

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 1 of 86

[1- Middle School Music Department to host 5th Annual Talent Show](#)

[2- School Calendar still being debated](#)

[2- Pump House Structure going up](#)

[4- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)

[6- Yesterday's COVID-19 UPDATE](#)

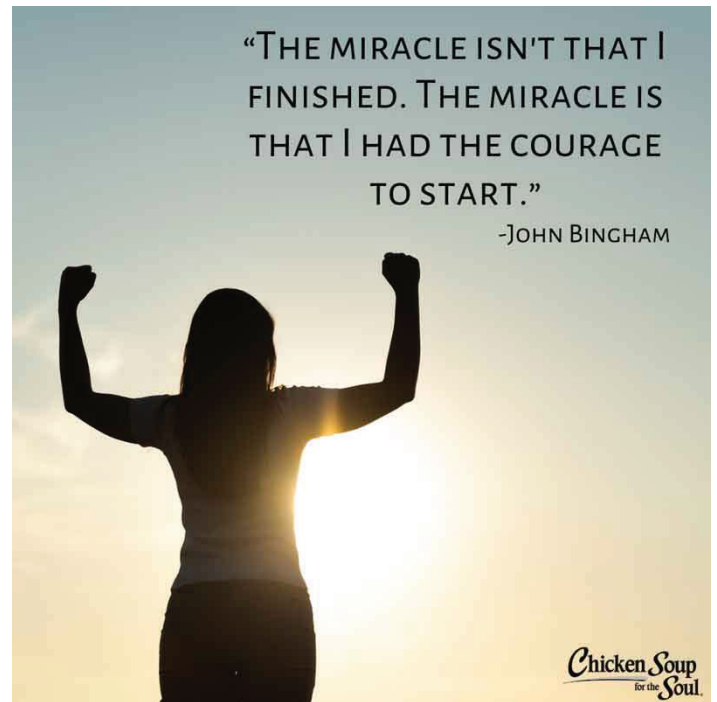
[12- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)

[13- Weather Pages](#)

[17- Daily Devotional](#)

[18- 2021 Community Events](#)

[19- News from the Associated Press](#)



“THE MIRACLE ISN'T THAT I FINISHED. THE MIRACLE IS THAT I HAD THE COURAGE TO START.”

-JOHN BINGHAM

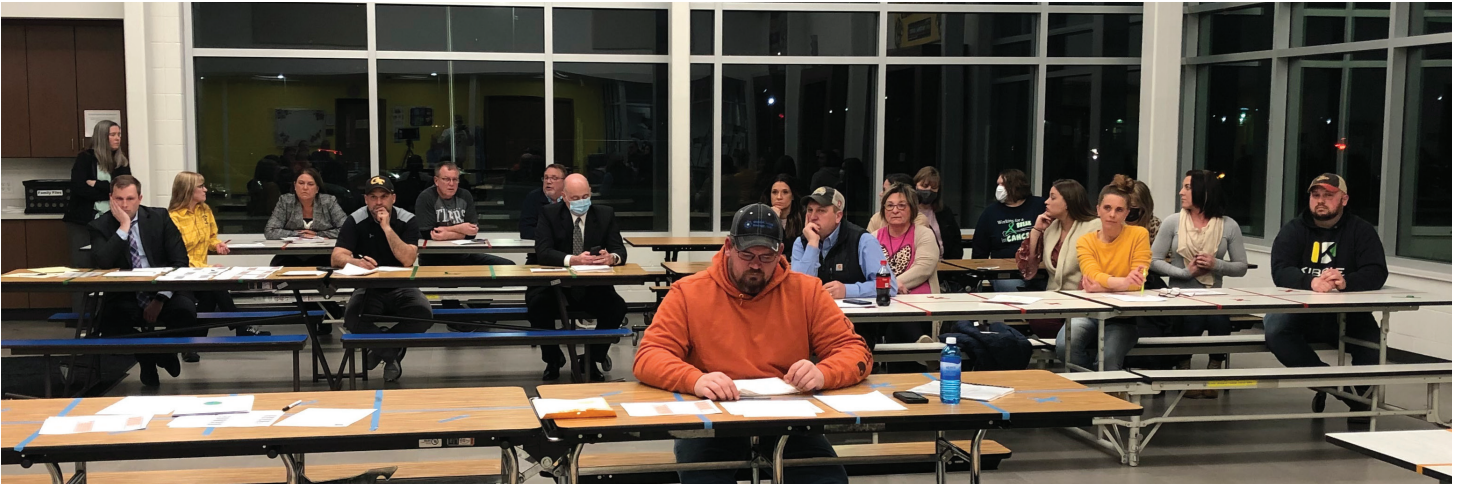
Middle School Music Department to host 5th Annual Talent Show

On Thursday March 11th, the Groton MS School Music Department will be hosting our Middle School Talent Show. Theme is “The Stage is Yours.” The event will be held at the Groton High Old Gym at 7:00 pm. The talent show is a fundraiser for the MS Music Students to earn money for their future music trips. The show will consist of talent acts made up of middle school students and popcorn. For people that purchase tickets in advance there will be a drawing for special prizes at the end of the show. The general admission cost is \$5.00. Tickets will not be sold at the door, but a \$5.00 donation will be requested. The 6th Grade Band, JH Band, and JH Choir will also perform. You can get your tickets from any MS Music Student. Come enjoy a fun-filled night of talent and music. Thank you all for your support!



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



School Calendar brings in district patrons

The debate over the Groton Area School calendar has been in the forefront of a debate with 4-day a week vs. 5 day a week. The Groton Area Board of Education listened to the patrons for over two hours at the board meeting Monday night. The current school year has just barely above state minimum with the four-day week. There is discussion of extending the school year from 149 to 165 days for the upcoming year. But the four-day vs. five-day week is up for debate. The board has been grappling with this for three board meetings and as of Monday night, no decision was made, except to have 165 days of school. Now Superintendent Joe Schwan has to put together a calendar upon that recommendation which will be presented at the next school board meeting. To date, six different school calendars have been proposed.



Work started yesterday on the new structure going up for the new pump house.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 3 of 86

#379 in a series

Covid-19 Update: Marie Miller

Numbers have stayed low today; we'll see what tomorrow looks like when the weekend effect is well over. For today, we're up to 29,081,000 cases, 0.2% more than yesterday. There were 47,400 new cases reported today. Hospitalizations rose today for the first time in 70 days; last time we had any increase at all was January 7, which was also our highest day with 132,464 people hospitalized. The increase was moderate, so I'm not worried about it; we're now at 43,473 people hospitalized in the US today. We've been below 100,000 for over a month and below 50,000 for over a week, so all's well yet. There were 794 deaths reported today. The total is now up to 525,433, which is 0.2% more than yesterday.

On March 8, 2020, one year ago today, there had been over 108,000 cases of Covid-19 diagnosed and 3800 deaths worldwide. Nearly 81,000 of those cases and over 3000 of the deaths were in mainland China, so a growing proportion was turning up in other countries every day. Italy had nearly 7500 cases and had lost over 350 lives, an increase in cases of around 25 percent and in deaths of about 33 percent in just 24 hours. Iran had over 6500 cases and 194 deaths. The first death in South America was reported on this date. North America was still in the early stages: Canada was reporting around 63 cases at this time.

The US had 550 cases, 49 in repatriated citizens, 46 from the Diamond Princess, and 21 from the Grand Princess. Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia had reported cases. Twenty-one had died. Washington had 136 cases and 18 deaths, 14 of them at that nursing home in King County; the other three deaths were two in Florida and one in California. There were around 105 cases reported in New York. Several states had declared states of emergency. We had started to have members of Congress and other political figures in quarantine due to exposures at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held the prior week, highlighting the dangers of gatherings. This was the Sunday of what I would consider to be our last weekend before anything resembling normal life began to grind to a halt.

Cancellations and closures: the tennis world's BNP Paribas Open; all travel to and from South Korea and Italy for US military personnel; Finish/Norwegian joint military exercises; the Vatican Museums; movies, meeting involving essential public service employees, bars, religious gatherings (including funerals), sporting events, all schools and university classes in Italy. These were just about to pick up speed.

Today, the new CDC guidance for fully-vaccinated people is out; I did a public post with a link on my FB page this morning if you want to see the website for yourself. The CDC web page says "fully-vaccinated" means two weeks past your second dose of a two-dose vaccine or two weeks past your dose of the one-dose vaccine. I have to admit that one-dose recommendation puzzles me a bit since the efficacy figures are for 28 days post; but that's what they're saying. Who am I to second-guess the CDC?

What did they have to say? Summary: You may gather indoors without masks with other fully-vaccinated people; you may gather indoors without masks with unvaccinated people from one other household (as long as none of them is in a high-risk category); you do not need testing or quarantine if exposed. You should still exercise the usual precautions in public places, crowds, and poorly-ventilated spaces; avoid larger gatherings; delay travel if possible, but follow CDC precautions if you do travel; get tested and isolate if you develop symptoms. They also say this: "Early data show that the vaccines may help keep people from spreading COVID-19, but we are learning more as more people get vaccinated." Understand this is not the final word; this is a way station. I expect the guidance to continue to be updated as the science delivers more certainty and as community transmission rates change.

Also today, the President's senior adviser Andy Slavitt said in an interview on CNN that this guidance is linked to vaccination rates, so it is likely to change as larger percentages of the population are vaccinated. "The rate at which the guidance will develop is directly related to how quickly we vaccinate the country. This is the key point. At 10% vaccinations we have this guidance. At 20-30%, we will have new guidance." He also mentioned that the plan is to begin to provide lists of activities classified as low, moderate, and high risk, rather than a list of allowed versus prohibited activities, so that people can make their own determination about the level of risk they are willing to undertake.

So how's the vaccination effort going? As of this morning, over 92 million doses have been administered,

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 4 of 86

about 31 million people have been fully vaccinated, and some 60 million have received at least one dose—that's close to one-fifth of the population. Please pause to recognize this means we now have more people fully vaccinated than we've reported as cases in the entire pandemic to date. That's a milestone. We're averaging something in the neighborhood of 2.2 million doses per day right now. There are still issues of reaching underserved communities, still glitches in many states' appointment systems, still inequities of access for people without Internet access or skills; but we are putting vaccine into arms at a blistering pace. Back when we started, we were seeing many states that weren't getting even half the doses they'd received into people; today, almost 80 percent of distributed doses has been administered. So we're coming along. We need to go faster, and we need to get further, but we're making progress.

A concern is that air travel levels have really picked up. Yesterday, nearly 1.3 million people were screened by TSA at airports; this is the highest number since January 3, which encompassed holiday travel, and it follows a weekend of high numbers—over one million every day since Thursday. I'm not sure whether this is simply increased confidence as more people are vaccinated—misplaced confidence, that—or spring break travel. In either case, it's a worry; we're pretty clear that transmission rates are far too high to undertake a nonessential travel. The experts are recommending we get our new-case rates below 10,000 per day before we relax on that. We're at four times that at the moment, so not close.

Haley Arceneaux had bone cancer as a child; at the age of 10, she had a steel implant to replace a good chunk of her femur, the large bone in the thigh. Back in 2003, she spoke at the Louisiana Young Heroes gala, saying, "Children want to see their dreams. I know I did, and I know I'm going to. I want to be a nurse at St. Jude's." That happened: She is a physician's assistant at St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital.

Then in January, the Hospital called her with a request: They were asking her to represent them in space. In space! She had been chosen to join the first all-civilian space mission, which is raising money for St. Jude's, SpaceX's Inspiration4. Arceneaux will be the youngest American to go to space, and she will be the first person with a prosthetic body part in space as well. That's always been a limitation that would prevent someone from joining a mission—until now. She told NPR's Ari Shapiro a few days ago, "I absolutely love that this mission is changing what an astronaut looks like. You know, until now, you've had to be physically perfect, and I don't fall into that category."

She then went on to describe the day after the news of her selection broke that a patient and her mom stopped her at the Hospital, asking, "Are you Hayley?" They were excited to meet a real astronaut. She explained that the little girl had had a really rough night. The girl said she was feeling really discouraged that she can't run or jump. Arceneaux said she told the child, "I can't run or jump either, but it's not stopping me from going to space." She added, "And I just hope that this mission shows kids what they're capable of."

Arceneaux said she's particularly excited to arrange a video call from space with the children at St. Jude's. "Them getting to actually see what their future can look like—I think it's going to be really powerful for them, and it's going to be a lot of fun." Indeed. Arceneaux blasts off into space this fall. I'll follow her trip with great interest.

Take care. We'll talk tomorrow.

