about wearing masks, even though the fast food company requires them.

As more jurisdictions join Texas, Mississippi and other states in lifting mask mandates and easing restrictions on businesses, many essential workers — including bartenders, restaurant servers and retail workers — are relieved by changes that might help the economy but also concerned they could make them less safe amid a pandemic that health experts warn is far from over.

Many business owners on the Mississippi Gulf Coast were glad Gov. Tate Reeves decided to eliminate mask requirements, limits on seating in restaurants and most other binding restrictions. "But the workers themselves... especially ones that have pre-existing conditions, they're scared right now," Carney said.

"This just puts us back in a situation where we're on the frontlines, under the gun again," said Carney,

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 73 of 101

who sees Black Mississippians facing the greatest risks from the decision that took effect Wednesday. COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black and Latino people in the United States, and many Gulf Coast restaurants have a significant number of Black employees.

Public health experts tracking the trajectory of more contagious virus variants have warned that lifting restrictions too soon could lead to another lethal wave of infections. Although vaccination drives are accelerating as drug manufacturers ramp up production, many essential workers are not yet eligible for COVID-19 vaccines in Mississippi and other states.

Alabama's state health officer on Friday advised residents to keep following standard infection-prevention recommendations even though the governor is letting the state's mask mandate expire next month.

"There is nothing magical about the date of April 9. We don't want the public to think that's the day we all stop taking precautions," State Health Officer Scott Harris said.

The governors of Iowa, Montana, North Dakota also have ended mask requirements or plan to suspend them soon. The governor of South Carolina on Friday lifted an executive order requiring face coverings in government office buildings and restaurants, leaving it up to state administrators and restaurant operators to develop their own guidelines.

Governors in several other states, including Michigan and Louisiana, eased the operating limits for bars, restaurants and other businesses in recent days.

The National Retail Federation, the largest retail trade association in the U.S., issued a statement Wednesday encouraging shoppers to wear masks. Some retail chains, including Target and supermarket operator Albertson's, plan to continue requiring them for both customers and workers in states that no longer make them mandatory.

Texas Retailers Association President and CEO George Kelemen said he thinks many members will continue to require workers — but not necessarily customers — to wear masks and other protective gear.

"Retailers know their customers best," he said.

McDonald's cook Cornejo, 43, said the end of Texas' mask mandate next week alarms her because several of her co-workers already were lax about keeping their faces covered. She said co-workers she has asked to pull their masks back over their noses politely acquiesced, but not always for long.

"There are just different attitudes," said Cornejo, whose 19-year-old son began working as a cashier at the same restaurant to help pay the family's bills. "Some say it's just too difficult to keep it on for eight hours, especially when it gets hot."

The director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, encouraged Americans to "do the right thing" by continuing to abide by recommendations for routine mask use and social distancing - even if their states lift restrictions.

Dr. William Schaffner, a professor of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, said individuals who wear masks still risk infection from unmasked shoppers and diners. He called Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's decision to lift COVID-19 restrictions starting March 10 "entirely too soon and entirely too carefree."

While deaths and new confirmed cases have plummeted from their January peaks nationwide, they're still running at high levels, while outbreak indicators in some states have risen in recent weeks. In Mississippi, for example, the 7-day rolling average of the virus positivity rate rose from 11.47% on Feb. 19 to 12.14% on March 5, and the state's 7-day rolling average of daily deaths increase during the same period from 15 per day to 20.71 per day.

Workers in cities that still have mask mandates or jobs at businesses that maintain their own virus-prevention rules anticipate defiance from customers emboldened by their governors' actions and weary of taking precautions.

Molly Brooks, 25, a barista at a Farmers Branch, Texas, coffee shop, said she has regularly dealt with customers who walked out or bullied her and her colleagues when they were asked to wear a mask. Brooks worries how they're going to enforce the rule, which the coffee shop plans to keep in place, now that Texas' governor lifted the statewide mask mandate.

"We are gearing up for the emotional toll that this is going to take," said the 25-year-old barista, who

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 74 of 101

started working for the coffee shop in November while looking for a job in education. "The people who don't want to wear them are still going to fight...and now they are going to have even more ammunition."

Square Books in Oxford, Mississippi, home of the University of Mississippi, will require masks and allow only eight customers at a time. Although General Manager Lyn Roberts believes the rules will make many customers feel safe, bookstore employee Paul Fyke said he observed a change in Oxford almost as soon as the Board of Aldermen chose to follow the governor's lead and did away with the college town's mask mandate.

"I mean, really, even on the drive home, you can kind of already see there were places where, for a lot of people, it was triumph," he said on Thursday, the day after Oxford's mask requirement ended. "They were happy to be removing them."

Still, some workers are cautiously hopeful that fewer restrictions will bring more customers, tips and job security after a year short on all three.

In San Francisco, where the mayor last week announced the return of indoor dining and the reopening of movie theaters and gyms, Dino Keres had no qualms about serving drinks to customers bellying up to the bar inside Sam's Grill.

That's partly because he was about to get his second vaccine dose, but also because nobody on staff was infected when indoor dining was briefly permitted last fall. What's more, masks are required unless people are eating, and indoor seating is limited to 25% of capacity.

"We have already went through this once, and now the timing feels about right to try it again," Keres said Thursday.

Ro Hart, an assistant general manager and hostess at Tony's Pizza Napoletana in San Francisco, said the return of indoor dining in the city provoked a mixture of joy and anxiety.

"We are happy to be bringing in more revenue, but we are little nervous, too, because we have to be more stringent about making sure everyone keeps their masks on when they're not eating," Hart said, adding that she would be far more worried if San Francisco didn't require masks.

"We feel for our brothers and sisters at all those restaurants in Texas," she said.

Associated Press writers Alexandra Olson and Joseph Pisani in New York; David Koenig in Dallas; Dee-Ann Durbin in Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, contributed to this story.

Swiss seen backing proposal to ban face coverings in public

BERLIN (AP) — Swiss voters appeared on course Sunday to narrowly approve a proposal to ban face coverings, both the niqabs and burqas worn by a few Muslim women in the country and the ski masks and bandannas used by protesters.

The measure would outlaw covering one's face in public places like restaurants, sports stadiums, public transport or simply walking in the street. There would be exceptions at religious sites and for security or health reasons, such as face masks people are wearing now to protect against COVID-19, as well as for traditional Carnival celebrations. Authorities would have two years to draw up detailed legislation.

The Swiss government opposed the measure and says that people covering their faces is a "marginal" issue. It argued the measure could harm tourism — most Muslim women who wear such veils in Switzerland are visitors from well-heeled Persian Gulf states, who are often drawn to Swiss lakeside cities. And it says that it wouldn't help the women affected.

It backed instead requiring people to show their faces if requested to do so by authorities.

Supporters of the proposal, which came to a vote five years after it was launched and came to be known colloquially as the "burqa ban," argued that the full-face coverings symbolize the repression of women and said the measure is needed to uphold a basic principle that faces should be shown in a free society like Switzerland's.

A projection for national public broadcaster SRG nearly two hours after polls closed put support for the proposal at 52%, with a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points. Lukas Golder of polling

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 75 of 101

agency gfs.bern told SRG's SRF television channel that a defeat was "practically almost ruled out."

The close outcome was in line with pre-referendum expectations.

Two of Switzerland's 26 cantons, or states, Ticino and St. Gallen, already have similar legislation that foresees fines for transgressions. National legislation would put Switzerland in line with countries like Belgium and France that have already enacted similar measures.

Backers included the nationalist Swiss People's Party, which is the strongest in parliament. The committee that launched the proposal is led by a lawmaker from the party and also initiated a ban on the construction of new minarets that voters approved in 2009.

This time around, a coalition of left-leaning parties that opposes the proposal put up signs that read: "Absurd. Useless. Islamophobic."

Experts estimate that at most a few dozen Muslim women wear full-face coverings in the country of 8.5 million people.

Voters had their say on two other issues Sunday. Projections showed them clearly rejecting a proposed voluntary "e-ID" to improve the security of online transactions — an idea that ran afoul of privacy advocates, as it would have been issued by private companies — and likely narrowly approving a free-trade deal with Indonesia.

From vote to virus, misinformation campaign targets Latinos

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Tom Perez was a guest on a Spanish-language talk radio show in Las Vegas last year when a caller launched into baseless complaints about both parties, urging Latino listeners to not cast votes at all.

Perez, then chairman of the Democratic Party, recognized many of the claims as talking points for #WalkAway, a group promoted by a conservative activist, Brandon Straka, who was later arrested for participating in the deadly Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

In the run-up to the November election, that call was part of a broader, largely undetected movement to depress turnout and spread disinformation about Democrat Joe Biden among Latinos, promoted on social media and often fueled by automated accounts.

The effort showed how social media and other technology can be leveraged to spread misinformation so quickly that those trying to stop it cannot keep up. There were signs that it worked as Donald Trump swung large numbers of Latino votes in the 2020 presidential race in some areas that had been Democratic strongholds.

Videos and pictures were doctored. Quotes were taken out of context. Conspiracy theories were fanned, including that voting by mail was rigged, that the Black Lives Matter movement had ties to witchcraft and that Biden was beholden to a cabal of socialists.

That flow of misinformation has only intensified since Election Day, researchers and political analysts say, stoking Trump's baseless claims that the election was stolen and false narratives around the mob that overran the Capitol.

More recently, it has morphed into efforts to undermine vaccination efforts against the coronavirus.

"The volume and sources of Spanish language information are exceedingly wide-ranging and that should scare everyone," Perez said.

The funding and the organizational structure of this effort is not clear, although the messages show a fealty to Trump and opposition to Democrats.

A nonpartisan academic report released this past week said most false narratives in the Spanish-language community "were translated from English and circulated via prominent platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as in closed group chat platforms like WhatsApp, and efforts often appeared coordinated across platforms."

"The most prominent narratives and those shared were either closely aligned with or completely repurposed from right-wing media outlets," said the report by researchers from Stanford University, the

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 76 of 101

University of Washington, the social network analysis firm Graphika and Atlantic Council's DFRLab, which studies disinformation online around the world.

Straka said via email that nothing from the #WalkAway Campaign "encourages people not to vote." He declined further comment.

While much of the material is coming from domestic sources such as Spanish-speaking social media "influencers," it increasingly originating on online sites in Latin America, those studying it closely say.

Misinformation originally promoted in English is translated in Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua and elsewhere, then reaches Hispanic voters in the U.S. via communications from their relatives in those countries. That is often shared via private WhatsApp and Facebook chats and text chains.

"There's this growing concern that this is very much part of the immigrant and first-generation information environment for a lot of Latinos in the United States," said Dan Restrepo, former senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs at the National Security Council. "A lot of it is seemingly coming through family and other group chats, whose origins are in-region rather than the United States."

WhatsApp and similar services are popular among Hispanics in the U.S. because the services allow for communicating with family and friends in Latin America free over the internet, avoiding costly long-distance charges. While those originating such campaigns in Latin America often cannot vote in the U.S., they can influence family in this country who do.

YouTube, Facebook and other social media companies have cracked down on false claims since before the election and intensified such efforts after online conspiracy theories helped incite the Trump loyalists who attacked the Capitol.

"We are running the largest online vaccine information campaign in history on our apps in dozens of languages, including Spanish," said Kevin McAlister, a spokesman for Facebook which owns WhatsApp and Instagram. "We've removed millions of pieces of content on Facebook and Instagram that violate our COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation policies, and labeled more than 167 million pieces of COVID-19 content, including Spanish-language content."

WhatsApp now limits users' ability to forward messages to more than one chat at a time; that led to a 70% reduction in the number of highly forwarded messages. The company also partnered with Google to provide a feature allowing users to search the internet for the contents of forwarded messages to better check the veracity.