Broton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 5 of 86

County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	454	432	874	15	Minimal	0.0%
Beadle	2791	2642	5892	39	Substantial	15.6%
Bennett	382	370	1178	9	None	0.0%
Bon Homme	1509	1477	2079	25	Minimal	3.8%
Brookings	3623	3521	12010	37	Moderate	2.6%
Brown	5175	5011	12739	89	Substantial	8.1%
Brule	695	679	1880	9	Minimal	8.6%
Buffalo	420	406	898	13	None	0.0%
Butte	986	950	3224	20	Moderate	9.0%
Campbell	131	125	258	4	Minimal	25.0%
Charles Mix	1309	1246	3931	21	Substantial	7.2%
Clark	375	361	954	5	Moderate	5.9%
Clay	1810	1768	5374	15	Substantial	3.0%
Codington	4030	3861	9701	77	Substantial	7.7%
Corson	472	454	1000	12	Minimal	14.8%
Custer	764	737	2724	12	Substantial	11.4%
Davison	2972	2878	6564	63	Moderate	6.3%
Day	672	628	1778	28	Substantial	6.5%
Deuel	476	461	1138	8	Minimal	0.0%
Dewey	1423	1383	3820	26	Substantial	4.7%
Douglas	434	420	912	9	Moderate	0.0%
Edmunds	487	464	1056	12	Moderate	5.0%
Fall River	546	507	2630	15	Substantial	9.8%
Faulk	362	347	699	13	Minimal	14.3%
Grant	980	922	2239	38	Substantial	6.8%
Gregory	547	502	1287	30	Moderate	11.9%
Haakon	256	240	537	10	Moderate	0.0%
Hamlin	722	663	1781	38	Substantial	21.9%
Hand	343	327	821	6	Moderate	5.3%
Hanson	367	353	721	4	Moderate	26.3%
Harding	92	90	183	1	Minimal	20.0%
Hughes	2321	2242	6598	36	Substantial	1.2%
Hutchinson	790	752	2383	26	Minimal	5.3%

Groton Daily Independent

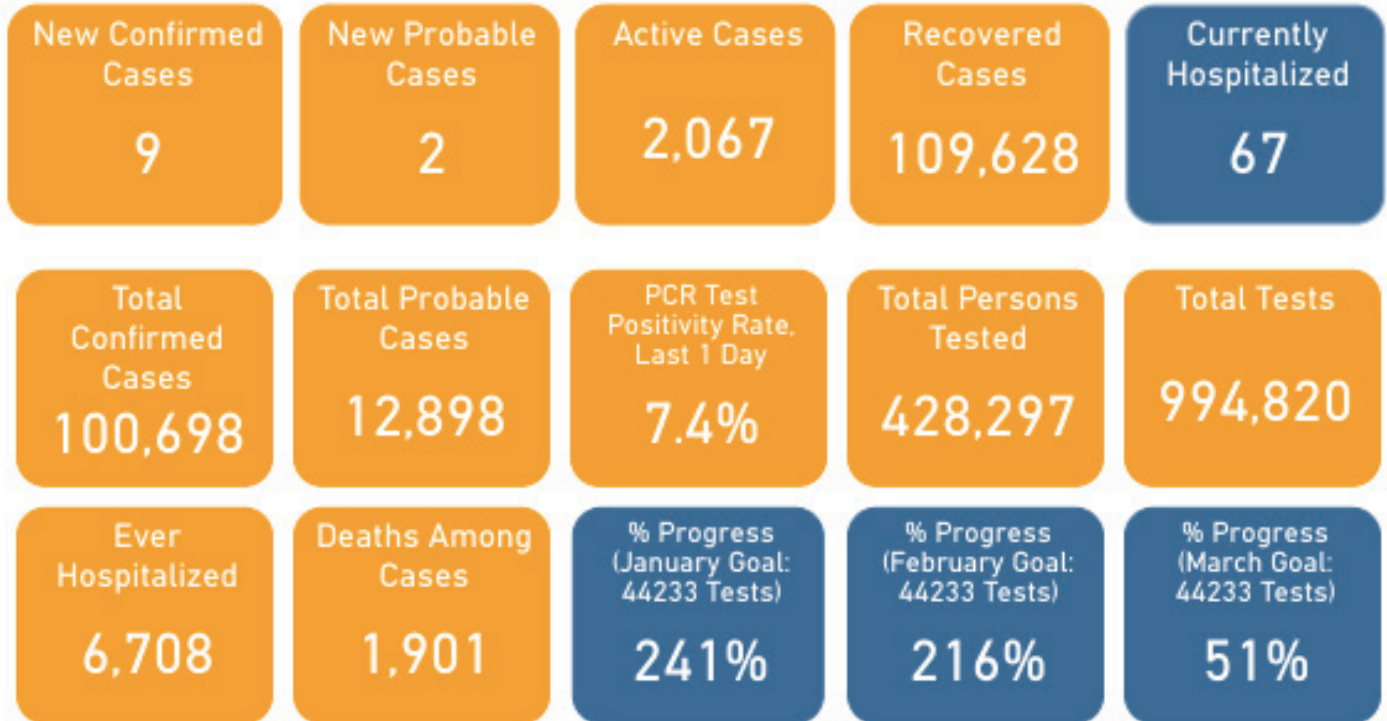
Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 6 of 86

Hyde	139	137	408	1	Minimal	5.3%
Jackson	280	263	918	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	275	251	557	16	Minimal	0.0%
Jones	85	85	222	0	Minimal	0.0%
Kingsbury	647	619	1680	14	Moderate	5.6%
Lake	1219	1158	3337	18	Substantial	9.0%
Lawrence	2834	2765	8547	45	Moderate	3.4%
Lincoln	7856	7611	20283	77	Substantial	10.5%
Lyman	603	586	1877	10	Minimal	2.6%
Marshall	337	308	1198	5	Substantial	12.3%
McCook	750	713	1621	24	Moderate	12.1%
McPherson	241	231	555	4	Minimal	0.0%
Meade	2618	2531	7721	31	Substantial	9.5%
Mellette	257	245	733	2	Moderate	8.8%
Miner	274	254	578	9	Minimal	18.2%
Minnehaha	28332	27497	78382	334	Substantial	8.7%
Moody	620	592	1752	17	Moderate	5.6%
Oglala Lakota	2065	1995	6645	49	Moderate	5.4%
Pennington	12992	12617	39484	189	Substantial	5.6%
Perkins	348	330	820	14	Minimal	2.8%
Potter	378	363	836	4	Moderate	0.0%
Roberts	1224	1140	4148	36	Substantial	19.4%
Sanborn	335	324	693	3	Minimal	5.2%
Spink	804	767	2136	26	Minimal	6.3%
Stanley	335	328	936	2	Moderate	2.9%
Sully	137	133	313	3	Minimal	0.0%
Todd	1219	1188	4148	29	Minimal	0.0%
Tripp	713	672	1485	16	Substantial	20.0%
Turner	1074	1006	2725	53	Moderate	6.3%
Union	2006	1926	6282	39	Substantial	8.0%
Walworth	729	698	1827	15	Moderate	8.6%
Yankton	2818	2750	9348	28	Moderate	7.9%
Ziebach	336	326	863	9	Minimal	7.7%
Unassigned	0	0	1780	0		

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 7 of 86

South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4598	0
10-19 years	12853	0
20-29 years	20128	7
30-39 years	18676	18
40-49 years	16226	36
50-59 years	16029	113
60-69 years	13019	251
70-79 years	6938	435
80+ years	5129	1041

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	59135	896
Male	54461	1005

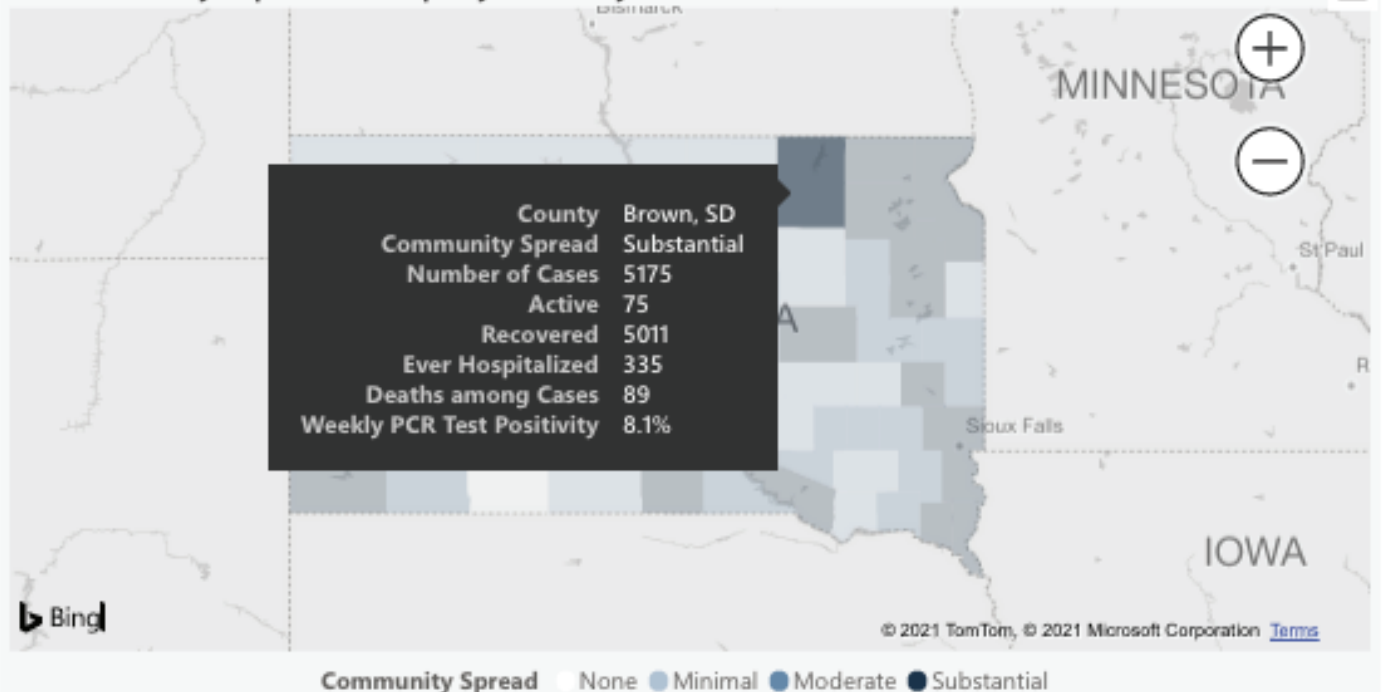
Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 8 of 86

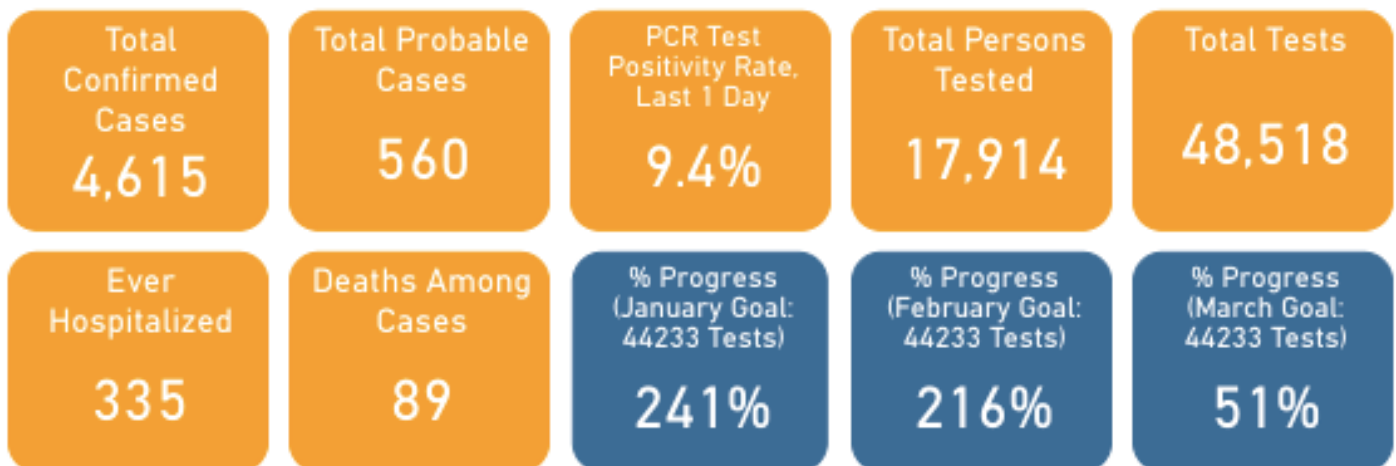
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



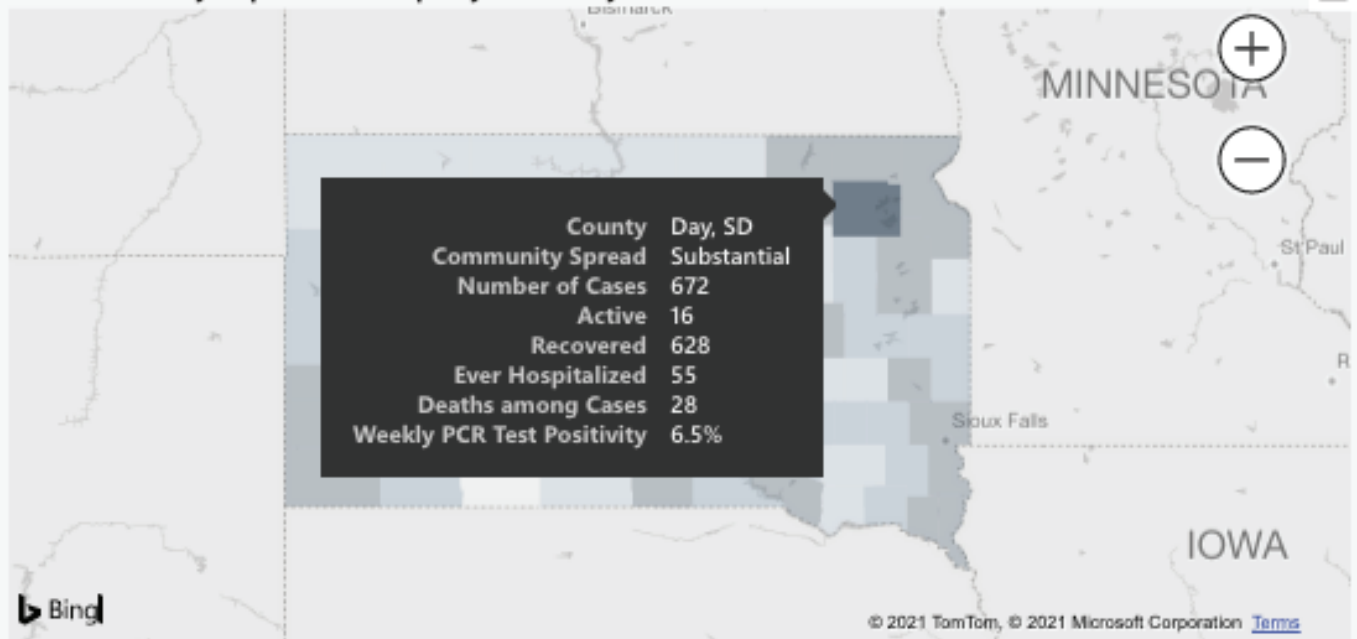
Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 9 of 86

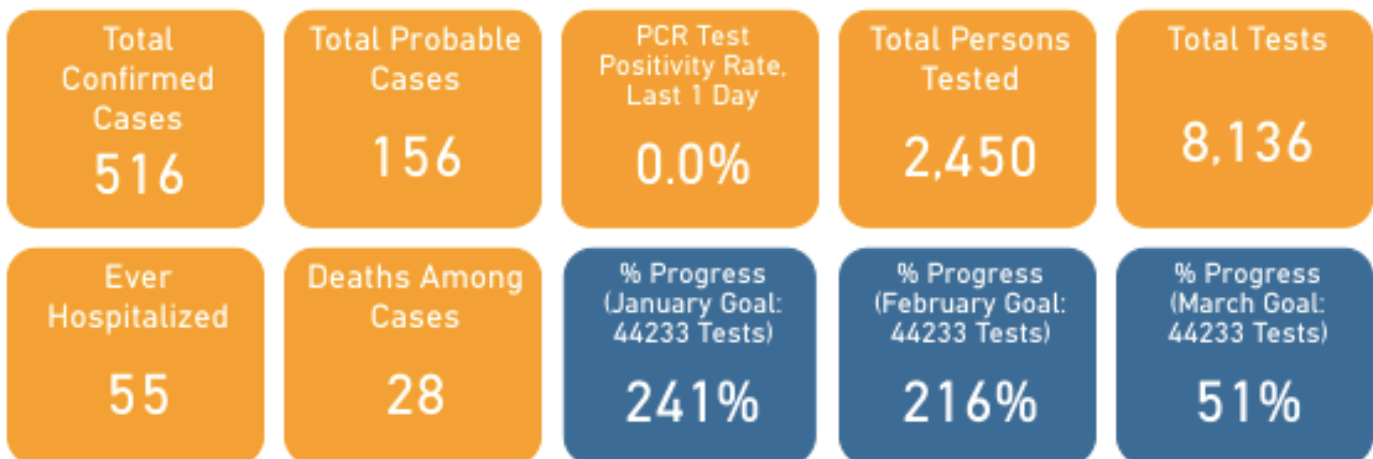
Day County



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

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 10 of 86

Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

261,885

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	497
Moderna	129,470
Pfizer	131,918

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

169,877

State Allocation

Janssen - Series Complete	497
Moderna - 1 dose	41,416
Moderna - Series Complete	44,027
Pfizer - 1 dose	35,958
Pfizer - Series Complete	47,980

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

30%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	29.55%
Series Complete	15.95%

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

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	694	244	225	469
Beadle	5273	1,833	1,720	3,553
Bennett*	436	122	157	279
Bon Homme*	2739	1,133	803	1,936
Brookings	7575	2,775	2,400	5,175
Brown	12308	2,796	4,756	7,552
Brule*	1565	513	526	1,039
Buffalo*	122	78	22	100
Butte	1794	756	519	1,275
Campbell	874	292	291	583
Charles Mix*	2496	1,068	714	1,782
Clark	986	334	326	660
Clay	4051	1,529	1,261	2,790
Codington*	8142	2,818	2,662	5,480
Corson*	246	98	74	172
Custer*	2321	889	716	1,605
Davison	6364	1,832	2,266	4,098
Day*	2124	772	676	1,448
Deuel	1214	426	394	820
Dewey*	332	72	130	202
Douglas*	973	313	330	643
Edmunds	1088	350	369	719
Fall River*	2207	733	737	1,470
Faulk	814	268	273	541
Grant*	2373	1,175	599	1,774
Gregory*	1439	609	415	1,024
Haakon*	477	159	159	318

Groton Daily Independent

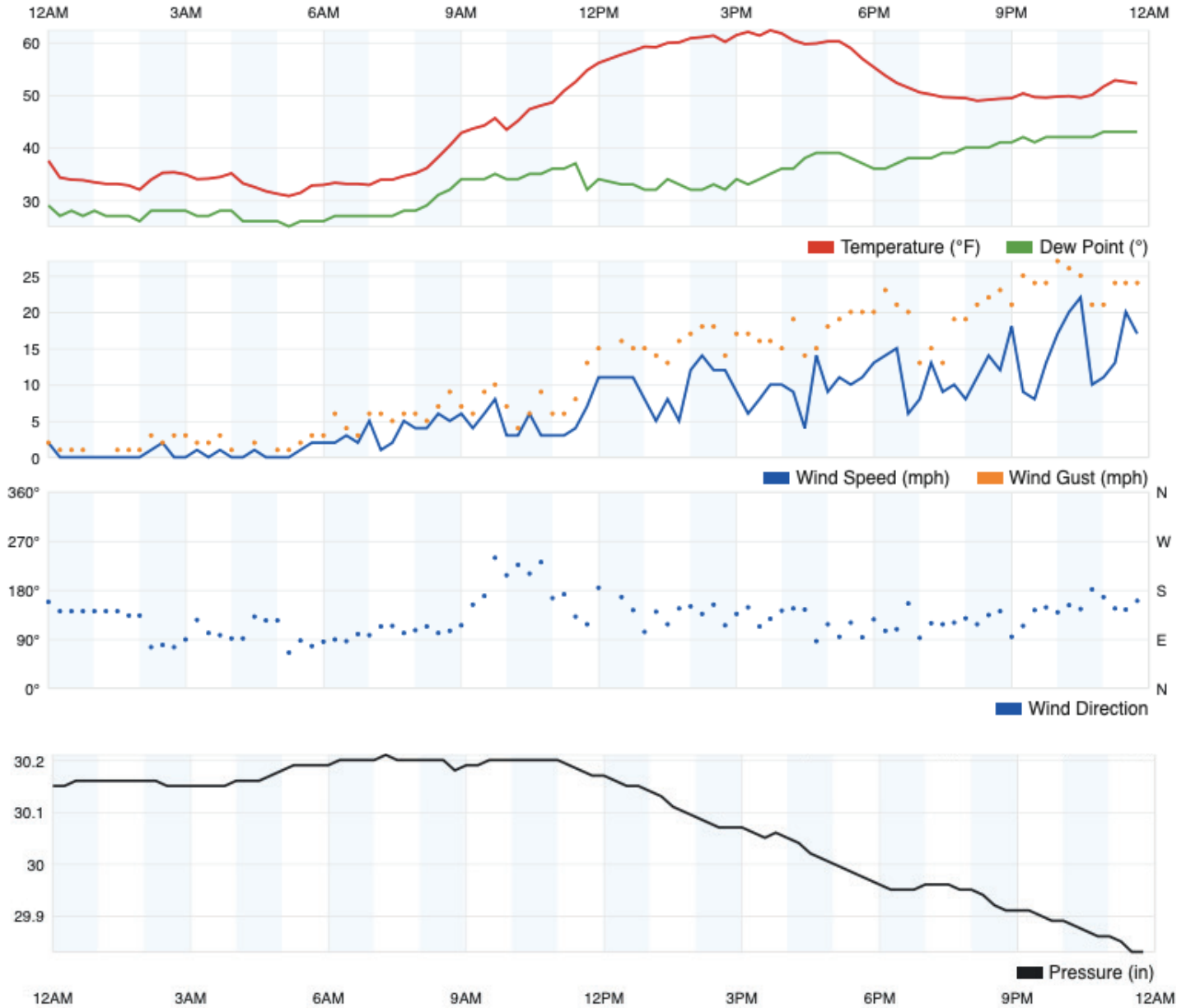
Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 11 of 86

Hamlin	1426	484	471	955
Hand	1057	375	341	716
Hanson	397	149	124	273
Harding	83	39	22	61
Hughes*	6522	1,736	2,393	4,129
Hutchinson*	2736	890	923	1,813
Hyde*	447	147	150	297
Jackson*	343	107	118	225
Jerauld	655	307	174	481
Jones*	554	164	195	359
Kingsbury	1909	845	532	1,377
Lake	3192	1,100	1,046	2,146
Lawrence	6752	2,641	2,055	4,696
Lincoln	22174	5,028	8,573	13,601
Lyman*	648	234	207	441
Marshall*	1364	448	458	906
McCook	1800	564	618	1,182
McPherson	208	64	72	136
Meade*	5158	1,734	1,712	3,446
Mellette*	37	17	10	27
Miner	712	236	238	474
Minnehaha*	68509	17,359	25,575	42,934
Moody*	1409	603	403	1,006
Oglala Lakota*	152	56	48	104
Pennington*	30800	8,674	11,063	19,737
Perkins*	555	275	140	415
Potter	684	310	187	497
Roberts*	3752	1,352	1,200	2,552
Sanborn	835	259	288	547
Spink	2441	869	786	1,655
Stanley*	998	268	365	633
Sully	309	73	118	191
Todd*	144	48	48	96
Tripp*	1726	556	585	1,141
Turner	2964	862	1,051	1,913
Union	2175	1,081	547	1,628
Walworth*	1535	459	538	997
Yankton	8389	2,017	3,186	5,203
Ziebach*	52	16	18	34
Other	5255	1,437	1,909	3,346

Groton Daily Independent

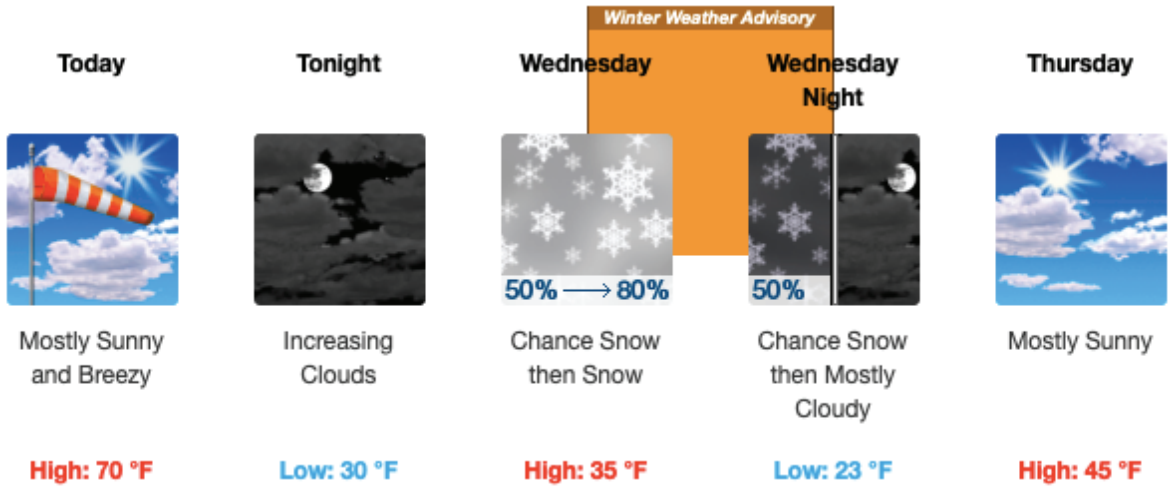
Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 12 of 86

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

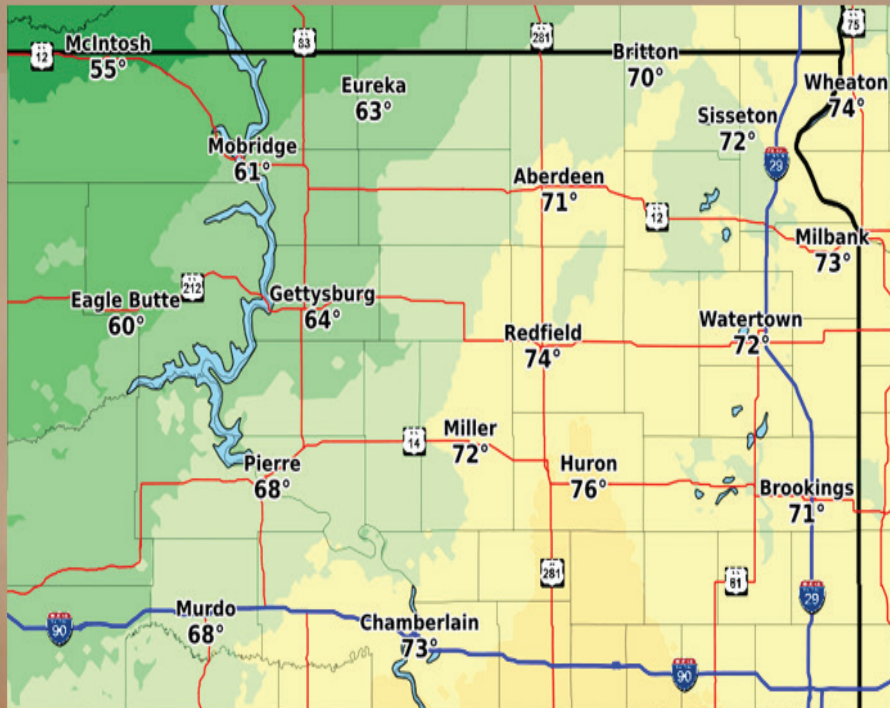


Broton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 13 of 86



Very High Fire Danger Today!