Still, those who monitor Spanish-language content online describe an information void, or dearth of reliable sources with large enough followings to consistently debunk falsehoods.

"The Spanish-language space has been a bit of a blind spot for researchers for awhile now," said Bret Schafer, a disinformation expert at the Alliance for Securing Democracy, which works to combat online efforts to weaken democratic institutions. "This field exploded after 2016 and, the vast majority of us who are in it, more of us speak Russian than Spanish."

With the election behind them, the proponents of these campaigns are now trying to spread chaos more broadly, notably by trying to create doubt about vaccines. That push is especially dangerous because Latinos have higher chances of being infected by, hospitalized from and dying of COVID-19 than do whites and African Americans or Asian Americans.

Maria Teresa Kumar, president and CEO of Voto Latino, which works to promote Hispanic voting and political engagement nationwide, has personal experience.

Her mother, Mercedes Vegvary, runs an elderly care facility in Northern California and spent weeks planning to forgo getting vaccinated against COVID-19 because a friend at a gym had showed her a video circulating on social media. In it, a woman wearing a lab coat and claiming to be a pharmacist in El Salvador says in Spanish that such vaccines aren't safe for use in humans.

A video with a similar message appears to have originated in Panama, and another came from the Middle East but had been translated into Spanish. All moved into the U.S. via text chains or internet messaging from people with family and friends in Latin America, Kumar said.

One chain features doctored video of the late, Nobel Prize-winning chemist Kary Mullis purportedly dis-

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 77 of 101

missing Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, as a “phony who knows nothing about virology.” Another shows a crowded street that it claims is full of Italians flaunting social distancing and mask-wearing rules over the hashtag in Spanish #yonomevacuno” or “I won’t be vaccinated.”

The vaccine disinformation may revert to more election related falsehoods as the 2022 midterm elections come more clearly into view. Voto Latino and Perez have partnered with the liberal online watchdog group Media Matters for America on a \$22 million “Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab” that will seek to counter online falsehoods about the coronavirus vaccine and upcoming elections.

“You don’t stop sowing chaos and misinformation in off years,” said Restrepo, who was President Barack Obama’s former principal advisor on Latin America. “You continue the steady drumbeat so that you’re building your reach, you’re building your capacity you’re moving into a space that is amenable to further dis- and misinformation.”

Democrats blame misinformation efforts for helping Trump win larger-than-expected shares of Latino support in normally reliably blue areas. But quantifying that is difficult.

Trump won about 35% support from Latino voters, according to VoteCast, an Associated Press survey of the national electorate. That helped him prevail in Florida and Texas, even as he became just the second Republican since 1948 to lose Arizona.

Kumar said that during the presidential race, misinformation in Spanish with Latin American roots would usually first hit Florida and “whatever sticks, spills over.” By mid-September, narratives had spread to Texas, popping up in Houston, San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley, along the U.S.-Mexico border. By the week before the election, much had reached Arizona and New Mexico, she said.

Now researchers will be watching to see if misinformation — especially that meant to discredit COVID-19 vaccines — spreads among congressional districts. That could serve to ultimately discourage Latino turnout in the midterms.

Misinformation may have helped fuel significant gains in Latino support for Trump in some Venezuelan American and Colombian American areas, where voters were especially wary of claims that Biden was soft on socialism.

Biden won Florida’s heavily Hispanic, most populous county of Miami-Dade by only 7 percentage points compared with Hillary Clinton’s about 30-point victory in 2016, and precincts with large Colombian American and Venezuelan American populations were part of the reason why.

Biden prevailed about 25 miles to the north in Weston, Florida, which is part of Broward County and affectionately is known as Westonzuela because of its sizable Venezuelan immigrant population, but saw Trump narrow the gap in some precincts.

In Texas, Trump became the first Republican to carry sparsely populated Zapata County, on the U.S.-Mexico border, in a century and won 41% of the vote in Hidalgo County, the largest in the fast-growing Rio Grande Valley area, in 2020, compared with 28% in 2016.

That bump might be attributable to the heavy concentration of energy and law enforcement jobs in South Texas, and Trump’s promises to secure the border and promote fossil fuels. But misinformation also deeply penetrated the area, Perez said.

Evelyn Pérez-Verdía a Florida Democratic strategist who has been monitoring disinformation groups in Spanish, said that since the election, those spreading it have been watching the Biden administration daily and building false narratives around current events.

“The people who are making it have to understand the sub-cultures and cultures of the community,” Pérez-Verdía said.

Brazilian Americans, for instance, have gotten manipulated video from a Democratic presidential primary debate when Biden suggested he would raise \$20 billion to help Brazil battle Amazon deforestation that makes it sound like Biden is ready to send U.S. troops into that country.

Misinformation has continued at such a furious pace post-election that 20-plus Latino progressive groups drafted a January letter declaring “No Más Lies, Disinformation and White Supremacy” that urged Spanish-language radio stations and other outlets in Florida to crack down on spreading it. Pérez-Verdía, one of the signees, said afterward that “it hasn’t dropped off. I consider now that it’s actually doubled down.”

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 78 of 101

In response to Russian meddling in the 2016 election, Congress approved \$160 million for the State Department to lead efforts across the federal government to identify and counter foreign propaganda. Still, a 2018 report by the Senate Intelligence Committee found that such efforts had only increased following Election Day 2016 — a postelection pattern that is consistent with the one experts have tracked in Spanish after 2020's vote.

So far, Congress isn't investigating Spanish-language misinformation to see if its origins spread beyond Latin America.

"Was this a deliberate effort to suppress the votes of specific demographic groups? Was this orchestrated and funded by dark money groups or other organized actors?" said Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. "These are all legitimate questions."

Harry, Meghan to delve into tough royal split with Oprah

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The time has finally come for audiences to hear Meghan and Harry describe the backstory and effects of their tumultuous split from royal life.

Sunday night's airing of a two-hour special hosted by Oprah Winfrey will provide the first, and unprecedented, peek into the couple's departure from royal duties and the strains it has placed on them.

How it's received is likely to depend on which side of the Atlantic Ocean viewers are on.

The show, which includes Winfrey's interviews with Meghan and Harry, will air first in the United States — Meghan's home country — at 8 p.m. Eastern. Hours earlier, Harry's grandmother, Queen Elizabeth II, will deliver a royal address before Commonwealth Day.

British audiences will wake up Monday to headlines and social media posts about Winfrey's special, but won't be able to see the full interview until Monday night when it airs on ITV.

Royal interviews that aren't tied to a specific topic are rare, and prior televised sessions have often proved problematic. Prince Andrew's 2019 BBC interview about his links with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein led to his own departure from royal duties after he failed to show empathy for Epstein's victims.

Harry and Meghan's departure from royal duties began in March 2020 over what they described as the intrusions and racist attitudes of the British media toward the duchess, who is biracial.

Clips released ahead of the airings suggest that at least Meghan will have some pointed criticisms of royal life. In one she describes the royal family as "the firm," a nickname that is sometimes used affectionately and sometimes critically.

At one point, Winfrey asked Meghan how she felt about Buckingham Palace "hearing you speak your truth today?"

"I don't know how they could expect that after all of this time we would still just be silent if there was an active role that the firm is playing in perpetuating falsehoods about us," she said. "And if that comes with risk of losing things, I mean, there's been a lot that's been lost already."

In another clip, Harry invoked the memory of his late mother, Princess Diana, who had to find her way alone after her divorce from Prince Charles.

"I'm just really relieved and happy to be sitting here talking to you with my wife by my side, because I can't begin to imagine what it must have been like for her going through this process by herself all those years ago," Harry said, adding, "because it's been unbelievably tough for the two of us."

In Britain, the interview is seen as poorly timed. It will air while Harry's 99-year-old grandfather Prince Philip remains hospitalized in London after undergoing a heart procedure.

Meghan is shown in a clip released Friday contrasting the conversation the two women were able to have now versus in 2018 ahead of her wedding. Meghan described not being able to talk to Winfrey, who was seeking an interview, without royal minders present.

"As an adult who lived a really independent life to then go into this construct that is um.. different than I think what people imagine it to be, it's really liberating to be able to have the right and the privilege in some ways to be able to say yes," Meghan told Winfrey.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 79 of 101

It is unclear what public reaction, if any, the queen and other royal family members will have to Sunday's interview. The U.K.'s Sunday Times newspaper, citing an anonymous source, reported that the queen would not watch it.

On Wednesday, the palace said it was launching a human resources investigation after a London newspaper reported that a former aide had accused Meghan of bullying staff in 2018.

A spokesman for the duchess said she was "saddened by the latest attack on her character, particularly as someone who has been the target of bullying herself."

The snippets already released provide some details about the interview, which includes Winfrey speaking one-on-one with Meghan and a joint session with the couple.

Holding hands, Harry and Meghan sat opposite Winfrey while she questioned them in a lush garden setting. The couple lives in Montecito, California, where they are Winfrey's neighbors.

Meghan, who recently announced she is pregnant with the couple's second child, wore an empire-style black dress with embroidery. Harry wore a light gray suit and white dress shirt, minus a tie.

As Meghan Markle, the actor starred in the TV legal drama "Suits." She married Harry at Windsor Castle in May 2018, and their son, Archie, was born a year later.

Harry and Meghan's departure from royal life was supposed to be reviewed after a year. On Feb. 19, Buckingham Palace confirmed that the couple would not return to royal duties and Harry would relinquish his honorary military titles — a decision that made formal, and final, the couple's split from the royal family.

Kelvin Chan in London contributed to this report.

Casting a wide intrusion net: Dozens burned with single hack

By FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writer

BOSTON (AP) — The SolarWinds hacking campaign blamed on Russian spies and the "grave threat" it poses to U.S. national security are widely known. A very different — and no less alarming — coordinated series of intrusions also detected in December has gotten considerably less public attention.

Nimble, highly skilled criminal hackers believed to operate out of Eastern Europe hacked dozens of companies and government agencies on at least four continents by breaking into a single product they all used.

The victims include New Zealand's central bank, Harvard Business School, Australia's securities regulator, the high-powered U.S. law firm Jones Day — whose clients include former President Donald Trump — the rail freight company CSX and the Kroger supermarket and pharmacy chain. Also hit was Washington state's auditor's office, where the personal data of up to 1.3 million people gathered for an investigation into unemployment fraud was potentially exposed.

The two-stage mega-hack in December and January of a popular file-transfer program from the Silicon Valley company Accellion highlights a threat that security experts fear may be getting out of hand: intrusions by top-flight criminal and state-backed hackers into software supply chains and third-party services.

The casualties keep piling up, with many being extorted by the Russian-speaking Clop cybercriminal gang, which threat researchers believe may have bought pilfered data from the hackers. Their threat: Pay up or we leak your sensitive data online, be it proprietary documents from Canadian aircraft maker Bombardier or lawyer-client communications from Jones Day.

The hack of up to 100 Accellion customers, who were easily identified by the hackers with an online scan, puts in painful relief a digital age core mission at which both governments and the private sector have been falling short.

"Attackers are finding it harder and harder to gain access via traditional methods, as vendors like Microsoft and Apple have hardened the security of the operating systems considerably over the last years. So, the attackers find easier ways in. This often means going via the supply chain. And as we've seen, it works," said Mikko Hypponen, chief research officer of the cybersecurity firm F-Secure.

Members of Congress are already dismayed by the supply-chain hack of the Texas network management software company SolarWinds that allowed suspected Russian state-backed hackers to tiptoe unnoticed

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 80 of 101

— apparently intent solely on intelligence-gathering — for more than half a year through the networks of at least nine government agencies and more than 100 companies and think tanks. Only in December was the SolarWinds hacking campaign discovered, by the cybersecurity firm FireEye.