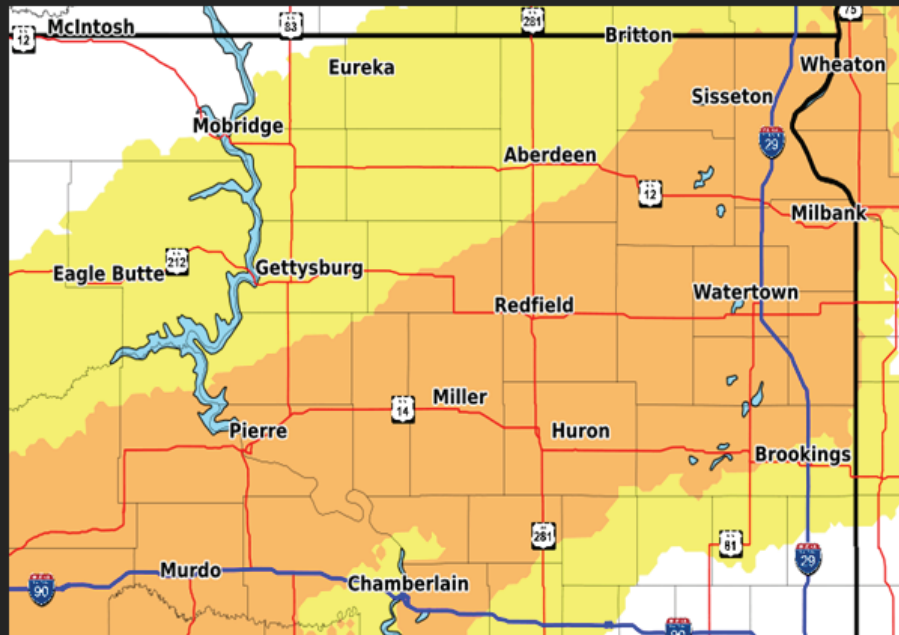
- ✓ Front Crosses The Dakotas Today
- ✓ South/Southeast Winds Ahead Of Front (20 to 35mph) With

A front will cross the region today, resulting in unseasonably mild temperatures (yeah, we're going to see records). The warm, dry air and dry ground cover/lack of snow cover and breezy to windy conditions will result in very high fire danger.



Potential Snowfall Impacts

Impact Outlook: Wed into Wed Night



None
No impacts are expected at this time

Minor ❄️
Light accumulations with minor road impacts possible

Moderate ❄️❄️
Slippery roads and low visibility are possible

Significant ❄️❄️❄️
Snow over roads and greatly reduced visibilities are possible

Crippling ❄️❄️❄️❄️
Major impacts are possible, travel may be impossible

Confidence is growing that an early spring storm system will bring precipitation to the area Wednesday into Wednesday night. Previous forecasts had hinted towards mainly rain or rain/snow mix however recent trends are pointing towards accumulating snow. Accumulation forecasts will remain in flux as we get closer to this system reaching the area, so at this point we would rather just identify the potential for travel impacts. More info to come throughout the day!

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 15 of 86

Today in Weather History

March 9, 1993: High winds gusting more than 50 mph moved east across South Dakota behind a strong cold front. Peak wind gusts reported included 62 mph at Pierre and 49 mph at Aberdeen. High winds flipped over a mobile home on top of a car and a utility shed near The Oahe Reservoir. A semi-tractor trailer was overturned while crossing Ft. Randall Dam. An office trailer was also tipped over at the same location.

1891: From March 9th through the 13th, a blizzard struck southern England and Wales with gale-force winds. An estimated 220 people were killed; 65 ships foundered in the English Channel, and 6,000 sheep perished. Countless trees were uprooted, and trains buried. Up to a foot of snow and snowdrifts of 11.5 feet were reported in Dulwich, London, Torquay, Sidmouth, and Dartmouth.

1956 - A whopping 367 inches of snow was measured on the ground at the Ranier Paradise Ranger Station in Washington. The snow depth was a state record and the second highest total of record for the continental U.S. (The Weather Channel)

1957: An earthquake measuring a magnitude 8.6 struck the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. A Pacific-wide tsunami was generated that caused damage in Hawaii, but fortunately, no lives were lost. Hardest hit was the island of Kauai, where houses were destroyed and roads washed away. Waves reached 34.1 feet high at Haena, HI.

1960 - A winter storm produced a narrow band of heavy snow from north central Kentucky into Virginia and the mountains of North Carolina. Snowfall amounts ranged from 12 to 24 inches, with drifts up to eleven feet high in western Virginia. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Gale force winds ushered arctic air into the north central U.S. Some places were 50 degrees colder than the previous day. Northeast winds, gusting to 60 mph, produced 8 to 15 foot waves on Lake Michigan causing more than a million dollars damage along the southeastern shoreline of Wisconsin. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A cold front brought high winds to the southwestern U.S. Winds in the Las Vegas Valley of Nevada gusted to 70 mph, and one person was injured by a falling tree. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-two cities in the southwestern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. In New Mexico, afternoon highs of 72 at Los Alamos, 76 at Ruidoso, and 79 at Quemado, were records for March. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in West Texas. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 71 mph at Lubbock, and golf ball size hail was reported at several other locations. Strong thunderstorm winds injured two persons north of the town of Canyon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

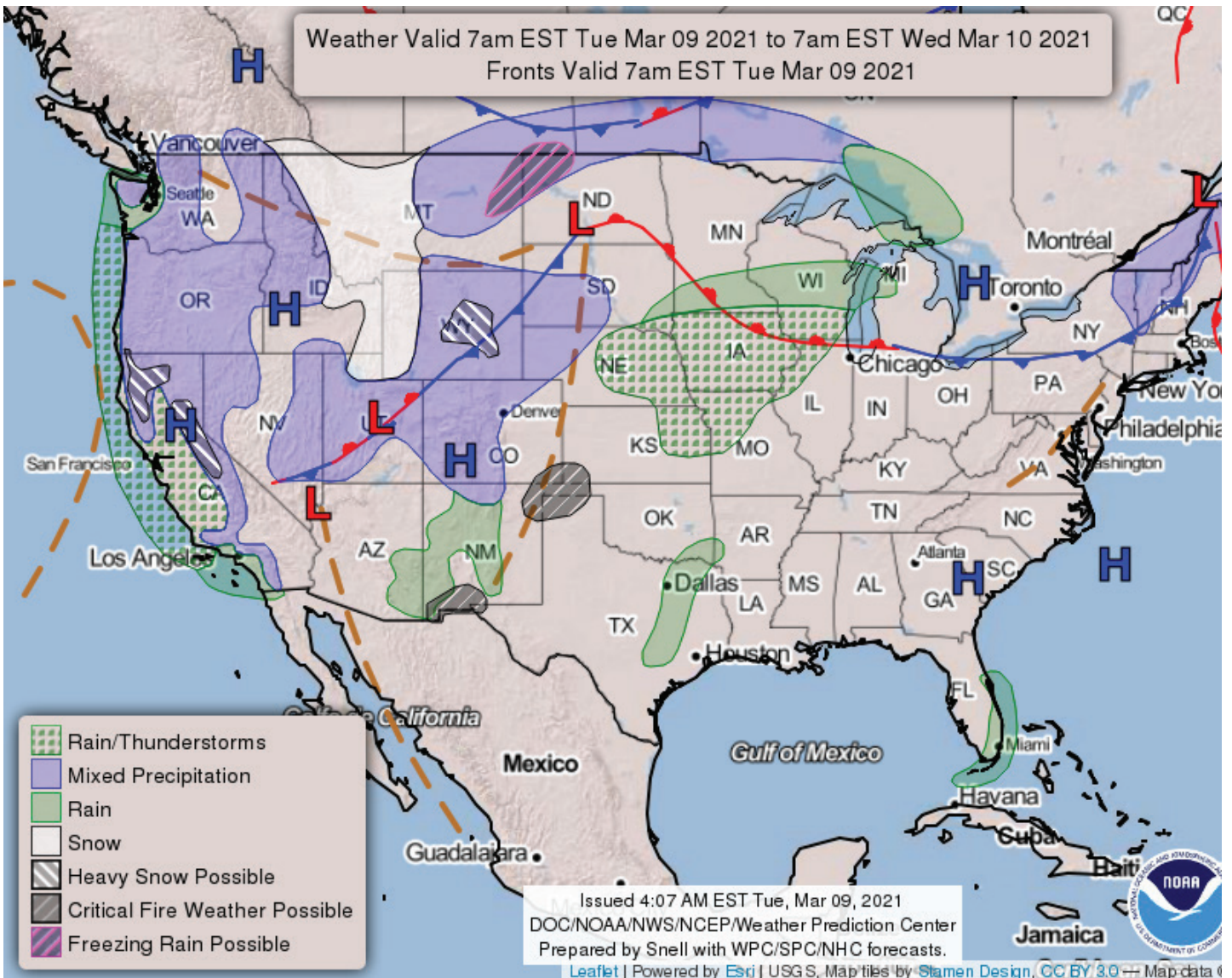
Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 16 of 86

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 62 °F at 3:09 PM (RECORD HIGH)
Low Temp: 30 °F at 5:23 AM
Wind: 28 mph at 9:46 PM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 64° in 1936
Record Low: -20° in 1951
Average High: 36°F
Average Low: 17°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.23
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.25
Precip Year to Date: 0.18
Sunset Tonight: 6:32 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:55 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 17 of 86



DARK VALLEYS AND DEATH'S SHADOW

It takes the darkness and fear of the night to bring out the brilliance and beauty of the stars. When we face the fear of the unknown, we often find the grace of God. "Though I walk through," David said, "the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil because You are with me!"

We are all joyfully aware of God's presence when days are filled with sunshine and warmth. All of us, however, have at one time or another, entered into valleys that are filled with ill-defined shadows that we find frightening and foreboding. We look for a light to shine over the rim of the mountain to give us the assurance that there is hope. Yet, it is because of those days of sunshine and warmth that David reminds us to remember that God is also with us when all is not well, and the light that faithfully guided us fades.

There are times when our "valley" may take the form of suffering. When it does, we must not forget that Jesus also suffered. So we know that He understands our suffering and is with us. When we face the fear and darkness of the unknown, we often discover the grace of God as Jesus did on the cross. And when we feel abandoned and alone, we must not forget that those who He spent three years training to be His disciples forsook Him. And remember – when He was laid to rest, it was in someone else's tomb.

Our Savior has walked through every "dark valley" that we will ever have. He understands our grief. Now, He is in heaven with His Father and when we go to Him in prayer with our needs, we have the assurance that He understands our needs because He was there before us, understands from experience what we are facing, and will deliver

Prayer: We are blest, Father, by Your presence and protection as we pass through life's dark valleys, knowing that as Your Father saved You, You will save us. In His Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23:4

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 18 of 86

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

Kreuser leads N. Dakota St. past S. Dakota 79-75 in Summit

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Rocky Kreuser had 20 points as third-seeded North Dakota State narrowly beat second-seeded South Dakota 79-75 in the Summit League Conference Tourney semifinals on Monday night.

The Bison will face fourth-seeded Oral Roberts in Tuesday's championship game.

Kreuser made 10 of 11 free throws. He added nine rebounds.

Sam Griesel had 16 points for North Dakota State (15-11). Tyree Eady added 14 points and six rebounds.

Stanley Umude had 23 points and nine rebounds for the Coyotes (14-11). Xavier Fuller added 19 points. Tasos Kamateros had 14 points.

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

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Obanor wins it at buzzer, Oral Roberts beats SDSU in Summit

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Kareem Thompson scored a season-high 22 points and Kevin Obanor tipped in a miss at the buzzer as Oral Roberts edged past South Dakota State 90-88 in the semifinals of the Summit League Conference tournament on Monday night.

Max Abmas had 18 points and 10 assists for Oral Roberts (15-10). Obanor finished with 14 points and Carlos Jurgens had 13. Thompson made 4 of 6 3-pointers.

Baylor Scheierman scored a career-high 28 points plus nine rebounds and seven assists for the Jackrabbits (16-7). Douglas Wilson added 20 points and nine rebounds, and Matt Dentlinger had 12 points and seven rebounds.

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

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Noem to sign ban on transgender girls from female sports

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Monday said she will sign a bill passed by the Legislature to bar transgender girls and women from participating in female sports leagues.

However, whether it ultimately takes permanent effect in the state will likely be decided in federal court. No transgender girl currently plays in a female high school sports league in South Dakota, according to the high school athletics association.

"I'm excited to sign this bill very soon," Noem tweeted minutes after it passed in the Senate. She described its passage as a celebration of International Women's Day and a defense of women's sports.

While proponents cast it as a way to "promote fairness in women's sports," Republican Sen. V.J. Smith labeled it as a "political statement" that would drag the state into a looming legal battle as lawmakers in 20 states weigh similar legislation.

"The decision is going to be made in federal court," said Smith. "It's not going to be made in the state senate of South Dakota."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 20 of 86

Only one state, Idaho, has enacted a law curtailing trans students' sports participation, and that 2020 measure is blocked by a court ruling.

A Senate committee dominated by Republicans last week had rejected the bill. Senators reasoned that its passage would bring up a broad range of problems for the state — from the NCAA potentially shying away from hosting tournaments, to legal challenges for discrimination and the administrative burden of collecting proof of every high school athlete's sex at birth.

But other Republican lawmakers revived the bill on the Senate floor and passed it Monday — the final day to pass such proposals during the legislative session. Proponents argued that allowing transgender women and girls to play in female sports leagues disadvantages other women and girls.

The state high school activities association, which opposed the bill, currently evaluates applications from transgender girls on a case-by-case basis. The association said its process was the best way to support transgender students while also maintaining competitive fairness. Only one transgender girl, who has since graduated, has played in girls' leagues in the state.

But proponents of the bill cast a vision of a future in which girls' and women's sports are completely altered by the presence of their transgender peers.

"My heart breaks for future generations. The decision you make today will affect future generations," said Republican Sen. Maggie Sutton, who sponsored the bill in the Senate. "I'm asking you today to protect women's sports."

Meanwhile, opponents worried about the devastating effects the bill's passage could have for transgender people in the state.

"It's about erasing and excluding trans people from participation in all aspects of public life," said Jett Jonelis, the advocacy manager for the ACLU of South Dakota.

Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba agreed. He read a letter from a friend who is a transgender man during the Senate debate, describing the psychological challenges many transgender people face.

"To me, this looks an awful lot like bullying," Nesiba said.

Resolution to halt Noem's agency merger fails in Senate

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — An effort to halt Gov. Kristi Noem from merging government agencies that oversee agriculture and the environment narrowly failed in the Senate on Monday.

Senate Democratic leader Troy Heinert introduced a resolution that would have stopped the merger of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. Noem has billed the new Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources as a "one-stop" shop for farmers and ranchers that would save the state about \$450,000 by eliminating five positions.

But Heinert argued that oversight should remain separated, both to protect the environment and best serve farmers and ranchers.

"This could change the trajectory of ag and the environment for generations to come," he said.

A number of Republicans joined Heinert's effort, but it failed by a single vote. The merger is set to take effect in April.

Noem's merger had split the two largest groups representing farmers. The South Dakota Farm Bureau supported it, while the South Dakota Farmers Union opposed it.

Noem's proposal to limit conservation officers clears Senate

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate on Monday passed a bill backed by Gov. Kristi Noem that would prevent conservation officers from entering private property without permission.

The bill had suffered an initial setback in the Senate after a committee unanimously rejected it. One powerful Republican, Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, had called it "a slap in the face of conservation officers." But at Noem's urging, Republicans revived the bill on the Senate floor and passed it Monday — the last possible day to approve such bills this legislative session.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 21 of 86

"Our policy today is that our conservation officers don't go onto private land unless they have permission, a reasonable suspicion or a warrant," the governor said at a news conference last week. "I would like to see that in statute to be consistent."

While the governor cast the bill as a way to respect private property rights and foster a working relationship between conservation officers and property owners, opponents described it as a "poacher's bill" that would make it more difficult to catch people who are illegally hunting or fishing.

Senate Republican leader Gary Cammack, a key supporter of the proposal, amended the bill to strike a section that barred courts from using evidence that conservation officers had gathered while they were in violation of the proposed law.

But Republican Sen. Arthur Rusch, who opposed the bill in committee, said the amendment did not improve the bill and would cause problems for courts deciding how to punish people who hunt or fish illegally on private land where conservation officers did not have permission to enter.

"It just ends up being a mess," Rusch said.

The House and Senate have passed different versions of the same bill, meaning lawmakers must negotiate which bill to send to the governor.

Pair involved in 3-hour standoff facing federal gun charges

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A western South Dakota couple that engaged in a standoff with federal agents last week is facing weapons charges.

Michael Blood and Carmen Mann agreed to surrender after holding law enforcement at bay for three hours at Blood's home a few miles west of Ellsworth Air Force Base in Meade County. Federal agents found firearms, methamphetamine and marijuana at the house.

Blood, 57, is charged with three counts, including being a prohibited person in possession of a firearm for allegedly having guns while being a drug user, according to the federal complaint. Mann is charged with being a prohibited person in possession of a firearm for allegedly having a revolver after being convicted of a felony.

Both of them have pleaded not guilty, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives Special Agent Riley Cook testified at a detention hearing for Mann Monday that the couple agreed to give up after speaking with ATF crisis negotiators. He said they have a history of criminal convictions and fleeing from police.

Mann's attorney, Connor Duffy, said during the hearing that his client was never seen holding a gun. Mann said she was scared for her life and for her husband.

25 companies split \$23.5M in South Dakota COVID-19 funding

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — More than \$23.5 million in COVID-19 relief funds was split up among 25 applicants for the first two rounds of the South Dakota small business grant program, leaving some proprietors to question the process.

The grant program is a primary payout of Republican Gov. Kristi Noem's plan to spend \$1.25 billion in federal coronavirus money to help offset losses due to the pandemic. Businesses that applied for the grants had to show there was at least a 25% reduction in business, said Colin Keeler, director of financial systems for the South Dakota Bureau of Finance and Management.

Those companies in the top 25 through the first and second rounds of distribution consisted mostly of hospitality, agriculture and commercial real estate and construction businesses, the Argus Leader reported.

Fifteen businesses received \$1 million in funding, after Noem raised the maximum benefit from \$100,000 to \$500,000 per round. Some businesses received more because they have several locations, such as Lester Hospitality, which received over \$2 million between its three businesses.

Some small businesses argue they were shortchanged. Eastway Bowl in Sioux Falls didn't qualify for the first round of grants, and owner Josh Thomas said he still doesn't know why. Despite owning the bowling alley and the separate bar and lounge inside the facility, Thomas received \$26,475, shaping up to a

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 22 of 86

fraction of his losses this year.

"From what we were told, we thought we'd be getting around \$100,000, but it only came up for a little bit for Eastway at the end and nothing for our bar," Thomas said. "That was surprising for us, because I know a lot of other businesses that showed less losses but received more grant money."

Grant awards ranged from \$1 million to \$538, according to recent data. The average amount paid out for businesses not in the top 25 was \$76,449; the median was \$29,818.

The review of all applications was completed in January, but there was still about \$3.2 million in grant money to be distributed as of March 1. That remaining money will be given out among 52 businesses.

South Dakota hemp backers hopeful about planting this year

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota hemp farmers are gearing up for the growing season while lawmakers tinker with a bill that would allow them to plant a crop this year.

A key change to the original bill would permit year-round applications to grow, rather than a 60-day window. Another amendment lowers the entry barrier of five outdoor acres to half an acre and allows for indoor commercial greenhouses.

"The bill has many good changes for the industry," said Rep. Caleb Finck, of Tripp, who introduced the legislation.

The House passed the original version 58-11 and the Senate passed the amended version 27-6. Finck is optimistic that the House will approve the changes and that Gov. Kristi Noem will sign it.

The measure contains an emergency clause, which means it goes into effect immediately rather than the usual July 1 start date, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

Derrick Dohmann, sales manager for Horizon Hemp Seeds in Willow Lake and vice president of the South Dakota Industrial Hemp Association, said dropping the 60-day application limit would provide a tremendous boost to the state's launch of the crop.

"For most farmers, they were a bit rushed," he said. "They were uncertain or weren't thinking about planting hemp in December."

A North Dakota native, Dohmann has been working during the past five years with producers and companies in other states and Canada. The experience, including interactions with growers in North Dakota and Minnesota during the past two growing seasons, has provided valuable knowledge and contacts about the crop and industry, he said.

"We're working to help more producers understand hemp and get into the business. During this first year, I think many of them are waiting to see how things turn out," he said. "North Dakota started in 2015, so they have been growing (hemp) for six seasons, and up in Canada, they have been working on it for 20 years."

Russia to make Sputnik V vaccine in Italy; a 1st in EU

MILAN (AP) — Russia has signed a deal to produce its Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in Italy, the first contract in the European Union, the Italian Russian Chamber of Commerce announced Tuesday.

The deal was signed with Adienne Srl, the Italian subsidiary of a Swiss-based pharmaceutical company, and Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund. Production is set to start in July and produce 10 million doses this year.

"The innovative production process will help create new jobs and allow Italy to control the entire production of the compound," the chamber said in a statement. Financial terms were not released.

Russian authorities are working on 20 similar collaborations in Europe and the Sputnik V vaccine has been registered in 45 nations worldwide, the group said.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund that bankrolled the vaccine and markets it abroad has said that the production of Sputnik V will span several countries, including India, South Korea, Brazil, China, Turkey, Iran, as well as Belarus and Kazakhstan. Some manufacturers abroad have produced trial batches of the Russian vaccine, but there are few indications they have so far produced any large amounts of the shot.

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

Provincial Italian hospital overrun by virus variant

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

CHIARI, Italy (AP) — The 160-bed hospital in the Po River Valley town of Chiari has no more room for patients stricken with the highly contagious variant of COVID-19 first identified in Britain that has put hospitals in Italy's northern Brescia province on high alert.

That history was repeating itself one year after Lombardy became the epicenter of Italy's pandemic was a sickening realization for Dr. Gabriele Zanolini, who runs the COVID ward in the M. Mellini Hospital in the once-walled city that maintains its medieval circular street pattern.

"You know that there are patients in the emergency room, and you don't know where to put them," Zanolini told The Associated Press.

"This for me is anguish, not to be able to respond to people who need to be treated. The most difficult moment is to find ourselves again in a state of emergency, after so much time."

The U.K. variant surge has filled 90% of hospital beds in Brescia province, bordering both Veneto and Emilia-Romagna regions, as Italy crossed the grim threshold of 100,000 pandemic dead on Monday and marks the one-year anniversary Wednesday of Italy's draconian lockdown, the first in the West.

While Zanolini was able to offer a safety valve to hard-hit Bergamo during last spring's deadly surge, and to Milan and Varese in the fall, now he must ask hospitals elsewhere in the region to take virus patients he himself cannot admit.

New measures are again being considered in Rome to tamp down the increase in new cases attributed to virus variants, including also those identified in South Africa and Brazil. With the U.K. variant prevalent in Italy and racing from school age children and adolescents through families, Lombardy has again put all schools on distance learning, as have several regions in the south where the health care system is more fragile.

In this surge, patients in the Chiari hospital COVID ward are increasingly family members — husbands and wives, fathers and sons — Zanolini said. And unlike previous spikes, the average age has dropped, with many of the virus patients needing breathing aid between 45 and 55 years of age. "We have seen, however, that they respond well to treatment," Zanolini said of the younger patients, noting that mortality remains high among the elderly.

Despite months of renewed restrictions starting in October, Italy's death toll remains stubbornly high — several hundred a day. It topped 100,000 this week, the second-highest in Europe after Britain.

Italy's new premier, Mario Draghi, is focusing on vaccines to help the country emerge from pandemic, pledging in a video message this week to intensify the campaign significantly in the coming weeks.

"Everyone must do his part to contain this spread of this virus," Draghi said Tuesday. "But above all, the government must do its part. Rather, it must try to do more every day. The pandemic is not yet defeated."

The vaccine is the only way out, Zanolini concurs. He sees all around him that people have grown weary of the restrictions, and are getting relaxed — too relaxed — with gatherings, distancing and masks.

"We are worried because we don't see an end. It seems like the tunnel is still very long," Zanolini said. "We find ourselves hit by another wave, and we are very tired."

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

The Latest: Hungary sets virus records for hospitals, deaths

By The Associated Press undefined

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 24 of 86

BUDAPEST— Hungary set records Tuesday for the number of COVID-19 patients being treated in Hungarian hospitals and the number of new daily virus deaths amid a powerful surge in cases.

Nearly 350 people in Hungary were hospitalized with the virus in the last 24 hours, bringing the number of hospitalizations on Tuesday to 8,270, breaking the previous record of 8,045 set on Dec. 8. The number of patients on ventilators also set a new record with 833. Health care experts say that could within days reach the threshold of 1,000, the maximum number of critical patients the country's health system can handle.

Another grim milestone was reached Tuesday as the total number of COVID-19 deaths in Hungary increased by 158 to more than 16,000, the most in a single day since before Christmas.

A new round of lockdown measures went into effect in Hungary on Monday requiring most shops to close for two weeks. Kindergartens and primary schools have also been closed until April 7.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- Gibraltar on track to inoculate all over 16 and Spanish cross-border workers by March, ponders vaccine passport to boost tourism
- CDC advice for U.S. residents: Fully-vaccinated people can gather without masks
- The U.S. COVID-19 bill will deliver big health insurance savings for many Americans
- Dutch prime minister extends country's pandemic lockdown
- The long game: The coronavirus pandemic changed the way we play, watch, cheer.

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

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg threatened Tuesday to impose new nationwide coronavirus restrictions, including closing amusement parks and gyms and banning the sale of alcohol if an increase in new cases is not brought down.

"We still have a steep hill ahead of us," Solberg said, calling "for one last effort. That we together go up this hill and hope that that this time we finally manage to reach the top."

In an address to parliament, she urged her countrymen to stay home for the Easter break in early April.

She vowed that Norway, which has had 74,940 cases and 632 coronavirus deaths, "will crack down on local outbreaks even faster. She said a year ago the Scandinavian country "introduced the most intrusive measures in peacetime."

"If we succeed (now), there will be no need for new national measures. If we fail, we must tighten quickly," she said.

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — New Zealand has opened its first large vaccination clinic as it scales up efforts to protect people from the coronavirus.

The clinic in south Auckland will initially target household members of border workers. New Zealand has stamped out community spread of the virus and considers border workers and their families the most vulnerable to catching the disease from infectious travelers.

Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield said initially about 150 people a day will get vaccinated at the clinic, although the numbers will be rapidly increased. Health officials plan to open two more clinics in Auckland over the next few weeks.