France suffered a similar hack, blamed by its cybersecurity agency on Russian military operatives, that also gamed the supply chain. They slipped malware into an update of network management software from a firm called Centreon, letting them quietly root around victim networks from 2017 to 2020.

Both those hacks snuck malware into software updates. The Accellion hack was different in one key respect: Its file-transfer program resided on victims' networks either as a stand-alone appliance or cloud-based app. Its job is to securely move around files too large to be attached to email.

Mike Hamilton, a former Seattle chief information security officer now with CI Security, said the trend of exploiting third-party service providers shows no signs of slowing because it gives criminals the highest return on their investment if they "want to compromise a broad swath of companies or government agencies."

The Accellion breach's impact might have been dulled had the company alerted customers more quickly, some complain.

The governor of New Zealand's central bank, Adrian Orr, says Accellion failed to warn it after first learning in mid-December that the nearly 20-year-old FTA application — using antiquated technology and set for retirement — had been breached.

Despite having a patch available on Dec. 20, Accellion did not notify the bank in time to prevent its appliance from being breached five days later, the bank said.

"If we were notified at the appropriate time, we could have patched the system and avoided the breach," Orr said in a statement posted on the bank's website. Among information stolen were files containing personal emails, dates of birth and credit information, the bank said.

Similarly, the Washington state auditor's office has no record of being informed of the breach until Jan. 12, the same day Accellion announced it publicly, said spokeswoman Kathleen Cooper. Accellion said then that it released a patch to the fewer than 50 customers affected within 72 hours of learning of the breach.

Accellion now tells a different story. It says it alerted all 320 potentially affected customers with multiple emails beginning on Dec. 22 — and followed up with emails and phone calls. Company spokesman Rob Dougherty would not directly address the New Zealand central bank's and Washington state auditor's complaints. Accellion says fewer than 25 customers appear to have suffered significant data theft.

A timeline released March 1 by the cybersecurity firm Mandiant, which Accellion hired to examine the incident, says the company got first word of the breach on Dec. 16. The Washington state auditor says its hack occurred on Christmas.

The notification timing issue is serious. Washington state has already been hit by a lawsuit, and several have been filed against Accellion seeking class action. Other organizations could also face legal or other consequences.

Last month, Harvard Business School officials emailed affected students to tell them that some Social Security numbers had been compromised as well as other personal information. Another victim, the Singapore-based telecommunications company Singtel, said personal data on about 129,000 customers was compromised.

Too often, software companies with hundreds of programmers have just one or two security people, said Katie Moussouris, CEO of Luta Security.

"We wish we could say that organizations were uniformly investing in security. But we're actually seeing them just dealing with the breaches and then vowing to do better in the future. And that's been sort of the business model."

Dougherty, the Accellion spokesman, said the attacks "had nothing to do with staffing," but he would not say how many people directly assigned to security the company employed in mid-December.

Cybersecurity threat analysts hope the snowballing of supply-chain hacks stuns the software industry into prioritizing security. Otherwise, vendors risk the fate that has befallen SolarWinds.

In a filing this past week with the Securities and Exchange Commission, the company offered a bleak

outlook.

It said that as supply-chain hacks "continue to evolve at a rapid pace" it "may be unable to identify current attacks, anticipate future attacks or implement adequate security measures."

The ultimate, painful upshot, the document added:

"Customers have and may in the future defer purchasing or choose to cancel or not renew their agreements or subscriptions with us."

—
Associated Press writer Rachel La Corte in Olympia, Washington, contributed to this report.

Biden marking 'Bloody Sunday' by signing voting rights order

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A new executive order from President Joe Biden directs federal agencies to take a series of steps to promote voting access, a move that comes as congressional Democrats press for a sweeping voting and elections bill to counter efforts to restrict voting access.

His plan was being announced during a recorded address on the 56th commemoration of "Bloody Sunday," the 1965 incident in which some 600 civil rights activists were viciously beaten by state troopers as they tried to march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama.

"Every eligible voter should be able to vote and have it counted," Biden says in his prepared remarks to Sunday's Martin and Coretta King Unity Breakfast. "If you have the best ideas, you have nothing to hide. Let the people vote."

Biden's order includes several modest provisions. It directs federal agencies to expand access to voter registration and election information, calls on the heads of federal agencies to come up with plans to give federal employees time off to vote or volunteer as nonpartisan poll workers, and proscribes an overhaul of the government's Vote.gov website.

Democrats are attempting to solidify support for House Resolution 1, which touches on virtually every aspect of the electoral process. It was approved Wednesday on a near party-line vote, 220-210.

The voting rights bill includes provisions to restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, strike down hurdles to voting and bring transparency to a murky campaign finance system that allows wealthy donors to anonymously bankroll political causes.

Democrats say the bill will help stifle voter suppression attempts, while Republicans have cast the bill as unwanted federal interference in states' authority to conduct their own elections.

The bill's fate is far from certain in the closely divided Senate. Conservative groups have undertaken \$5 million campaign to try persuade moderate Senate Democrats to oppose rule changes needed to pass the measure.

With his executive order, Biden is looking to turn the spotlight on the issue and is using the somber commemoration of Bloody Sunday to make the case that much is at stake.

Bloody Sunday proved to be a conscious-shocking turning point in the civil rights movement that led to passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Similarly, Biden is hoping the Jan. 6 sacking of the U.S. Capitol by a pro-Donald Trump mob will prove to be a clarion call for Congress to take action to improve voter protections.

"In 2020 — with our very democracy on the line — even in the midst of a pandemic — more Americans voted than ever before," Biden says in his prepared remarks. "Yet instead of celebrating this powerful demonstration of voting — we saw an unprecedented insurrection on our Capitol and a brutal attack on our democracy on January 6th. A never-before-seen effort to ignore, undermine and undo the will of the people."

Biden's remarks also pay tribute to the late civil rights giants Rev. C.T. Vivian, Rev. Joseph Lowery and Rep. John Lewis. All played critical roles in the 1965 organizing efforts in Selma and all died in within the past year.

Sri Lanka Catholics mark 'Black Sunday' for Easter victims

By KRISHAN FRANCIS Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Sri Lankan Roman Catholics attended Mass dressed in black on Sunday, with prayers and protests calling for justice for those killed in coordinated suicide bomb attacks on Easter Sunday two years ago.

Church bells tolled and prayers were chanted at 8:45 a.m., the time when bombs were detonated almost simultaneously at two Roman Catholic churches and a Protestant church during Easter services on April 21, 2019. Bombs were also set off at three top hotels targeting locals and foreigners who were eating breakfast.

More than 260 people, including 171 from the two Catholic churches, were killed in the attacks, which were blamed on two local Islamic extremist groups that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group.

A presidential inquiry commission has handed its final report to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who has shared parts of it with Catholic and Buddhist religious leaders. The report has also been sent to the attorney general for legal action.

However, the archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, said the report had concentrated more on the failures of the then-government in preventing the attacks despite early warnings, rather than finding out the handlers of the groups accused of carrying out the bombings.

"No one who wants to promote hatred and religious strife will receive our support. We believe there should be unity and brotherhood among different ethnic and religious groups all over the world," Ranjith said Sunday.

"Today Holy Father Pope Francis has visited Iraq and has had a discussion with the Shia leaders (in Iran). It shows religious leaders in the world think about unity and brotherhood, not about creating strife. Therefore I request anyone inclined to create conflict on account of religion to give up that idea," he said.

At St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo, a predominantly Catholic area north of Colombo where 115 people were killed in the Easter attacks, parishioners attended Mass on Sunday dressed in black and held placards outside the church in a silent "Black Sunday" protest.

"The main purpose of this is to show the people and our rulers that justice has not happened for the victims of the Easter attacks," said Auxiliary Bishop the Rev. Maxwell Silva, who celebrated Mass at the church.

"We believe the commission report is not genuine and it did not do any justice to those who suffered," said Manilal Ranasinghe, who attended Mass at St. Mary's Church in Dehiwala, south of Colombo.

Political infighting between the then-president and prime minister resulting in a communications breakdown and lapse of security coordination was said to have enabled the attacks despite foreign intelligence warnings.

Rajapaksa told a public gathering Saturday that the report blamed the government at the time for letting its guard down on national security, and that his government will punish those responsible.

Drones vs hungry moths: Dutch use hi-tech to protect crops

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

MONSTER, Netherlands (AP) — Dutch cress grower Rob Baan has enlisted high-tech helpers to tackle a pest in his greenhouses: palm-sized drones seek and destroy moths that produce caterpillars that can chew up his crops.

"I have unique products where you don't get certification to spray chemicals and I don't want it," Baan said in an interview in a greenhouse bathed in the pink glow of LED lights that help his seedlings grow. His company, Koppert Cress, exports aromatic seedlings, plants and flowers to top-end restaurants around the world.

A keen adopter of innovative technology in his greenhouses, Baan turned to PATS Indoor Drone Solutions, a startup that is developing autonomous drone systems as greenhouse sentinels, to add another layer of protection for his plants.

The drones themselves are basic, but they are steered by smart technology aided by special cameras

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 83 of 101

that scan the airspace in greenhouses.

The drones instantly kill the moths by flying into them, destroying them in midair.

"So it sees the moth flying by, it knows where the drone is ... and then it just directs the drone towards the moth," said PATS chief technical officer Kevin van Hecke.

There weren't any moths around on a recent greenhouse visit by The Associated Press, but the company has released video shot in a controlled environment that shows how one bug is instantly pulverized by a drone rotor.

The drones form part of an array of pest control systems in Baan's greenhouses that also includes other bugs, pheromone traps and bumblebees.

The drone system is the brainchild of former students from the Technical University in Delft who thought up the idea after wondering if they might be able to use drones to kill mosquitos buzzing around their rooms at night.

Baan says the drone control system is smart enough to distinguish between good and bad critters.

"You don't want to kill a ladybug, because a ladybug is very helpful against aphids," he said. "So they should kill the bad ones, not the good ones. And the good ones are sometimes very expensive — I pay at least 50 cents for one bumblebee, so I don't want them to kill my bumblebees."

The young company is still working to perfect the technology.

"It's still a development product, but we ... have very good results. We are targeting moths and we are taking out moths every night in an autonomous way without human intervention," said PATS CEO Bram Tijmons. "I think that's a good step forward."

Baan also acknowledges that the system still needs refining.

"I think they still need too many drones ... but it will be manageable, it will be less," he said. "I think they can do this greenhouse in the future maybe with 50 small drones, and then it's very beneficial."

Myanmar police fire on protesters in ancient former capital

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Police in Myanmar's ancient former capital, Bagan, opened fire Sunday on demonstrators protesting last month's military takeover, wounding several people, according to witness accounts and videos on social media.

At least five people were reported wounded as police sought to break up the Bagan protest, and photos showed one young man with bloody wounds on his chin and neck, believed to have been caused by a rubber bullet. Bullet casings collected at the scene indicated that live rounds were also fired.

The city, located in the central Mandalay region, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site in recognition of the more than 2,000 pagodas or their remnants still situated there, dating from the ninth to 13th centuries, when it was the capital of a kingdom that later became known as Burma and is now Myanmar.

Bagan is best known for being one of the country's top tourist attractions, but it has also been the scene of large protest marches against the military's Feb. 1 seizure of power.

Large protests have occurred daily across many cities and towns in Myanmar, and security forces have responded with greater use of lethal force and mass arrests. At least 18 protesters were shot and killed on Feb. 28 and 38 on Wednesday, according to the U.N. Human Rights Office. More than 1,500 have been arrested, the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said.

Protests elsewhere Sunday, including in the two biggest cities of Yangon and Mandalay, were also met with the use of force by police firing warning shots, and variously employing tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades.