"It doesn't hurt, and it is important for everybody to get it," said Denise Fogasavai, the sister of an Air New Zealand employee who has already been vaccinated.

New Zealand plans to use the Pfizer vaccine for all inoculations and hopes to complete its vaccination program this year.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- New Mexico is clearing the way for schools to reopen next month as vaccine

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 25 of 86

eligibility is expanding to include shots for all teachers and other educators.

State education officials announced Monday that five-day a week in-class programs would be open to those who want them. Districts also will be required to provide virtual learning options for students who opt out.

As part of the vaccination effort, the state plans to get teachers their first shots by the end of March.

The state is making the move as part of a directive by the Biden administration. State officials have acknowledged that meeting the goal depends on the federal government increasing vaccine shipments.

CHEYANNE, Wyo. — Wyoming Gov. Mark Gordon says the state will join a handful of others that have lifted mask-wearing mandates to limit the spread of the coronavirus. The changes take effect March 16.

Also being lifted are requirements for bars, restaurants, theaters and gyms, where employees must wear masks and customers not seated in small groups have to keep 6 feet apart.

Gordon cites Wyoming's declining number of COVID-19 cases and its success in distributing vaccines as reasons to lift the restrictions.

The statewide order in place since December was set to expire next week. States including Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota and Texas also have lifted mask mandates.

HELSINKI — Estonia's government has decided on further coronavirus restrictions due to a rapid rise in cases, especially the variant first detected in Britain, and the Baltic country will enter a lockdown Thursday.

Prime Minister Kaja Kallas unveiled the new measures in an interview with the Estonian public broadcaster ERR saying "the situation with COVID-19 in Estonia is extremely critical."

Kallas said Estonia's pandemic situation needs to be addressed quickly to avoid further escalation and hence "we have decided to lock the country in as much as possible."

With exception of grocery and other essential stores such as pharmacies, all stores and restaurants throughout Estonia are required to remain closed and all indoor sport activities cease as of Thursday. Restaurants will, however, be able to serve food for take-away and drive-in customers.

Kallas said the new restrictions would be in place for a minimum of one month.

The nation of 1.3 million has seen a rapidly increasing number of COVID-19 cases in the past few weeks. The country on Monday reported 1,181 new confirmed cases putting total tally to over 76,183 cases with 667 deaths.

HONOLULU — Hawaii has detected a new COVID-19 variant in the islands, one that first emerged in South Africa.

The state Department of Health said Monday the virus, which has technical name B.1.351 was found in an Oahu resident with no travel history.

Some tests suggest the variant may be less susceptible to antibody drugs or antibody-rich blood from COVID-19 survivors.

Acting State Epidemiologist Sarah Kemble said in a statement that a study conducted in South Africa, where the variant was predominant, showed that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was effective in preventing serious disease requiring hospitalization and in preventing death.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that as of Sunday, 81 cases of the South African variant have been detected in 19 states and Washington, D.C.

Hawaii has already detected eight cases of the U.K. or B.1.1.7 variant, including two more announced Monday in an Oahu resident who traveled to the U.S. mainland and a household contact of that person.

HARTFORD, Conn. — The first Connecticut resident to be diagnosed with COVID-19 says he is still coping with health problems one year later, but the experience has brought a new optimism to his life.

Chris Tillet, a former Wilton, Connecticut, resident, tested positive for COVID-19 on March 8, 2020, and spent three weeks at Danbury Hospital, including 10 days in a coma and on a ventilator. Doctors used

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 26 of 86

experimental treatments, including anti-malaria and anti-HIV drugs, in efforts to save his life.

Tillett, who was 45 at the time, a husband and father of 4-month-old twin boys, got sick after returning from a conference in California.

"This has been a tough year," Tillett, who now lives in Virginia, told WVIT-TV. "I'm enjoying little aspects of life. Even when things go bad, I just choose to laugh at it now instead of letting it get me angry and upset."

Tillett told Connecticut Public Radio he continues to experience muscle pain, stiffness and swelling in his legs. He also had to begin taking blood pressure medication and red spots still cover his feet.

GENEVA — A senior World Health Organization official said that so-called "vaccine passports" for COVID-19 should not be used for international travel because of numerous concerns, including ethical considerations that coronavirus vaccines are not easily available globally.

At a press briefing on Monday, WHO emergencies chief Dr. Michael Ryan said there are "real practical and ethical considerations" for countries considering using vaccine certification as a condition for travel, adding the U.N. health agency advises against it for now.

"Vaccination is just not available enough around the world and is not available certainly on an equitable basis," Ryan said. WHO has previously noted that it's still unknown how long immunity lasts from the numerous licensed COVID-19 vaccines and that data are still being collected.

Ryan also noted the strategy might be unfair to people who cannot be vaccinated for certain reasons and that requiring vaccine passports might allow "inequity and unfairness (to) be further branded into the system."

GENEVA — One of the Oxford University scientists who helped develop AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine disputed that simply making intellectual property rights freely available would significantly widen access to vaccines.

Agencies, including the World Health Organization, have called for pharmaceuticals to waive patent rights.

At a press briefing on Monday, Sarah Gilbert of Oxford University said freely available IP rights would not get the world "anywhere close to solving this problem" of limited vaccines, saying that "it's not just the rights to the technology that's needed." Gilbert said other essential technical goods were needed, including cell banks and testing reagents.

Last year, WHO began a patent pool that asked companies to share their COVID-19 technology and know how for vaccines, treatments and diagnostics. Not a single company has yet joined and Gilbert said she had never heard of the initiative, despite Oxford University's pledge to make its vaccine available to countries globally.

MILAN — Italy surpassed 100,000 dead in the pandemic, a year after it became the first country in Europe to go on lockdown in a bid to stop the spread of COVID-19.

The Italian Health Ministry on Monday said 318 people had died in the last 24 hours, bringing the total to 100,103, the second highest in Europe after Britain.

Italy recorded its first virus death on Feb. 21, 2020, when 78-year-old retired roofer Antonio Trevisan from a winemaking town west of Venice who had been hospitalized with heart issues died.

Italy's total virus cases surpassed 3 million last week, with a new surge powered by the highly contagious variant that was first identified in Britain.

Nearly 14,000 new positives were recorded Monday as the number of people in ICUs rose to 2,700 -- 95 more than a day earlier. Italy imposed a draconian nationwide lockdown last March 9, which continued for seven weeks and included a shutdown of all non-essential manufacturing.

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden will deliver his first primetime address to speak to the nation on Thursday to mark the one-year anniversary of COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday that Biden would note the sacrifices and losses suf-

ferred by Americans during the last 12 months. More than 525,000 Americans have died from the coronavirus.

It was March 11, 2020 when the pandemic hit home for many Americans and lockdowns began. That was the night the NBA suspended play, actor Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson announced they had tested positive and then-President Donald Trump addressed the nation.

The anniversary comes as the administration has bolstered vaccine supply, and some states have begun reopening even as worries remain about virus variants.

Myanmar protesters venture out despite police violence

MANDALAY, Myanmar (AP) — About a thousand demonstrators against last month's military seizure of power in Myanmar emerged cautiously Tuesday onto the streets of the country's second-biggest city, those in the vanguard carrying homemade shields bearing images of the three-fingered salute, the movement's symbol of defiance.

The protest in Mandalay took place even though security forces have shown little reluctance to use lethal force to break up crowds. Those who marched gathered for just a few minutes before dispersing to avoid a possible confrontation with riot police. Another group made a mobile protest, driving through the streets on motorbikes.

The protesters have adapted their tactics in response to escalating violence from security forces, including the firing of live ammunition at crowds. The government's crackdown has left more than 50 protesters dead but has failed to slow the widespread protests against the Feb. 1 coup that ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

In what has become a daily occurrence, protest marches were held Tuesday in cities and towns across the country, according to reports by local news media and on social media.

Protests occurred in Ye, a town in Mon State in southern Myanmar; Kyaukpadaung, a town in central Myanmar; Mohnyin, a town in Kachin State in the north; and Myeik Taung, in the southeast. The authorities reportedly used force in each case.

Armed police carried out night patrols on Monday, yelling abuse, firing at buildings and making targeted arrests. The tactic appears to be aimed at spreading fear and disrupting sleep in order to weaken the resolve of those opposed to the army's takeover.

One video recorded Monday night in a district of Yangon, the country's biggest city, shows more than 20 police swarming down a street, around a corner and then opening fire. They return, point up at a window or balcony overlooking them and fire once again.

Their actions came during a dramatic night when thousands of residents broke the 8 p.m. curfew to show support for a group of protesters who had been trapped by police in an enclave of streets.

They came out of their homes, sang songs against the coup and banged pots, pans and other implements together, partly in the hope of diverting police from the hunted protesters, estimated to number 200.

Witnesses said several dozen of those who had sought shelter in the city's Sanchaung neighborhood were arrested, but others made their way home at dawn, several hours after police withdrew from the area.

Nighttime hours have become increasingly dangerous. Police and army units routinely range through neighborhoods, shooting randomly to intimidate residents and making targeted arrests.

According to the Myanmar-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, more than 1,850 people have been arrested in connection with the coup. Dozens of journalists have been arrested, including Thein Zaw of The Associated Press, who has been charged under a public order law that carries a penalty of up to three years in prison.

The military government on Monday imposed a major curb on media coverage of the crisis. It announced that the licenses of five local media outlets — Mizzima, DVB, Khit Thit Media, Myanmar Now and 7Day News — had been canceled.

"These media companies are no longer allowed to broadcast or write or give information by using any kind of media platform or using any media technology," it said on state broadcaster MRTV.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 28 of 86

All five had been offering extensive coverage of the protests, often with livestreaming video online. The offices of Myanmar Now were raided by the authorities on Monday before the measure was announced.

DVB -- short for Democratic Voice of Burma — said it was not surprised by the cancellation and would continue broadcasting on satellite TV and online.

“We worry for the safety of our reporters and our staff, but in the current uprising, the whole country has become citizen journalists and there is no way for military authorities to shut the information flow,” Executive Director Aye Chan Naing told AP.

The New York-based group Human Rights Watch said the government action was part of a larger assault on freedom of the press.

“By stripping five independent media outlets of their licenses to operate, the Myanmar military junta is resorting to the tactics of its dictatorial past to suppress information,” said the group’s deputy Asia director, Phil Robertson.

The Latest: Ex-Australian leader urges changing royal ties

LONDON (AP) — The latest on Oprah Winfrey’s interview with Meghan and Harry, their first since stepping away from royal life.

SYDNEY — Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said the television interview with Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, bolstered his argument for Australia severing its constitutional ties to the British monarchy.

Turnbull met the couple in April 2018 four months before he was replaced by the current Prime Minister Scott Morrison in an internal power struggle.

“It’s clearly an unhappy family or at least Meghan and Harry are unhappy. It seems very sad,” Turnbull told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

“After the end of the queen’s reign, that is the time for us to say: OK, we’ve passed that watershed. Do we really want to have whoever happens to be the head of state of -- the king or queen of the U.K., automatically our head of state?” Turnbull added.

Britain’s monarch is Australia’s head of state.

Turnbull was a leading advocate for Australia selecting an Australian citizen as its head of state when he was chairman of the Australian Republican Movement from 1993 to 2000.

A referendum on Australia becoming a republic was defeated in 1999, despite opinion polls showing that most Australians believed that their country should have an Australian head of state.

Many advocates of an Australian republic want a U.S. system where the president is popularly elected rather than serving in a figure-head role as proposed in 1999.

Morrison was not questioned about the royal interview during a press conference on Tuesday.

LOS ANGELES — Oprah Winfrey’s explosive interview with Prince Harry and Meghan reached an estimated 17.1 million viewers in the United States on Sunday.

That’s according to preliminary numbers from the Nielsen company. Winfrey guided the two as they discussed racism and dysfunction inside the royal family in a two-hour special on CBS.

Nielsen said it had the largest audience for any prime-time entertainment special so far this television season.

In the interview, Meghan said she considered suicide, while Harry said he and his family were “trapped” in an oppressive institution.

WASHINGTON — The White House is emphasizing America’s “special partnership” with the U.K. government in the wake of the bombshell interview in which Prince Harry and Meghan alleged racism and widespread misconduct within the royal family.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki was asked Monday if, given their relationship with Harry and

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 29 of 86

Meghan, President Joe Biden and his wife Jill had any reaction to the interview. She said that Meghan's decision to speak about her struggles with mental health "takes courage" and said "that's certainly something the president believes in." But she said she wouldn't offer additional comment on the situation "given these are private citizens, sharing their own story and their own struggles."

Psaki added that the U.S. has "a strong and abiding relationship with the British people and a special partnership with the government of the United Kingdom on a range of issues, and that will continue."

LONDON — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is refusing to comment on the explosive allegations of racism and dysfunction inside the royal family made by Prince Harry and Meghan in a television interview.

Asked about the interview at a coronavirus news conference, Johnson said he had "always had the highest admiration for the queen and the unifying role that she plays in our country and across the Commonwealth."

But he said "when it comes to matters to do with the royal family the right thing for a prime minister to say is nothing."

In contrast, Keir Starmer, leader of the main opposition Labour Party, says the palace has to take the allegations seriously.

"The issues that Meghan has raised of racism and mental health are really serious issues," he said. "It is a reminder that too many people experience racism in 21st-century Britain."

7 a.m.

LOS ANGELES — Oprah Winfrey has revealed that while Harry would not say who in the royal family made comments about his son's skin color, he did share who hadn't.

Appearing Monday on "CBS This Morning," Winfrey said Harry told her neither his grandmother, Queen Elizabeth II, nor his grandfather, Prince Philip, were part of conversations about Archie's skin tone.