Multiple reports from Yangon said there were also police raids Saturday night seeking to seize organizers and supporters of the protest movement. A ward chairman from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, which was ousted from power in the coup, was found dead in a military hospital Sunday morning by fellow residents of his Pabedan neighborhood, according to a post on Facebook by NLD lawmaker Sithu Maung.

Suspicion was rampant on social media that Khin Maung Latt, 58, died due to a beating in custody after

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 84 of 101

being taken from his residence, but no official cause of death was immediately announced.

In Yangon and elsewhere, raids are carried out nightly after an 8 p.m. curfew by police and soldiers. The arrests are often carried out at gunpoint, without warrants.

In videos taken Saturday night and posted online, sporadic fire from heavy weapons could be heard in some neighborhoods.

The escalation of violence has put pressure on the global community to act to restrain the junta. The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in Myanmar, which for five decades had languished under strict military rule that led to international isolation and sanctions.

Suu Kyi's party led a return to civilian rule with a landslide election victory in 2015, and with an even greater margin of votes last year. It would have been installed for a second five-year term last month, but instead Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and other members of the government were placed in military detention.

A rare light note was struck Saturday when demonstrators in the central city of Monywa poured cans of beer over their feet and those of passers-by to show their contempt for the brewery's owners — the military. Myanmar Beer is one of a number of business concerns in the country that are linked to the generals and has seen its sales plummet in the weeks following the coup. It also has lost its Japanese partner, Kirin, which announced it was pulling out of the joint venture as a result of the power grab.

In neighboring Thailand, several thousand people, Thai as well as from Myanmar, rallied Sunday outside the regional office of the United Nations to bring attention to the crisis and their desire for international action to end the junta's violence.

"I have a good life here, but I'm fighting for my relatives and families and friends in Myanmar. Since Day One (when) the military took our leader, we are here," said 26-year-old Aye Nanda Soe, who works in digital marketing and lives in Bangkok with her mother and brother while her father resides in Yangon. "We want the U.N. to protect our people first, then help our leader. My people are not safe anymore."

Murder, but gentler: 'Cozy' mysteries a pandemic-era balm

By TAMARA LUSH Associated Press

"A book," author Neil Gaiman may or may not have said, "is a dream you hold in your hand." And right now, in an era of pandemic and polarization, Americans have — and need — a lot of dreams.

We dream of unfettered travel, of a world free of face masks and hand sanitizer, of days that are exciting and new and not the grinding tedium of spending hour after hour staring, horrified, at the TV news. We dream of going back to school. Of eating a meal with family. Of hugs.

And some of us — well, some of us dream of murder. Small-town murder. Gentle murder. Quiet murder.

For those who find their dreams in books, there's a group of readers who are hungrily consuming a particular style of narrative to escape from the past year's reality: "cozy" mysteries.

In an unfathomably complex year, a gently told tale of murder and mayhem whittles the sharp edges of reality to a manageable, smooth surface.

"Murder is definitely dark, but in a cozy the reader is with the protagonist every step of the way as each clue is revealed," says Michelle Vega, executive editor of Berkley, who works with several cozy authors. "You can enjoy the perfect cup of tea and pretend you're sitting in that comfy bookshop with the protagonist, smiling along with the banter as she and friends figure out whodunit. It is escapist perfection."

In television form, the cozy can be seen in popular shows such as "Murder, She Wrote," "Midsomer Murders" and "Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries." Cozies claim roots in early 20th-century British mysteries by such writers as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. But with the advent of the e-book, authors are setting their gentle crime scenes in RV campgrounds in the American South, tourist towns in the Pacific northwest and in neighborhoods in Brooklyn, to name a few.

The genre's parameters are few: no swearing, no sex, and little to no gore. Just what the pandemic-era doctor ordered.

"The cozy mystery is a familiar way to encounter the two seemingly unreconcilable realities of death

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 85 of 101

and country peace at the same time," says Sarah Allison, an associate professor of English at Loyola New Orleans who is working on a book about "escape reading."

"The restoration of order at the end of the novel might be less significant than the way this genre makes beautiful scenery and grisly details feel like they go together naturally," she said in an email. Such mysteries, she says, promise a messy murder and a tidy resolution, "a welcome contrast to the way we've all been suspended between life as it was before COVID and life as it will be after."

Kelly Vaiman, a longtime cozy fan, has tried to avoid thinking about real life this past year. First she was wary of going places due to the pandemic, then her elderly mother's health declined while in a Pennsylvania nursing home. Vaiman couldn't travel to say goodbye, and her mother died.

"After her passing, during the mourning period, I just couldn't handle the grief," Vaiman says. "So I'd pick up a cozy mystery to take my mind off everything."

She estimates that she reads 120 books a year. They're not all cozies, but those are what she turns to when she needs a comforting read.

Valerie Burns writes gentle murder mysteries under the pen name of V.M. Burns, and her "Mystery Bookshop" series is now six stories long. Since the pandemic began in early 2020, she's noticed more readers are taking the time to email her about her work, seeking that human connection that's sorely missing.

Burns, who lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee, is an avid cozy reader as well as a writer of them. She acknowledges the unusual nature of cozies — that they revolve around a murder yet are also soothing to read. But, she adds, trying to solve a mystery gives a feeling of accomplishment when so much of life seems stalled.

"It's basically a puzzle, but there's that safety net in knowing there's not going to be a whole lot of blood and guts and violence," she says, laughing. "It's contradictory. A murder mystery with no violence. But I can pick up a cozy, and can figure out clues and try to figure out whodunit but I don't have to live in all of the horror associated with true crime or a noir."

Esi Sogah, a senior editor at Kensington Books, says she's seen an uptick in cozy mystery sales in the past year. She believes that the genre's settings — often picturesque small towns, quirky villages, or unique neighborhoods — allow homebound readers to travel in their minds.

"Sitting in cafes, going book clubs. Browsing in a bookstore in fictional world," she says. "All the stuff you can't do right now."

Unlike big blockbuster stories that revolve around one near-superhuman character (who is usually a man), cozy series cultivate an amateur sleuth (usually a woman) and a cast of quirky secondary characters. Readers become attached to the entire ensemble, says author Bree Baker, and consider them old friends. That's why readers love series that stretch to multiple books.

"I think we all need a place to belong, at the core of everything. We need to have our people," Baker says.

And at a time when we can't see our own people in real life, fictional stand-ins will have to do. Solving a murder in one's mind, dreaming of the day when we can languidly enjoy a coffee and conversation with friends, knowing that what's right will prevail in the end — those are the reasons people turn to cozies. And, not coincidentally, they overlap with the ways people are coping at this moment in history.

"We have enough horror in our day to day lives," Burns says. "Right now, that's all I want to do is escape. Escape into a world where justice prevails."

Former Associated Press journalist Tamara Lush, who worked for the AP from 2008 to 2021, is the author, under the pseudonym Tara Lush, of "Grounds for Murder (A Coffee Lover's Mystery)" (2020), a cozy mystery published by Crooked Lane Books. Follow her on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/TamaraLush>

Russia scores points with vaccine diplomacy, but snags arise

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's boast in August that it was the first country to authorize a coronavirus vaccine led to skepticism at the time because of its insufficient testing. Six months later, as demand for the

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 86 of 101

Sputnik V vaccine grows, experts are raising questions again — this time, over whether Moscow can keep up with all the orders from the countries that want it.

Slovakia got 200,000 doses on March 1, even though the European Medicines Agency, the European Union's pharmaceutical regulator, only began reviewing its use on Thursday in an expedited process. The president of the hard-hit Czech Republic said he wrote directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin to get a supply. Millions of doses are expected by countries in Latin America, Africa, the former Soviet Union and the Middle East in a wave of Russian vaccine diplomacy.

"Sputnik V continues to confidently conquer Europe," anchor Olga Skabeyeva declared on the Russia-1 state TV channel.

Dmitry Kiselev, the network's top pro-Kremlin anchor, heaped on the hyperbole last month, blustering: "The Russian coronavirus vaccine, Sputnik V, is the best in the world."

State TV channels have covered vaccine exports extensively, citing praise from abroad for Russia and running segments about the difficulties countries are having with Western vaccines.

The early criticism of Sputnik V has been blunted by a report in the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet* that said large-scale testing showed it to be safe, with an efficacy rate of 91% against the virus.

That could help revamp Russia's image to one of a scientific, technological and benevolent power, especially as other countries encounter shortages of COVID-19 vaccines because richer nations are scooping up the Western-made versions or manufacturers struggle with limited production capacity.

"The fact that Russia is among five countries that were able to quickly develop a vaccine ... allows Moscow to present itself as a high-tech power of knowledge rather than a petrol pump in decline," said foreign affairs analyst Vladimir Frolov.

Some experts say boosting the use of vaccines from China and Russia — which have not been as popular as those from the West — could offer a quicker way to increase the global supply. Others note that Russia wants to score geopolitical points.

"Putin is using (the vaccine) to bolster a very tarnished image of Russia's scientific and technological prowess," said Lawrence Gostin, a Georgetown University professor and director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Center on National and Global Health Law. "He's using it for geostrategic purposes in areas where Russia would like to have spheres of influence."

Whether Russia can deliver is another question. China has supplied millions of doses to other countries, but the output of Sputnik V appears for now to be far lower than the demand.

"They succeeded beyond their wildest dreams in terms of this vaccine actually being a viable, marketable product," said Judy Twigg, a political science professor specializing in global health at Virginia Commonwealth University. "They've made all of these explicit and implicit promises to people inside and outside Russia about access to this product that now is unexpectedly great. And now they're stuck trying, scrambling, trying to figure out how to deliver on all those promises."

Russia also must take care of its own. Authorities have announced plans to vaccinate 60% of adults, or roughly 68 million people, by the end of June.

The domestic rollout in Russia has been slow, compared with other nations, with about 4 million people, or less than 3% of the population, vaccinated as of late February. Some of that could also be due to widespread reluctance among Russians to trust vaccines.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund, which bankrolled and markets the vaccine abroad, has not responded to a request for comment on how many doses are going to other countries. It said earlier that it has received requests for 2.4 billion doses from over 50 nations.

Airfinity, a London-based science analytics company, estimates that Russia agreed to supply about 392 million doses abroad, and there are talks with countries for at least another 356 million.

Judging by production and exports so far, "Russia is very far from being able to deliver this," said Airfinity CEO and founder Rasmus Hansen.

Russia manufactured just over 2 million doses last year amid reports of local producers having problems with buying equipment and making the second component of the two-shot vaccine.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 87 of 101

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said Feb. 20 that over 10 million doses of Sputnik V have been produced.

Sputnik V is a viral vector vaccine, which uses a harmless virus that carries genetic material to stimulate the immune system. Producing it is a complicated process, said Elena Subbotina, a consultant with the pharma consultancy CBPartners' Central and Eastern Europe Team. Producers can't guarantee stable output because working with biological ingredients involves a lot of variability in terms of the quality of the finished product.

Some countries that have been offered large batches of Sputnik V have yet to approve it for use.

In India, which has been pledged 125 million doses, the vaccine is undergoing studies to determine if it produces a comparable immune response. Brazil's health ministry said it is negotiating to purchase 10 million doses, but the nation's regulatory agency has yet to authorize its use. Nepal, which has been offered 25 million doses, also hasn't given its approval.

Other countries have had delays in receiving Sputnik V shipments.

Argentina got nearly 2.5 million doses by March 1, even though at one point the government was expecting 5 million in January and over 14 million more in February. Officials in Hungary, who agreed to buy 2 million doses over three months, said Jan. 22 they were expecting 600,000 doses in the first 30 days, but got only 325,600 by early March. Mexico signed a deal for 24 million doses and was hoping to receive 400,000 in February but got only 200,000.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund has agreements with manufacturers in countries including Brazil, South Korea and India to boost production, but there are few indications that manufacturers abroad have made any large amounts of the vaccine so far.