"He did not share the identity with me, but he wanted to make sure I knew and if I had the opportunity to share it that it was not his grandmother nor his grandfather," Winfrey said.

In her bombshell interview which aired Sunday, Meghan described that when she was first pregnant with son Archie, there were "concerns and conversations about how dark his skin might be when he's born."

The Duchess of Sussex declined to say who had this conversation with Harry that he relayed to her, saying revealing their name would be "very damaging."

LOS ANGELES — Tennis star Serena Williams says she's "proud" of Meghan Markle following her interview with Oprah Winfrey.

Williams called Meghan "my selfless friend" in an Instagram post after the sit-down aired Sunday night in the U.S. praising the Duchess of Sussex as "brave."

"I know it is never easy," Williams said in the caption. "You are strong- both you and Harry."

Meghan revealed in the interview that she experienced suicidal thoughts after joining the royal family. She also said there were concerns within the palace while she was pregnant with son Archie about how dark his skin might be.

Williams said Meghan's words "illustrate the pain and cruelty" Meghan has experienced.

"I know first hand the sexism and racism institutions and the media use to vilify women and people of color to minimize us, to break us down and demonize us," Williams wrote. "The mental health consequences of systemic oppression and victimization are devastating, isolating and all too often lethal."

Williams said she wants her daughter, Meghan's daughter and "your daughter," referring to readers, "to live in a society that is driven by respect."

AUCKLAND, New Zealand — New Zealand's prime minister says the country is unlikely to become a republic anytime soon or otherwise break from observing Britain's Queen Elizabeth II as head of state.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was asked by a reporter whether the unflattering picture of the British royal family painted by Harry and Meghan had given her pause about New Zealand's constitutional ties to Britain.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 30 of 86

"I've said before that I've not sensed an appetite from New Zealanders for significant change in our constitutional arrangements, and I don't expect that's likely to change quickly," she said.

Asked whether Harry and Meghan had ever inquired about living in New Zealand, Ardern said they hadn't in any official capacity, as far as she was aware.

And asked about her personal friendship with Meghan since the couple toured the country in 2018, Ardern said she had kept in touch.

"But ultimately, the matters that are being canvassed here I see as for Meghan and Harry to respond to directly. These are matters about their personal lives and their personal decisions, and I don't think it deserves a commentary from anyone else," she said.

LOS ANGELES — Prince Harry says he was "trapped" in the royal family before Meghan helped free him.

Oprah Winfrey asked Harry in their interview airing Sunday night whether he would have stepped down from his royal duties if he had never met Meghan.

"I wouldn't have been able to," the Duke of Sussex replied, "because I myself was trapped as well" until "the moment that I met Meg."

Meghan said allegations that the couple's departure was due to her scheming made no sense.

"I left my career, my life. I left everything because I love him," she said. "Our plan was to do this forever."

Harry said "we did everything we did to make it work" and would never have left had the palace been supportive of Meghan.

Harry also said his family cut him off financially in early 2020 after they announced they were eschewing their duties, and that they were only able to depart because of the money left him by his mother, the late Princess Diana.

Harry says Diana would have been "very angry at how this has played out, and sad. But ultimately, all she'd ever want is for us to be happy."

LOS ANGELES — Meghan and Harry say their second child is a girl.

The two made the revelation in their interview with Oprah Winfrey that aired on Sunday night, a rare positive moment in a conversation that dwelt mostly on their struggles within the royal family.

Their first child, son Archie, turns 2 in May.

Harry said "to have a boy and then a girl, what more can you ask for? But now we've got our family. We've got the four of us and our two dogs."

Harry, wearing a gray suit as he sat next to his wife at a distance from Winfrey, joined the interview after Meghan talked to Winfrey alone. He denied blindsiding the queen with the news that he and Meghan were stepping down from their royal duties, saying it was preceded by several conversations.

"I've never blindsided my grandmother," Harry said. "I have too much respect for her."

He did however say that his father, Prince Charles, has stopped taking his calls.

LOS ANGELES — Meghan Markle told Oprah Winfrey that she had suicidal thoughts after marrying Prince Harry, and the palace prevented her from getting help.

Meghan told Winfrey in the interview airing Sunday night that she "just didn't see a solution" to the mental suffering she had experienced since joining the royal family and that she told Harry she "didn't want to be alive anymore."

She said she went to a senior royal staffer and said she needed to get help for her mental health, but was told it would be bad for the family if she did.

She described the moment as a breaking point leading to her and Harry stepping aside from their royal duties.

Meghan said she "wasn't planning to say anything shocking" during the interview, "I'm just telling you what happened."

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Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 31 of 86

LOS ANGELES — Meghan Markle told Oprah Winfrey that she realized soon after marrying Prince Harry that she learned that the institution of the royal family would not protect her.

In their pre-taped interview on Sunday night, Meghan told Winfrey that “not only was I not being protected, but they were willing to lie to protect other members of the family, but they weren’t willing to tell the truth to protect me and my husband.” She did not give specific examples.

She said when she was first pregnant with son Archie, there were “concerns and conversations about how dark his skin might be when he’s born.” The statement led Winfrey to ask “What,” incredulously and sit in silence for a moment.

Meghan declined to say who had this conversation with Harry that he relayed to her, saying revealing their name would be “very damaging.”

Meghan also said she was stunned when she was told he would not be a prince and would not receive security from the palace.

Meghan said she did not worry about being a divorced, mixed-race American actress entering the British royal family, but later she “thought about it because they made me think about it.”

Meghan said it was not so much the royal family members themselves who treated her this way, but the people behind the institution.

She emphasized that the queen herself “has always been wonderful to me.”

EXPLAINER: Myanmar media defiant as junta cracks down

By ELAINE KURTENBACH Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Myanmar’s military-controlled government is seeking to suppress media coverage of protests against its seizure of power as journalists and ordinary citizens strive to inform people inside and outside of the country about what is happening.

Authorities on Monday canceled the licenses of five local media outlets that had been offering extensive coverage of the protests, attempting to fully roll back such freedoms a decade after the country began its faltering transition toward democracy.

The government has detained dozens of journalists since the Feb. 1 coup, including Thein Zaw of The Associated Press.

The crackdown comes as the military has escalated violence against mass protests. Reports by independent media are still providing vital information about arrests and shootings by troops in cities across Myanmar. And they’re using other platforms to distribute their reports such as social media.

Here’s a look at the media situation in Myanmar:

HOW IS THE GOVERNMENT SUPPRESSING NEWS?

Five local outlets — Mizzima, DVB, Khit Thit Media, Myanmar Now and 7Day News — were banned from broadcasting or providing any information on any media platform or using any technology after their licenses were canceled, state broadcaster MRTV reported. All five had covered the protests extensively and often livestreamed video. Myanmar Now, an independent news service, reported that police broke down the door of its office Monday and seized computers, printers and parts of the newsroom’s data server. It cited unnamed witnesses and showed a photo of CCTV footage. But it said the office had been evacuated in late January. The government has arrested dozens of journalists, including Thein Zaw of The Associated Press. “This ban is clearly part of a much larger military junta assault on freedom of the press and the ability of journalists to do their jobs without harassment, intimidation or arrest,” Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch, said in a statement Tuesday.

HOW ARE MEDIA OUTLETS RESPONDING?

Myanmar journalists are risking being killed or jailed for doing their jobs, and Swe Win, Myanmar Now’s editor-in-chief, said the raid demonstrated the government intends to show zero tolerance for press freedom. “What is certain is that we will not stop covering the enormous crimes the regime has been committing throughout the country,” he said. Mizzima, another privately owned, independent local news outlet, put a statement on its website saying it “continues to fight against the military coup and for the restoration

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 32 of 86

of democracy and human rights" using various online and multimedia platforms. Other outlets also still reported on protests Tuesday. Some of the media outlets already have experience operating from abroad.

WHAT KIND OF MEDIA ARE STILL LEGALLY OPERATING IN MYANMAR?

Myanmar appears to be returning to a situation where its officially sanctioned media are entirely state-controlled, as they were before August 2012. Even before the coup, under the military-dominated, quasi-civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, reporters faced arrest and harassment for reporting on sensitive topics such as abuses against its Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority. Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were given seven-year prison sentences, but later pardoned, for trying to investigate a massacre of Rohingya civilians. Myanmar ranked 139th of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom index. Journalists often have faced criminal prosecution for online defamation. The English-language Myanmar Times announced it had suspended all publications for three months beginning Feb. 21. That move came after many of its staff quit to protest the paper's agreement to follow a junta order not to use the word "coup" to describe the military takeover. Another state-controlled newspaper, the Global New Light of Myanmar, is still publishing. Other state media include the Myanmar News Agency and army-controlled Myawaddy TV.

WHAT ARE THE LONGER-TERM RAMIFICATIONS?

To suppress all reporting would likely require a complete blackout of all internet and satellite communications. Apart from the legal and human rights implications, that would be a huge setback for the country's economy. Myanmar's businesses are highly reliant on the internet and on digital platforms like Facebook, having developed quickly in the past few years after decades of relative isolation under previous military governments. So far, the junta has chosen to shut down internet links at night, hindering but not completely stopping such communications. Since modern businesses rely heavily on the internet and the free-flow of communications and information the military's actions are further damaging a business and investment environment already devastated by the coup and its aftermath.

Biden hopes to boost offshore wind as Mass. project advances

By MATTHEW DALY and PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A huge wind farm off the Massachusetts coast is edging closer to federal approval, setting up what the Biden administration hopes will be a model for a sharp increase in offshore wind energy development along the East Coast.

The Vineyard Wind project, south of Martha's Vineyard near Cape Cod, would create 800 megawatts of electricity, enough to power 400,000 homes in New England. If approved, the \$2 billion project would be the first utility-scale wind power development in federal waters. A smaller wind farm operates near Block Island in waters controlled by the state of Rhode Island.

Vineyard Wind is significantly farther offshore than Cape Wind, a previous Massachusetts offshore wind project that famously failed amid opposition from the Kennedy family and businessman William Koch, among others, who considered it a bird-killing eyesore in their ocean views.

Supporters say Vineyard Wind, located nearly 15 miles (24 kilometers) offshore, is better situated than Cape Wind and uses superior technology with fewer and larger turbine blades. Under a preferred alternative being considered, the project's giant turbines will be located at least 1 nautical mile apart, allowing fishing boats easier movement around the blades, officials said.

The Interior Department said Monday it has completed an environmental analysis of Vineyard Wind, with a decision on whether to approve the project expected as soon as next month.

President Joe Biden has vowed to double offshore wind production by 2030 as part of his administration's efforts to slow climate change. The likely approval of Vineyard Wind — one of two dozen offshore wind projects along the East Coast in varying stages of development — marks a sharp turnaround from the Trump administration, which stymied wind power both onshore and in the ocean.

As president Donald Trump frequently derided wind power as an expensive, bird-slaughtering way to make electricity, and his administration resisted or opposed wind projects nationwide, including Vineyard Wind.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 33 of 86

The project's developer temporarily withdraw its application late last year in a bid to stave off possible rejection by the Trump administration. Biden provided a fresh opening for the project soon after taking office in January.

"The United States is poised to become a global clean energy leader," said Laura Daniel Davis, a senior Interior Department official.

Vineyard Wind, which is slated to become operational in 2023, is the first of many offshore wind projects that will help the nation "combat climate change, improve resilience through reliable power and spur economic development to create good-paying jobs," said Amanda Lefton, director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, an Interior agency that oversees the project.

"The Biden administration is putting wind back in the sails of this vital new industry," said Sen. Ed Markey, D-Mass., a longtime cheerleader for the Vineyard Wind project. "Responsible development of wind off our coast (will) energize the economy, provide affordable electricity and move us further into a climate-safe future," Markey said.

Despite the enthusiasm, offshore wind development is still in its infancy in the U.S., far behind progress made by countries in Europe. Besides the Block Island project, a small wind farm operates off the coast of Virginia.

Vineyard Wind CEO Lars Pedersen said in a statement that the company looks "forward to reaching the final step in the federal permitting process and being able to launch an industry that has such tremendous potential for economic development in communities up and down the Eastern Seaboard."

The renewable energy industry believes the Biden administration presents a huge opportunity for growth, especially in expediting offshore wind projects the industry has long sought.

"The offshore industry is on the point of taking off," said Amy Farrell, a senior vice president of the American Clean Power Association, a trade group for renewable energy. The group expects 30 gigawatts of offshore wind energy to be built over the next decade.

Wind developers are poised to create tens of thousands of jobs and generate more than \$100 billion in new investment by 2030, "but the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management must first open the door to new leasing," said Erik Milito, president of the National Ocean Industries Association, another trade group.

Not everyone is cheering the rise of offshore wind.

Andrew Minkiewicz, an attorney for the Fisheries Survival Fund, which advocates for the sea scallop fishing industry, said the group has concerns about the abrupt shift in attitude from the Trump administration to Biden.

The project appeared dead — or at least on indefinite pause — as recently as last year, "and the new administration comes in and says no, we're going to go ahead," Minkiewicz said. "If this were not a clean-energy project, I think there would be an absolute uproar."

Fishing groups from Maine to Florida have expressed fear that large offshore wind projects could render huge swaths of the ocean off-limits to their catch. While Vineyard Wind is not located in an area critical to the scallop fishery, other potential sites along the Atlantic coast could pose a major threat to scallopers, Minkiewicz said.

Whittle reported from Portland, Maine.

'Bad news': Wave of GOP retirements signals battles ahead

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

This is not the way Republicans wanted to begin the year.