The Brazilian company Uniao Quimica is in the pilot testing phase, the results of which will be shared with Russia before the company can produce it for sale. Indian drugmaker Hetero Biopharma, with a deal to make 100 million doses, was to begin production at the start of 2021, but it isn't clear if it has actually started.

South Korean company GL Rapha, which expects to make 150 million doses this year, will be manufacturing finished products by sometime in March, said company official Kim Gi-young.

Russia so far hasn't faced any criticism for delaying supplies of Sputnik V to other countries, with foreign officials optimistic about the deals.

Hungary is still awaiting large shipments, but expressed optimism about receiving them.

"The Russian side, with minimal delay, will meet the 600,000 doses agreed to in the first phase, and then the additional 1.4 million doses," Hungary's State Secretary Tamas Menczer said last month. Prime Minister Viktor Orban added Friday: "The Russians are pretty much keeping their promises."

Promising more than can be delivered appears to be a universal problem with coronavirus vaccines, and it is a real risk for Russia as well, said Theresa Fallon, director of the Brussels-based Centre for Russia Europe Asia Studies.

"They have won the gold medal for creating this very effective vaccine," she said. "But the problem is, how are they going to implement it?"

Associated Press writers Aniruddha Ghosal in New Delhi, India; David Biller in Rio de Janeiro; Almudena Calatrava in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Justin Spike and Bela Szandelszky in Budapest, Hungary; and Tonghyung Kim in Seoul, South Korea, contributed.

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Escalating violence ups pressure for Myanmar sanctions

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — The escalation of violence in Myanmar as authorities crack down on protests against

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 88 of 101

the Feb. 1 coup is raising pressure for more sanctions against the junta, even as countries struggle over how to best sway military leaders inured to global condemnation.

The challenge is made doubly difficult by fears of harming ordinary citizens who were already suffering from an economic slump worsened by the pandemic but are braving risks of arrest and injury to voice outrage over the military takeover. Still, activists and experts say there are ways to ramp up pressure on the regime, especially by cutting off sources of funding and access to the tools of repression.

The U.N. special envoy on Friday urged the Security Council to act to quell junta violence that this week killed about 50 demonstrators and injured scores more.

"There is an urgency for collective action," Christine Schraner Burgener told the meeting. "How much more can we allow the Myanmar military to get away with?"

Coordinated U.N. action is difficult, however, since permanent Security Council members China and Russia would almost certainly veto it. Myanmar's neighbors, its biggest trading partners and sources of investment, are likewise reluctant to resort to sanctions.

Some piecemeal actions have already been taken. The U.S., Britain and Canada have tightened various restrictions on Myanmar's army, their family members and other top leaders of the junta. The U.S. blocked an attempt by the military to access more than \$1 billion in Myanmar central bank funds being held in the U.S., the State Department confirmed Friday.

But most economic interests of the military remain "largely unchallenged," Thomas Andrews, the U.N. special rapporteur on the rights situation in Myanmar, said in a report issued last week. Some governments have halted aid and the World Bank said it suspended funding and was reviewing its programs.

It's unclear whether the sanctions imposed so far, although symbolically important, will have much impact. Schraner Burgener told U.N. correspondents that the army shrugged off a warning of possible "huge strong measures" against the coup with the reply that, "We are used to sanctions and we survived those sanctions in the past."

Andrews and other experts and human rights activists are calling for a ban on dealings with the many Myanmar companies associated with the military and an embargo on arms and technology, products and services that can be used by the authorities for surveillance and violence.

The activist group Justice for Myanmar issued a list of dozens of foreign companies that it says have supplied such potential tools of repression to the government, which is now entirely under military control.

It cited budget documents for the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Transport and Communications that show purchases of forensic data, tracking, password recovery, drones and other equipment from the U.S., Israel, EU, Japan and other countries. Such technologies can have benign or even beneficial uses, such as fighting human trafficking. But they also are being used to track down protesters, both online and offline.

Restricting dealings with military-dominated conglomerates including Myanmar Economic Corp., Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. and Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise might also pack more punch, with a minimal impact on small, private companies and individuals.

One idea gaining support is to prevent the junta from accessing vital oil and gas revenues paid into and held in banks outside the country, Chris Sidoti, a former member of the U.N. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, said in a news conference on Thursday.

Oil and gas are Myanmar's biggest exports and a crucial source of foreign exchange needed to pay for imports. The country's \$1.4 billion oil and gas and mining industries account for more than a third of exports and a large share of tax revenue.

"The money supply has to be cut off. That's the most urgent priority and the most direct step that can be taken," said Sidoti, one of the founding members of a newly established international group called the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar.

Unfortunately, such measures can take commitment and time, and "time is not on the side of the people of Myanmar at a time when these atrocities are being committed," he said.

Myanmar's economy languished in isolation after a coup in 1962. Many of the sanctions imposed by Western governments in the decades that followed were lifted after the country began its troubled transition

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 89 of 101

toward democracy in 2011. Some of those restrictions were restored after the army's brutal operations in 2017 against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar's northwest Rakhine state.

The European Union has said it is reviewing its policies and stands ready to adopt restrictive measures against those directly responsible for the coup. Japan, likewise, has said it is considering what to do.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, convened a virtual meeting on March 2 to discuss Myanmar. Its chairman later issued a statement calling for an end to violence and for talks to try to reach a peaceful settlement.

But ASEAN admitted Myanmar as a member in 1997, long before the military, known as the Tatmadaw, initiated reforms that helped elect a quasi-civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Most ASEAN governments have authoritarian leaders or one-party rule. By tradition, they are committed to consensus and non interference in each others' internal affairs.

While they lack an appetite for sanctions, some ASEAN governments have vehemently condemned the coup and the ensuing arrests and killings.

Marzuki Darusman, an Indonesian lawyer and former chair of the Fact-Finding Mission that Sidoti joined, said he believes the spiraling, brutal violence against protesters has shaken ASEAN's stance that the crisis is purely an internal matter.

"ASEAN considers it imperative that it play a role in resolving the crisis in Myanmar," Darusman said.

Thailand, with a 2,400 kilometer (1,500-mile)-long border with Myanmar and more than 2 million Myanmar migrant workers, does not want more to flee into its territory, especially at a time when it is still battling the pandemic.

Kavi Chongkittavorn, a senior fellow at Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Security and International Studies, also believes ASEAN wants to see a return to a civilian government in Myanmar and would be best off adopting a "carrot and stick" approach.

But the greatest hope, he said, is with the protesters.

On Saturday, some protesters expressed their disdain by pouring Myanmar Beer, a local brand made by a military-linked company whose Japanese partner Kirin Holdings is withdrawing from, on people's feet — considered a grave insult in some parts of Asia.

"The Myanmar people are very brave. This is the No. 1 pressure on the country," Chongkittavorn said in a seminar held by the East-West Center in Hawaii. "It's very clear the junta also knows what they need to do to move ahead, otherwise sanctions will be much more severe."

'We can do big things,' Schumer says as Senate approves aid

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Tensions were raw ahead of midnight as Republican leader Mitch McConnell rose in the Senate for the purpose of publicly ridiculing Majority Leader Chuck Schumer over the daylong delay as Democrats argued among themselves over the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 rescue package.

But 12 hours later, it was Schumer, D-N.Y., reveling in the last word, an unabashedly upbeat "help is on the way" to Americans suffering through the pandemic and lockdowns as the Senate prepared to approve the massive package without a single GOP vote.

Senate passage of the sweeping relief bill Saturday puts President Joe Biden's top priority closer to becoming law, poised to unleash billion for vaccines, \$1,400 direct payments and other aid, and shows Schumer, in his first big test as majority leader, can unify the ever-so-slim Democratic majority and deliver the votes.

"Lessons learned: If we have unity, we can do big things," Schumer told The Associated Press in an interview after the vote.

The outcome "gives us optimism about doing more big things in the future — because it worked," he said.

Stewardship of the massive pandemic relief package was an inaugural foray of the new power dynamics of Washington, testing Democratic control of the White House and Congress for the first time in a decade, and setting the foundation for what's possible for Biden's agenda.

So much of Biden's success or failure depends on the Senate, where Democrats are in command of an

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 90 of 101

evenly split chamber, 50-50, a majority so delicate that any one senator can upend the legislative agenda. While Vice President Kamala Harris is able to break tie votes, Schumer has zero slack if Republicans are opposed, voting lockstep as they did Saturday against the virus aid as bloated and unnecessary. One key centrist, Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., wavered over an unemployment provision, throwing the proceedings into chaos before a grueling all-night session.

Biden has been telling senators privately their vote on pandemic aid will build momentum for the next priorities. An ambitious infrastructure package is emerging, part of his "Build Back Better" campaign agenda, to bring roads, broadband and green-energy projects nationwide. He and Schumer spoke often as the Senate leader steered the pandemic aid to approval. It's now headed back to the House for a final vote, as soon as Monday.

While no senators appeared ready to tank Biden's top priority, the next votes could prove more difficult. "There's a whole series of issues that that quite a few of us were discussing," said Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., a Biden ally eager for bipartisanship, who spoke to the president a few minutes after the vote.

"This was a reminder yesterday that, in a 50-50 Senate, if any one member changes their mind on an amendment, or vote or an issue, it can change the outcome," Coons said.

Voting rights, immigration law changes and other bills will be subject to filibuster rules that require 60 votes for passage, rather than 51, a potentially impossible hurdle in the face of Republican opposition that is stoking calls to change the process to ensure Biden's priorities don't flame out.

"We're going to have to have discussions about that," said Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., a member of leadership.

But that tough topic was for another day. On Saturday, Democrats elbow-bumped and cheered in the chamber — Stabenow said some were almost in tears -- as they ushered the massive aid package they had promised voters to approval. With 10 million jobs lost and countless schools and businesses shuttered, it includes \$300 a week in extra unemployment benefits, money school reopenings, eviction protections and small business assistance.

"Only 45 days after Joe Biden became president of the United States, to be able to do something so big, and so significant, that fundamentally is the glue for us," she said.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, said it was the "best day" he'd ever had in the Senate. That biting speech from McConnell, R-Ky., poking at Democrats' temporary disarray? Brown dismissed it as cynical and unsubstantial.

"So what," Brown said. "Nobody cares about that. What they care about is, did we deliver on unemployment? Did we deliver on vaccines? Did we deliver on pensions? We cut the rate of child poverty in half. Think about that."

McConnell led Republicans to put up a blockade of opposition, reviving a strategy used the last time Democrats held the sweep of power, when Barack Obama was president, against the 2009 financial crisis rescue package.

After Donald Trump won the White House, McConnell and Republicans controlling Congress with only a slightly thicker Senate margin used similar procedural tools to pass the \$2 trillion GOP tax cuts on a party-line vote in 2017. Their effort to repeal and replace the health care law known as "Obamacare" fizzled when Sen. John McCain and two other Republicans voted with Democrats, and McConnell was unable to hold his party together.

From his stately office off the Senate floor, with the lived-in feel of the rumpled New Yorker, Schumer pulled out his not-so-secret weapon, the flat flip-phone, which he uses for his constant calls keeping in touch with senators on their votes.

"Every member of our caucus, from Bernie Sanders to Joe Manchin, realize that we had to pull together, that if we failed, we'd all be hurt," Schumer said, referring to the liberal-most senator from Vermont and the centrist from West Virginia.

As Manchin hesitated, Schumer called him, as did other senators, and even Biden. But Manchin also had time — hours dragged on — to make up his mind.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 91 of 101

"He listens to everybody and then he puts it together," Brown said of Schumer. "He's good at it."

When the votes were being tallied Saturday, Schumer spotted the two new senators from Georgia, Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, and pointed at them. They had stunned the political world by defeating two Republican incumbents in special elections in January that delivered Democrats the majority.

"The people of Georgia deserve a great deal of credit for what happened here today," Warnock said afterward. "Had they not stood up in such a powerful way, in this historic election that sent Jon Ossoff and myself to the Senate, we simply would not be here."

Schumer urged the presiding officer to announce the vote, 50-49. One Republican senator was absent for a family matter. Harris was not needed to break the tie.

Schumer turned to his senators and said, "We are a great team."

S Korea, US scale back drills over virus, N Korea diplomacy

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The South Korean and U.S. militaries are scaling back their annual exercises this month due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to support diplomacy focusing on North Korea's nuclear program, officials said Sunday.

Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement that the allies decided to start the nine-day drills on Monday after reviewing factors like the status of the pandemic and diplomatic efforts to achieve denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula.

It said the drills are defensive in nature and are mostly tabletop exercises and simulations that won't involve field training.

Last year, the allies canceled their springtime drills after some of their troops were infected with the coronavirus. In recent years, the countries have also suspended or downsized many of their regular training to create more space for the now-stalled U.S.-led diplomatic drive to convince North Korea to denuclearize in return for economic and political incentives.

U.S.-South Korea drills have been a major source of animosities on the peninsula, with North Korea viewing them as invasion rehearsals and responding with its own weapons tests. In January, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un urged the U.S. to withdraw its hostile policy and South Korea to end drills with the U.S., warning the fate of their relations with North Korea depends on how they behave.

Some experts have said Kim may resume high-profile missile tests and raise tensions if he feels provoked by the upcoming drills, one of the two major military exercises between Seoul and Washington along with their summertime training.

The nuclear negotiations have been stalled for about two years since a February 2019 summit between Kim and then President Donald Trump collapsed due to wrangling over U.S.-led sanctions on North Korea. The government of South Korean President Moon Jae-in, which facilitated the early part of the U.S.-North Korea talks, has been calling for the diplomacy's restart and greater inter-Korean ties.

A South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff officer said that Seoul and Washington decided to "minimize" the number of troops participating in this month's drills because of the pandemic.

The officer, who requested anonymity citing a department rule, said the allies have been staging field exercises throughout the year to maintain their readiness, rather than holding them intensively in certain periods, in an apparent reference to the spring and summer drills.

US gives hope to previously denied asylum seekers in camp

By MARÍA VERZA and CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — In a camp at the U.S.-Mexico border, some asylum seekers were told by officials that the U.S. government may reopen their cases and they would eventually be able to enter the U.S. to wait out the asylum process.

The new opening for people previously denied came as Mexican authorities worked to close the improvised camp along the banks of the Rio Grande, across from Brownsville, Texas, that has housed thousands

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 92 of 101

of asylum seekers over the more than two years it existed.

Late Friday night, an official with Mexico's Foreign Affairs Ministry said via Twitter that the last asylum seekers with active cases from the camp had been processed and the camp was closed. Others with closed asylum cases who were told their cases could be reopened were urged to move to a shelter. But about 50 had still remained in the camp on Saturday until they were finally moved to a shelter and the camp closed later in the day.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security did not respond to requests for comment Friday and Saturday.

Last month, the Biden administration began processing asylum seekers who had been forced to wait out the long process from Mexico during the administration of former President Donald Trump. The Matamoros camp was one of the most visible signs of a policy implemented in response to high numbers of asylum seekers by an administration that worked in various ways to make it more difficult to access protective status in the United States.

On Saturday, Juan Antonio Sierra, who runs the migrant shelter in Matamoros, confirmed that he had committed to housing asylum seekers with closed cases so that the camp could be closed.

Sierra said that the day before, the U.S. Consul in Matamoros, Yolanda Parra, met with officials from the UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration, Mexico's National Immigration Institute, Sierra and some migrants. She agreed that the U.S. government would evaluate the possible reopening of closed cases for the people who remained in the camp, Sierra said.

The U.S. State Department referred questions to the Department of Homeland Security.

"I was going to take them to the Casa del Migrante until it was sure they were going to cross," Sierra said. The goal, he said, was to avoid new people arriving at the camp and assure that those who were still there would only cross the border when it was clear their cases would be reopened and avoid that they were immediately deported.

"They're trying to reopen (the cases)," Sierra said. "You're not going to send a person so that they deport them to their country." But he said the migrants were so desperate they "wanted to go without guarantees."

Asked if word of reopened cases could draw more people to the border, Rev. Francisco Gallardo, who is in charge of the shelter, said "the avalanche is already here, a lot of people are arriving." He warned it could become more complicated, because there were signs that a new camp would form.

The shelter already has more than 200 migrants staying there.

By Friday afternoon, only several dozen asylum seekers remained in the riverside camp. Workers dismantled primitive shelters and hauled away portable toilets. Friday night, power was cut to the camp. But even with the promise that their cases could be reopened, many resisted abandoning the camp for fear that a less public space would allow their shrunken number to be more easily ignored by the U.S. government.

A Honduran asylum seeker who has lived in the camp for two years with her son said that personnel from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees told her Friday that "the United States had approved the reopening of our cases and that we had to wait some days for them to authorize the crossing to the U.S."

The woman, a former police officer who requested anonymity because she did not want to jeopardize her case, said that the U.S. government had rejected her case earlier. With the help of lawyers, she appealed and was turned down again in November. She has filed a subsequent appeal.

"Now there's hope," she said.

Others were informed of the same, she said. Some were told their situation could be addressed in a couple of days, others in 10 days. She said they didn't give her a date.

Previously, U.S. officials have not said if people will be allowed back in the U.S. at some future date to pursue asylum claims that were denied or dismissed under the Trump administration's so-called Migrant Protection Protocols, better known as "Remain in Mexico." They have described the re-entry of an estimated 26,000 people with active cases as an initial step but have not said what any subsequent measures would entail.

The Matamoros camp has been an uncomfortable monument to the exceptional policy for its residents, as well as the U.S. and Mexican governments.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 93 of 101

Non-governmental organizations and volunteers eventually gave it some organization and basic sanitation and health services, but it existed in a city held in the sway of organized crime. Many residents were fearful of venturing beyond its borders for fear of rampant kidnappings and extortion.

Human Rights Watch published a report Friday that said it "has consistently found that migrants in Mexico are exposed to rape, kidnapping, extortion, assault, and psychological trauma."

"Tens of thousands of migrant families, including Venezuelans seeking protection from torture, persecution, and arbitrary imprisonment, have been abandoned by the U.S. and Mexican governments to suffer extortion and violence in Mexico," said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch.

In late January, 19 people — 16 of them Guatemalan migrants — were shot dead near Camargo, upriver from Matamoros near the border with Texas. A dozen state police have been arrested in connection with their killings.

On Monday, in Nuevo Laredo, another Tamaulipas border city, a Honduran woman and her 10-year-old son were shot and gravely wounded.

The Honduras consul in the area, Juan Carlos Ponce, confirmed the attack and said that Thursday they remained hospitalized, but declined to share details because they were victims of a serious crime.

On Thursday, 10 Democratic members of Congress told U.S. Secretary of Antony Blinken that the U.S. government must help to push for greater protections for migrants and asylum seekers waiting in Mexico.

AP writers Alfredo Peña in Ciudad Victoria, Mexico and Elliot Spagat in San Diego contributed to this report.

Dolce&Gabbana seeks over \$600M damages from 2 US bloggers

By COLLEEN BARRY AP Fashion Writer

MILAN (AP) — The Milan fashion house Dolce&Gabbana has filed a defamation suit in an Italian court seeking over \$600 million in damages from two U.S. fashion bloggers who reposted anti-Asian comments attributed to one of the designers that led to a boycott by Asian consumers.

The suit was filed in Milan civil court in 2019 but only became public this week when the bloggers posted about it on their Instagram account, Diet Prada. Their feed is widely followed in the fashion world for its cutting commentary on unoriginality in designs and on social issues.

"This whole case is a way of trying to silence Diet Prada, and to silence Tony (Liu) and Lindsay (Schuyler) personally," said Susan Scafidi, director of the Fashion Law Institute at Fordham Law School, which is coordinating the bloggers' defense.

Lawyers for Dolce&Gabbana reached by the AP declined to comment on the case.

The case dates back to November 2018, when Dolce&Gabbana faced a boycott in Asia after outrage over what were seen as culturally insensitive videos promoting a major runway show in Shanghai and subsequent posts of insulting comments in a private Instagram chat.

The show was canceled in the backlash, which included retailers pulling Dolce&Gabbana merchandise and Asian VIPs disavowing the brand.

Designers Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana initially said that Gabbana's account had been hacked. The two later appeared in a video apologizing to the Chinese people.

"A public apology and a quiet lawsuit really cancel each other out in my mind," Scafidi told The Associated Press on Saturday.

Italian defense attorneys filed a brief this week in Milan civil court, arguing that Italy is not the correct venue for the case, given that the blog is produced in the United States and the alleged damages occurred in Asia.

The fashion house is seeking damages totaling more than half a billion euros, Scafidi said.

She said the fashion house is seeking 450 million euros spent to restore brand image since 2018 and damages of 3 million euros for the company and 1 million for Gabbana, to whom the remarks were attributed. The suit also seeks more than 8.6 million euros for the cancellation of the Shanghai show, another 8.6 million euros for staff expenditures and 89.6 million euros for lost Asian sales from November

2018-March 2019.

Since going public, Diet Prada, which has over 2.5 million Instagram followers, has raised more than \$38,000 for its defense.

In a statement, Liu and Schuyler both said they would not allow their platform, which has also been vocal about the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter and recent attacks on Asians in the United States, to be silenced by lawsuits.

"Diet Prada will continue to be a platform to elevate these crucial issues," Liu said.

Schuyler called on "public figures and brands to respond to public opinion and media critiques with progressive action, not lawsuits."

Dozens rally before ex-officer put on trial in Floyd's death

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Dozens of people gathered in front of the Minnesota governor's mansion on Saturday to demand accountability for police officers, days before a former Minneapolis officer is scheduled to go on trial in the death of George Floyd.

Many of the roughly 150 people who demonstrated in Minnesota were family members of others who died during police encounters. Similar protests were being organized in cities around the country in advance of the trial of Derek Chauvin.

Floyd, a Black man, died May 25 after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against Floyd's neck while Floyd was held face-down on the ground in handcuffs, saying he couldn't breathe. Body-camera video time stamps provided by prosecutors show Chauvin held his position for about nine minutes, even after Floyd stopped moving. Floyd was later pronounced dead at a hospital.

Chauvin is charged with second-degree murder and manslaughter and jury selection in his trial begins Monday.

Saturday's protest in Minnesota was organized by Families Supporting Families Against Police Violence, a coalition of families who lost loved ones in police confrontations. The Star Tribune reports that speakers said that in light of Floyd's death, they want other fatal police encounters reopened and examined.

Biden, Dems prevail as Senate OKs \$1.9T virus relief bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An exhausted Senate narrowly approved a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill Saturday as President Joe Biden and his Democratic allies notched a victory they called crucial for hoisting the country out of the pandemic and economic doldrums.

After laboring all night on a mountain of amendments — nearly all from Republicans and rejected — bleary-eyed senators approved the sprawling package on a 50-49 party-line vote. That sets up final congressional approval by the House next week so lawmakers can whisk it to Biden for his signature.

The huge measure — its cost is nearly one-tenth the size of the entire U.S. economy — is Biden's biggest early priority. It stands as his formula for addressing the deadly virus and a limping economy, twin crises that have afflicted the country for a year.

"This nation has suffered too much for much too long," Biden told reporters at the White House after the vote. "And everything in this package is designed to relieve the suffering and to meet the most urgent needs of the nation, and put us in a better position to prevail."

Saturday's vote was also a crucial political moment for Biden and Democrats, who need nothing short of party unanimity in a 50-50 Senate they run with Vice President Kamala Harris' tiebreaking vote. They hold a slim 10-vote House edge.

Not one Republican backed the bill in the Senate or when it initially passed the House, underscoring the barbed partisan environment that's characterized the early days of Biden's presidency.

A small but pivotal band of moderate Democrats leveraged changes in the legislation that incensed progressives, hardly helping Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., guide the measure through the House. But rejection of their first, signature bill was not an option for Democrats, who face two years of running

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 95 of 101

Congress with virtually no room for error.

In a significant sign, the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, representing around 100 House liberals, called the Senate's weakening of some provisions "bad policy and bad politics" but "relatively minor concessions." Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., said the bill retained its "core bold, progressive elements."

"They feel like we do, we have to get this done," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said of the House. He added, "It's not going to be everything everyone wants. No bill is."

In a written statement, Pelosi invited Republicans "to join us in recognition of the devastating reality of this vicious virus and economic crisis and of the need for decisive action."

The bill provides direct payments of up to \$1,400 for most Americans and extended emergency unemployment benefits. There are vast piles of spending for COVID-19 vaccines and testing, states and cities, schools and ailing industries, along with tax breaks to help lower-earning people, families with children and consumers buying health insurance.

Republicans call the measure a wasteful spending spree for Democrats' liberal allies that ignores recent indications that the pandemic and economy was turning the corner.

"The Senate has never spent \$2 trillion in a more haphazard way," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. He said Democrats' "top priority wasn't pandemic relief. It was their Washington wish list."

The Senate commenced a dreaded "vote-a-rama" — a continuous series of votes on amendments — shortly before midnight Friday, and by its end around noon dispensed with about three dozen. The Senate had been in session since 9 a.m. EST Friday.

Overnight, the chamber looked like an experiment in sleep deprivation. Several lawmakers appeared to rest their eyes or doze at their desks, often burying their faces in their hands. At one point, Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, at 48 one of the younger senators, trotted into the chamber and did a prolonged stretch.

Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, missed the votes to attend his father-in-law's funeral.

The measure follows five earlier ones totaling about \$4 trillion enacted since last spring and comes amid signs of a potential turnaround.

Vaccine supplies are growing, deaths and caseloads have eased but remain frighteningly high, and hiring was surprisingly strong last month, though the economy remains 10 million jobs smaller than pre-pandemic levels.

The Senate package was delayed repeatedly as Democrats made eleventh-hour changes aimed at balancing demands by their competing moderate and progressive factions.

Work on the bill ground to a halt Friday after an agreement among Democrats on extending emergency jobless benefits seemed to collapse. Nearly 12 hours later, top Democrats and West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps the chamber's most conservative Democrat, said they had a deal, and the Senate approved it on a party-line 50-49 vote.

Under their compromise, \$300 weekly emergency unemployment checks — on top of regular state benefits — would be renewed, with a final payment Sept. 6. There would also be tax breaks on some of that aid, helping people the pandemic abruptly tossed out of jobs and risked tax penalties on the benefits.

The House relief bill, largely similar to the Senate's, provided \$400 weekly benefits through August. The current \$300 per week payments expire March 14, and Democrats want the bill on Biden's desk by then to avert a lapse.

Manchin and Republicans have asserted that higher jobless benefits discourage people from returning to work, a rationale most Democrats and many economists reject.

The agreement on jobless benefits wasn't the only move that showed moderates' sway.

The Senate voted Friday to eject a House-approved boost in the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2025, a major defeat for progressives. Eight Democrats opposed the increase, suggesting that Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and other liberals pledging to continue the effort will face a difficult fight.

Party leaders also agreed to restrict eligibility for the \$1,400 stimulus checks for most Americans. That amount would be gradually reduced until, under the Senate bill, it reaches zero for people earning \$80,000 and couples making \$160,000. Those ceilings were higher in the House version.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 96 of 101

Many of the rejected GOP amendments were either attempts to force Democrats to cast politically awkward votes or for Republicans to demonstrate their zeal for issues that appeal to their voters.

These included defeated efforts to bar funds from going to schools that don't reopen their doors or let transgender students born male participate in female sports. One amendment would have blocked aid to so-called sanctuary cities, where local authorities don't help federal officials round up immigrants in the U.S. illegally.

Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro and Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Journalists' group calls for release of reporters in Myanmar

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The Society of Professional Journalists, saying it is "frustrated and fed up" with the arrests of reporters doing their jobs, has called on Myanmar to release Associated Press journalist Thein Zaw and five others detained while covering protests in the Southeast Asian nation.

The nation's oldest journalism organization also called on U.S. law enforcement agencies to drop charges against any journalist detained while doing their work, specifically mentioning at least four journalists due in court this month after being arrested last summer covering Black Lives Matter protests.

"We urge all Americans to join us in a campaign to urge public officials that journalism is not a crime," the Indianapolis-based organization said in a statement Friday.

Thein Zaw was arrested on Feb. 27 while covering a protest against the military coup that ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. A video of the arrest shows him being surrounded and held in a chokehold as handcuffs are placed on him. The AP has called for his release.

Authorities charged Thein Zaw and the other journalists with violating a public order law that could see them imprisoned for up to three years.

"Those journalists, like all journalists, are doing their jobs, and shouldn't be punished for it. What part of 'journalism is not a crime' do government officials not get?" SPJ National President Matthew Hall said in a statement.

The group said it also is "appalled" that American journalists continue to face charges "for doing a public service."

"We call on law enforcement agencies in the U.S. to drop charges against any journalist detained while doing their work, and we ask the Biden administration to publicly make that same statement in support."

The SPJ said that although the majority of the more than 120 journalists arrested or detained while covering Black Lives Matter protests were released without charges, at least four are due in court this month on charges ranging from disorderly conduct to interference with official acts.

"Journalists here and abroad must be able to do their jobs without threat of arrest or reprisal," Hall said.

Pope, top Iraq Shiite cleric deliver message of coexistence

By NICOLE WINFIELD and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA Associated Press

PLAINS OF UR, Iraq (AP) — Pope Francis walked through a narrow alley in Iraq's holy city of Najaf for a historic meeting with the country's top Shiite cleric Saturday, and together they delivered a powerful message of peaceful coexistence in a country still reeling from back-to-back conflicts over the past decade.

In a gesture both simple and profound, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani welcomed Francis into his spartan home. The 90-year-old cleric, one of the most eminent among Shiites worldwide, afterward said Christians should live in peace in Iraq and enjoy the same rights as other Iraqis. The Vatican said Francis thanked al-Sistani for having "raised his voice in defense of the weakest and most persecuted" during some of the most violent times in Iraq's recent history,

Later in the day, the pope attended a gathering of Iraqi religious leaders in the deserts near a symbol of the country's ancient past — the 6,000-year-old ziggurat in the Plains of Ur, also the traditional birthplace of Abraham, the biblical patriarch revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims. The joint appearance by figures from across Iraq's sectarian spectrum was almost unheard-of, given their communities' often bitter divisions.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 97 of 101

Together, the day's events gave symbolic and practical punch to the central message of Francis' visit, calling for Iraq to embrace its diversity. It is a message he hopes can preserve the place of the thinning Christian population in the tapestry. At a Mass the pope celebrated later in Baghdad, emotional worshippers sang hymns, ululated and shouted "Viva la Papa!" or "Long live the pope" — a rare public moment of joy among a population weighed down by turmoil, economic woes and the coronavirus pandemic.

Still, his message faces a tough sell in a country where every community has been traumatized by sectarian bloodshed and discrimination and where politicians have tied their power to sectarian interests.

In al-Sistani, Francis sought the help of an ascetic, respected figure who is immersed in those sectarian identities but is also a powerful voice standing above them.

Al-Sistani is one of the most senior clerics in Shiite Islam, deeply revered among Shiites in Iraq and worldwide. His rare but powerful political interventions have helped shape present-day Iraq. Their meeting in al-Sistani's humble home, the first ever between a pope and a grand ayatollah, was months in the making, with every detail painstakingly negotiated beforehand.

Early Saturday, the 84-year-old pontiff, travelling in a bullet-proof Mercedes-Benz, pulled up along Najaf's narrow and column-lined Rasool Street, which culminates at the golden-domed Imam Ali Shrine, one of the most revered sites in Shiite Islam.

He then walked the few meters (yards) down an alley to al-Sistani's home. As a masked Francis entered the doorway, a few white doves were released in a sign of peace.

A religious official in Najaf called the meeting "very positive." He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief media.

The official said al-Sistani, who normally remains seated for visitors, stood to greet Francis at the door of his room — a rare honor. The pope removed his shoes before entering al-Sistani's room and was served tea and a plastic bottle of water.

At one point in their 40-minute meeting, the pope gingerly cradled the ayatollah's two hands in his own as al-Sistani leaned in speaking, according to footage aired on Lebanon's LBC. They sat close to one another, without masks. Al-Sistani spoke for most of the meeting, the official said. Al-Sistani, who rarely appears in public or even on television, wore black robes and a black turban, in simple contrast to Francis' all-white cassock.

The official said there was some concern about the fact that the pope had met with so many people the day before. Francis has received the coronavirus vaccine but al-Sistani has not. The aging ayatollah, who underwent surgery for a fractured thigh last year, looked tired.

After the meeting ended, Francis paused before leaving the room to have a last look, the official said.

In a statement issued by his office afterward, al-Sistani affirmed that Christians should "live like all Iraqis, in security and peace and with full constitutional rights." He pointed out the "role that the religious authority plays in protecting them, and others who have also suffered injustice and harm in the events of past years."

Al-Sistani wished Francis and the followers of the Catholic Church happiness and thanked him for taking the trouble to visit him in Najaf, the statement said.

Iraqis cheered the meeting, and the prime minister responded to it by declaring March 6 a National Day of Tolerance and Coexistence in Iraq.

"We welcome the pope's visit to Iraq and especially to the holy city of Najaf and his meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani," said Najaf resident Haidar Al-Ilyawi. "It is a historic visit and hope it will be good for Iraq and the Iraqi people."

Iraq's Christians, battered by violence and discrimination, hope a show of solidarity from al-Sistani will help secure their place in Iraq and ease intimidation from Shiite militiamen against their community.

Al-Sistani's voice is a powerful one, often for moderation.

After the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, his opinions forced American administrators to alter their transition plans, and his approval opened the way for Iraq's Shiites to participate in force in post-Saddam Hussein elections. In 2019, as anti-government demonstrations gripped the country, his sermon led to the resignation of then-prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 98 of 101

But his word is not law. After 2003, he repeatedly preached calm and restraint as the Shiite majority came under attack by Sunni extremists. Yet brutal Shiite reprisals against Sunni civilians fed a years-long cycle of sectarian violence.

His 2014 fatwa, or religious edict, calling on able-bodied men to join the security forces in fighting the Islamic State group helped ensure the extremists' defeat. But it also swelled the ranks of Shiite militias, many closely tied to Iran and now blamed for discrimination against Sunnis and Christians.

Later, Pope Francis evoked the common reverence for Abraham to speak against religious violence at the inter-faith gathering at the Plains of Ur, near the southern city of Nasiriyah.

"From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters," Francis said. "Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion."

Such interfaith forums are a staple of Francis' international trips. But its sectarian breadth was startling in Iraq: From Shiite and Sunni Muslims to Christians, Yazidis and Zoroastrians and tiny, ancient and esoteric faiths like the Kakai, a sect among ethnic Kurds, Mandaeans and Sabaeans.

The Vatican said Iraqi Jews were invited to the event but did not attend, without providing further details. Iraq's ancient Jewish community was decimated in the 20th century by violence and mass emigration fueled by the Arab-Israeli conflict, and only a handful remain.

Ali Thijeel, a Nasiriyah resident who attended the event, said he hoped the pope's visit would encourage investment in the area to attract pilgrims and tourists. "This is what we were waiting for," he said. "This is a message to the government and politicians. They should take care of this city and pay attention to our history."

Francis' visit — his first international trip since the start of the coronavirus pandemic — comes amid a surge in COVID-19 cases in Iraq. Despite concern about infections, Francis celebrated Mass in a packed, stuffy Chaldean Catholic Cathedral later Saturday in Baghdad that featured chanted Scripture readings and a maskless choir singing hymns.

"Love is our strength, the source of strength for those of our brothers and sisters who here too have suffered prejudice, indignities, mistreatment and persecutions for the name of Jesus," Francis told the faithful, who did wear masks.

Abdul-Zahra reported from Baghdad. Associated Press journalists Anmar Khalil in Najaf, Iraq, and Samya Kullab in Baghdad contributed.

Highlights of the \$1.9T COVID bill nearing final passage

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate approved a sweeping pandemic relief package over Republican opposition on Saturday, moving President Joe Biden closer to a milestone political victory that would provide \$1,400 checks for most American and direct billions of dollars to schools, state and local governments, and businesses.

The bill cleared by a party-line vote of 50-49 after a marathon overnight voting session and now heads back to the House for final passage, which could come early next week.

Democrats said their "American Rescue Plan" would help the country defeat the virus and nurse the economy back to health. Republicans criticized the \$1.9 trillion package as more expensive than necessary. The measure follows five earlier virus bills totaling about \$4 trillion that Congress has enacted since last spring.

A look at some highlights of the legislation:

AID TO THE UNEMPLOYED

Expanded unemployment benefits from the federal government would be extended through Sept. 6 at \$300 a week. That's on top of what beneficiaries are getting through their state unemployment insurance program. The first \$10,200 of jobless benefits would be non-taxable for households with incomes under

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 99 of 101

\$150,000.

Additionally, the measure provides a 100% subsidy of COBRA health insurance premiums to ensure that the laid-off workers can remain on their employer health plans at no cost through the end of September.

MORE CHECKS

The legislation provides a direct payment of \$1,400 for a single taxpayer, or \$2,800 for a married couple that files jointly, plus \$1,400 per dependent. Individuals earning up to \$75,000 would get the full amount, as would married couples with incomes up to \$150,000.

The size of the check would shrink for those making slightly more, with a hard cut-off at \$80,000 for individuals and \$160,000 for married couples.

Most Americans will be getting the full amount. The median household income was \$68,703 in 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

MONEY FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

The legislation would send \$350 billion to state and local governments and tribal governments for costs incurred up until the end of 2024. The bill also requires that small states get at least the amount they received under virus legislation that Congress passed last March.

Many communities have taken hits to their tax base during the pandemic, but the impact varies from state to state and from town to town. Critics say the funding is not appropriately targeted and is far more than necessary with billions of dollars allocated last spring to states and communities still unspent.

AID TO SCHOOLS

The bill calls for about \$130 billion in additional help to schools for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The money would be used to reduce class sizes and modify classrooms to enhance social distancing, install ventilation systems and purchase personal protective equipment. The money could also be used to increase the hiring of nurses and counselors and to provide summer school.

Spending for colleges and universities would be boosted by about \$40 billion, with the money used to defray an institution's pandemic-related expenses and to provide emergency aid to students to cover expenses such as food and housing and computer equipment.

AID TO BUSINESSES

A new program for restaurants and bars hurt by the pandemic would receive \$25 billion. The grants provide up to \$10 million per company with a limit of \$5 million per physical location. The grants can be used to cover payroll, rent, utilities and other operational expenses.

The bill also provides \$7.25 billion for the Paycheck Protection Program, a tiny fraction of what was allocated in previous legislation. The bill also allows more non-profits to apply for loans that are designed to help borrowers meet their payroll and operating costs and can potentially be forgiven.

TESTING AND VACCINES

The bill provides \$46 billion to expand federal, state and local testing for COVID-19 and to enhance contact tracing capabilities with new investments to expand laboratory capacity and set up mobile testing units. It also contains about \$14 billion to speed up the distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines across the country.

HEALTH CARE

Parts of the legislation advance longstanding Democratic priorities like increasing coverage under the Obama-era Affordable Care Act. Financial assistance for ACA premiums would become considerably more generous and a greater number of solid middle-class households would qualify. Though the sweetened subsidies last only through the end of 2022, they will lower the cost of coverage and are expected to boost the number of people enrolled.

The measure also dangles more money in front of a dozen states, mainly in the South, that have not yet taken up the Medicaid expansion that is available under the ACA to cover more low-income adults. Whether such a sweetener would be enough to start wearing down longstanding Republican opposition to Medicaid expansion is uncertain.

BIGGER TAX BREAKS FOR HOUSEHOLDS WITH AND WITHOUT KIDS

Under current law, most taxpayers can reduce their federal income tax bill by up to \$2,000 per child. In

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 100 of 101

a significant change, the bill would increase the tax break to \$3,000 for every child age 6 to 17 and \$3,600 for every child under the age of 6.

The legislation also calls for the payments to be delivered monthly instead of in a lump sum. If the secretary of the Treasury determines that isn't feasible, then the payments are to be made as frequently as possible.

Families would get the full credit regardless of how little they make in a year, leading to criticism that the changes would serve as a disincentive to work. Add in the \$1,400 checks and other items in the proposal, and the legislation would reduce the number of children living in poverty by more than half, according to the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University.

The bill also significantly expands the Earned Income Tax Credit for 2021 by making it available to people without children. The credit for low and moderate-income adults would be worth \$543 to \$1,502, depending on income and filing status.

RENTAL AND HOMEOWNER ASSISTANCE

The bill provides about \$30 billion to help low-income households and the unemployed afford rent and utilities, and to assist the homeless with vouchers and other support. States and tribes would receive an additional \$10 billion for homeowners who are struggling with mortgage payments because of the pandemic.

Amanda Gorman says she was racially profiled near her home

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Amanda Gorman, the 22-year-old poet who captured hearts at the inauguration of President Joe Biden, posted to social media that she was followed home by a security guard who demanded to know where she lived because she "looked suspicious."

"I showed my keys & buzzed myself into my building," she tweeted of the incident Friday night. "He left, no apology. This is the reality of black girls: One day you're called an icon, the next day, a threat."

Gorman, the nation's youngest inaugural poet, lives in Los Angeles but did not specify where the encounter occurred. Her spokeswoman did not immediately return an email Saturday seeking additional comment.

The post was met with thousands of messages of support on Twitter and Instagram. She followed up her post with a second comment that said:

"In a sense, he was right. I AM A THREAT: a threat to injustice, to inequality, to ignorance. Anyone who speaks the truth and walks with hope is an obvious and fatal danger to the powers that be. A threat and proud."

Gorman became an instant sensation Jan. 20 when she recited her poem, "The Hill We Climb," at Biden's swearing-in.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Sunday, March 7, the 66th day of 2021 There are 299 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 7, 1965, a march by civil rights demonstrators was violently broken up at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, by state troopers and a sheriff's posse in what came to be known as "Bloody Sunday."

On this date:

In 1875, composer Maurice Ravel was born in Ciboure, France.

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell received a U.S. patent for his telephone.

In 1911, President William Howard Taft ordered 20,000 troops to patrol the U.S.-Mexico border in response to the Mexican Revolution.

In 1912, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen arrived in Hobart, Australia, where he dispatched telegrams announcing his success in leading the first expedition to the South Pole the previous December.

In 1926, the first successful trans-Atlantic radio-telephone conversations took place between New York

Groton Daily Independent

Sunday, March 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 244 ~ 101 of 101

and London.

In 1936, Adolf Hitler ordered his troops to march into the Rhineland, thereby breaking the Treaty of Versailles (vehr-SY) and the Locarno Pact.

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. forces crossed the Rhine at Remagen, Germany, using the damaged but still usable Ludendorff Bridge.

In 1963, the Pan Am Building (today the MetLife Building) first opened in midtown Manhattan.

In 1975, the U.S. Senate revised its filibuster rule, allowing 60 senators to limit debate in most cases, instead of the previously required two-thirds of senators present.

In 1994, the U.S. Navy issued its first permanent orders assigning women to regular duty on a combat ship — in this case, the USS Eisenhower.

In 2001, Ariel Sharon was sworn in as Israel's prime minister, serving until he suffered a stroke in 2006.

In 2010, the Iraq war thriller "The Hurt Locker" received six Academy Awards including best picture, with Kathryn Bigelow accepting the first directing Oscar awarded to a woman.

Ten years ago: Reversing course, President Barack Obama approved the resumption of military trials at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, ending a two-year ban. Charlie Sheen was fired from the sitcom "Two and a Half Men" by Warner Bros. Television following repeated misbehavior and weeks of the actor's angry, often-manic media campaign against his studio bosses.

Five years ago: Peyton Manning announced his retirement after 18 seasons in the National Football League. A jury in Nashville, Tennessee, awarded sports reporter Erin Andrews \$55 million in her lawsuit against a stalker who rented a hotel room next to hers and secretly recorded her, finding that the hotel companies and the stalker shared in the blame. Stephen Curry scored 41 points and became the first player in NBA history to make 300 3-pointers in a season as the Golden State Warriors held off the Orlando Magic 119-113 for their 45th straight home victory.

One year ago: Health officials in Florida said two people who had tested positive for the new coronavirus had died; the deaths were the first on the East Coast attributed to the outbreak. Italy saw its biggest daily increase in coronavirus cases since the outbreak began in the northern part of the country. A hotel in southeastern China that was being used to quarantine suspected coronavirus patients collapsed, killing 29 people. In an interim report, Ethiopian investigators put most of the blame on Boeing for the 2019 crash of a 737 Max jet shortly after takeoff, saying there were design failures and inadequate training for pilots; the crash killed all 157 people on board.

Today's Birthdays: TV personality Willard Scott is 87. International Motorsports Hall of Famer Janet Guthrie is 83. Actor Daniel J. Travanti is 81. Entertainment executive Michael Eisner is 79. Rock musician Chris White (The Zombies) is 78. Rock singer Peter Wolf is 75. Rock musician Matthew Fisher (Procol Harum) is 75. Pro Football Hall of Famer Franco Harris is 71. Pro and College Football Hall of Famer Lynn Swann is 69. R&B singer-musician Ernie Isley (The Isley Brothers) is 69. Rock musician Kenny Aronoff (BoDeans, John Mellencamp) is 68. Actor Bryan Cranston is 65. Actor Donna Murphy is 62. Actor Nick Searcy is 62. Golfer Tom Lehman is 62. International Tennis Hall of Famer Ivan Lendl is 61. Actor Mary Beth Evans is 60. Singer-actor Taylor Dayne is 59. Actor Bill Brochtrup is 58. Author E.L. James is 58. Author Bret Easton Ellis is 57. Opera singer Denyce Graves is 57. Comedian Wanda Sykes is 57. Actor Jonathan Del Arco is 55. Rock musician Randy Guss (Toad the Wet Sprocket) is 54. Actor Rachel Weisz (wys) is 51. Actor Peter Sarsgaard is 50. Actor Jay Duplass is 48. Classical singer Sebastien Izambard (Il Divo) is 48. Rock singer Hugo Ferreira (Tantric) is 47. Actor Jenna Fischer is 47. Actor Tobias Menzies is 47. Actor Sarayu Blue is 46. Actor Audrey Marie Anderson is 46. Actor TJ Thyne is 46. Bluegrass singer-musician Frank Solivan is 44. Actor Laura Prepon is 41. Actor Bel Powley is 29. Actor Giselle Eisenberg (TV: "Life in Pieces") is 14.