Missouri's Roy Blunt on Monday became the fifth Republican senator to announce he will not seek reelection, a retirement wave that portends an ugly campaign season next year and gives Democrats fresh hope in preserving their razor-thin Senate majority.

History suggests Republicans are still well-positioned to reclaim at least one chamber of Congress next year. But officials in both parties agree that the surge of GOP departures will make the Republicans' chal-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 34 of 86

lenge more difficult in the Senate.

"Any time you lose an incumbent, it's bad news," said Republican strategist Rick Tyler, who briefly worked for failed Missouri Senate candidate Todd Akin nearly a decade ago. "Missouri's not necessarily a safe state for Republicans. Democrats have won there."

The 71-year-old Blunt's exit is a reminder of how the nation's politics have shifted since the rise of Donald Trump. Blunt and his retiring GOP colleagues from Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Alabama represent an old guard who fought for conservative policies but sometimes resisted the deeply personal attacks and uneven governance that dominated the Trump era.

Their departures will leave a void likely to be filled by a new generation of Republicans more willing to embrace Trumpism — or by Democrats.

Several Missouri Republicans are expected to seek the nomination to replace Blunt, but none will be more divisive than former Gov. Eric Greitens, who resigned in 2018 amid the fallout of a sex scandal and ethics investigation. Missouri's Republican base has since rallied behind him, believing he was unfairly prosecuted.

Greitens was considering running for the GOP nomination even before Blunt's announcement. He is expected to announce his candidacy as soon as Tuesday morning.

Two leading Missouri Democrats, former Sen. Claire McCaskill and 2016 Senate candidate Jason Kander, both said they would not run for the open seat.

Ahead of Greitens' announcement, some Republicans worried that he could jeopardize the Senate seat if he emerges as the party's nominee.

Steven Law, a key ally of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and CEO of the Senate Leadership Fund, warned that Republicans may be beginning to repeat the mistakes of 2010, when the GOP lost the Senate majority by embracing flawed far-right candidates.

Law cited Greitens' looming announcement specifically.

"We have an opportunity to win back a majority," Law said. "But in 2010, that opportunity was lost on the Senate side because of unelectable candidates who got nominated."

Back in 2010, tea party favorite Christine O'Donnell beat a longtime GOP congressman in the Delaware Senate primary before losing by a landslide in the general election following reports of personal financial difficulties, questionable use of campaign funds and allegations that she had "dabbled into witchcraft."

Two years later in Indiana, Richard Mourdock defeated six-term Sen. Richard Lugar in the 2012 GOP primary, but he imploded after a debate in which he said pregnancy resulting from rape "is something that God intended." In Missouri, Republican nominee Akin lost after he insisted on a local talk show that women's bodies have ways to avoid pregnancy in cases of "legitimate rape."

In the decade since Akin's debacle, Missouri's politics, like the nation's, have evolved in a way that gives both parties opportunities.

States like Missouri, Ohio and Iowa, recently considered swing states, are trending away from Democrats. At the same time, previous red states like North Carolina and Georgia are trending away from Republicans.

Missouri hasn't elected a Democratic senator since McCaskill beat Akin in 2012. Trump carried the state last November by 15 percentage points. Trump carried Ohio, where Republican Sen. Rob Portman will not seek reelection next year, by 8 percentage points. The former president won by the same margin in Iowa, where 87-year-old Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley is considering retirement.

Democrats are expected to be more competitive in North Carolina, where Trump eked out a victory by just 1 percentage point, and in Wisconsin, should Republican Sen. Ron Johnson follow through with a campaign promise not to seek more than two terms.

Democrats have not lost any incumbents to retirement, but they are defending vulnerable incumbents in Georgia and Arizona, among others.

They have no margin for error. Republicans will claim the Senate majority for the last two years of President Joe Biden's term if they pick up even one additional seat next November.

The party that occupies the White House traditionally suffers significant losses in the first midterm election of a new president. President Barack Obama's Democratic Party, for example, lost 63 seats in the

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 35 of 86

House and six in the Senate in 2010.

Democrats are hopeful that Trump will become an unwitting ally in 2022. The former Republican president has vowed to play an active role in the midterms, particularly by supporting pro-Trump candidates in primary elections. That leaves little room for well-established Republicans like Blunt who are popular statewide.

"The challenge for Republicans will be the race to the bottom in the Republican primaries," said Morgan Jackson, a leading Democratic strategist based in North Carolina. "It's not about what you say, it's about how loud and angry you say it. That's a very different view of the world."

Jackson said "it's a safe bet" Republicans will win the House majority, but he's optimistic that Trump's meddling in Senate primaries will help limit Democrats' losses.

"Maybe it won't be a good cycle, but maybe it won't be a bad cycle," he said.

J.B. Poersch, who leads the Democratic-allied Senate Majority PAC, noted that Republicans are focused on the nation's culture wars, while Democrats are in the process of sending billions of dollars to working-class Americans affected by the pandemic. That contrast will help Democrats, he said.

"There is a working-family economic argument that Democrats can still make in the middle of the country, in places like Missouri and Ohio, and keep them competitive," he said.

Meanwhile, Blunt predicted political success for Republicans in Missouri and beyond during a Monday news conference. He also reflected upon the 2010 election, when Democrats were punished nationwide after embracing Obama's fiscal stimulus and health care overhaul.

"I think 2022 will be a great year in the country and I think it will be a fine year in this Senate race," Blunt told reporters. "The Republican Party will be just fine."

From a prolonged pandemic, a rethink of life's milestones?

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

Wedding anniversaries for Elizabeth O'Connor Cole and her husband, Michael, usually involve a dinner reservation for two at a fancy restaurant. Not this time around.

As the pandemic raged last May, the Chicago mom of four unearthed her boxed wedding gown from 19 years ago, got it zipped with help from one of her daughters and surprised her spouse.

Cole recreated their reception menu — a shrimp appetizer and beef tenderloin — and pulled out her wedding china and silver after enlisting another of her kids to DJ their first-dance song, "At Last," for a romantic turn around the living room. And the priest who married them offered a special blessing on Zoom with friends and family joining in.

"Spontaneous and a bit chaotic," O'Connor Cole pronounced the celebration. "Still, it was probably the most meaningful and fun anniversary we've had."

As the pandemic enters its second year, there's a pent-up longing for the recent past, especially when it comes to life's milestones. When the crisis finally resolves, will our new ways of marking births and deaths, weddings and anniversaries have any lasting impact? Or will freshly felt sentiments born of pandemic invention be fleeting?

Some predict their pandemic celebrations have set a new course. Others still mourn the way their traditions used to be.

Milestones, rituals and traditions help set the rhythm of our lives, from the annuals like birthdays and anniversaries to the one-timers like births and deaths, extending beyond those boundaries to more casual events like opening day (choose your sport), drinks out after work with colleagues and that first swim of summer.

Jennifer Talarico, a psychology professor at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania who studies memory and personal experience, says certain events shape lives differently — and have been reshaped just as differently during the pandemic. Perhaps most devastatingly impacted, she says, are death and dying, sitting at bedsides to comfort and attending funerals to mourn as the coronavirus has killed more than 2.3 million people around the world.

"That's being felt the hardest because it's the hardest to replace," Talarico says. "That's probably going

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 36 of 86

to have the most lasting impact.”

Renee Fry knows the feeling well. Her grandmother, Regina Connelly, died Dec. 6 of COVID-19 at her nursing home in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania. She had just turned 98. There was no dropping everything to be at her bedside. There was no large church celebration of her life followed by dinner for all.

“We had to rely on video conferencing,” Fry says.

But they also did something else. She and her sister, Julie Fry, put together a “memory book” shared with far-flung family and friends. They included Regina’s favorite prayer, the Hail Mary, and asked loved ones to recite it on her behalf. They filled pages with photos through the years, from a portrait of young Regina in a fine red dress (lipstick to match, gold pendant around her neck) to more casual shots with grandchildren.

The sisters — Renee in Quincy, Massachusetts, and Julie in Port Matilda, Pennsylvania — wrote the story of how Regina met her husband on a blind date, then lost him when he died in 2010 after 64 years of marriage. They wrote of how she spent most of her teen years caring for her two brothers after their mother died suddenly when she was 13. They included rosaries with each of the 32 booklets they mailed.

Judging from the response — a second cousin called to say thank you, and a caregiver for Regina wrote a two-page letter offering thanks as well — it made an impact. “It was incredibly meaningful,” Renee says.

Such a booklet will be created when the family faces death once again. The pandemic, Fry says, has proven that distance no longer denies lasting meaning.

Daryl Van Tongeren, an associate professor of psychology at Hope College in Michigan, studies meaning in life, religion and virtues. Rituals, symbols and milestones help provide structure to our worlds, he says, demarcating the passage of time or a significant accomplishment but more importantly lending meaning to life itself.

“One of the things that these milestones and these rituals do is they connect us with other people and things that are larger than ourselves,” he says.

Sometimes left behind in a swirl of celebration is the core significance of something just as important — the events themselves. Students who missed out on the walk across the stage at their graduations remain graduates. Couples forced to elope or give up their dreams of weddings for 200 for smaller affairs still have their marriages to experience.

While some predict a Roaring ‘20s renaissance once the crisis has ended, “there are going to be a number of people who are changed,” Van Tongeren says. “They’re going to say, ‘I’m going to emerge from this pandemic with a new set of values and I’m going to live my life according to new priorities.’”

Last year, Shivaune Field celebrated her 40th birthday on Jan. 11 with a group of friends at a downtown restaurant in Los Angeles, where she lives. It was just weeks before the coronavirus made its way to the U.S. This year, when she turned 41, the adjunct professor in business at Pepperdine University simply took to the beach with her pals.

“It felt much more authentic, a nicer way to connect without all the bells and whistles,” she says. “I think it’s really nice to get back to that. It reminds me of childhood.”

Fields grew up in Melbourne, Australia, where she says her parents kept birthdays rooted in family outings to the beach or bike rides followed by a treat of ice cream.

“Weekend get-togethers are now in sneakers with dogs sitting on grass and picnic rugs rather than on stools in fancy restaurants,” she says. And Field is just fine with that.

Marking time has changed during the pandemic. There’s the ticking off of months based on trips to the hair salon and the length of pandemic beards. There’s Zoom creativity and socially distanced trips outdoors. Recreating celebrations of the past for major, time-marking events has been difficult as time blurred and safety restrictions took over.

“We have all of this cultural baggage, in a good way, around those events,” Talarico says. “It’s a reinforcing cycle of events that we expect to be memorable.”

Memorable has been hard to achieve. But the rethink has been important for many, and its effects may ripple long after the virus has ebbed.

“For those wanting to reminisce years later about important events that happened during the pandemic,

there will likely be nostalgia mixed with more than a tinge of trauma," says Wilfred van Gorp, a past president of the American Academy of Clinical Neuropsychology.

"It may remind us of the loneliness and isolation brought about by the pandemic, our fear of catching the virus, fear of dying, fear of losing loved ones and loss of any we knew who may have died from COVID-19," he says. "And," he adds, "recollections of what we didn't have, what we missed, and the experiences we couldn't share together."

Follow Leanne Italie on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/litalie>

Gibraltar, a vaccine champion, launches 'Operation Freedom'

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

GIBRALTAR (AP) — Maskless parents pick up smiling Cinderellas, Harry Potters and hedgehogs from schools that reopened after a two-month hiatus just in time for World Book Day's costume display. Following weeks under lockdown, a soccer team resumes training at the stadium. Coffee shops and pubs have finally raised their blinds, eager to welcome locals and eyeing the return of tourists.

There's an end-of-hibernation feeling in Gibraltar. The narrow British overseas territory stretching between Spain and the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea is emerging from a devastating virus surge. COVID-19 has killed 93 people, nearly all of them in January and February this year, and infected over 4,000 of its 33,000 residents.

But the compact, high-density geography that is blamed — together with new virus variants — for the surge of infections has also been key to Gibraltar's successful vaccination campaign, with word-of-mouth facilitating the rollout.

The recent easing of restrictions — what Gibraltar authorities have dubbed "Operation Freedom" — also owes much to the steady delivery of jabs from the U.K.

By the end of March, Gibraltar is on track to have completely vaccinated all residents over 16 and its vast imported workforce, Health Minister Samantha Sacramento told The Associated Press. That's over 40,000 people. Only 3.5% have so far rejected the vaccine.

But Gibraltar's struggle to regain normality is only just starting. It still faces the many challenges of re-opening in a globalized world with unequal access to vaccines and new virus variants emerging. Sacramento has been working on contingency plans, including topping up vaccinations with a booster.

"Being vaccinated is absolutely no carte blanche to then behave without any restrictions. But then, we also have to go back to being a little bit more human, being able to breathe fresh air," the minister said in an office atop the local hospital.

"It's 'Operation Freedom,' but with caution," she added.

Finding that balance can be tricky for a territory linked to both Spain and the U.K. As a British territory, Gibraltar has received five vaccine consignments from London, mostly the Pfizer-BioNTech jab. A handful of AstraZeneca shots have also been reserved for those possibly vulnerable to severe allergic reactions.

Expanding Gibraltar's limited flights with the U.K., which is also rolling out vaccinations at high speed, could in theory be done by mandating tests and quarantines upon entry. But the contagious virus variant first found in Britain has been a source of concern.

In Spain, restrictions have tamed an end-of-the-year coronavirus surge that strained public hospitals. But, like much of the European Union, Spain is struggling with a slow vaccine rollout that hopes to immunizing 33 million residents, or 70% of its population.

Most Gibraltarians are eager to travel. With an area of only 6.7 square kilometers — a territory only a little bigger than The Vatican and Monaco, most of it dominated by the imposing presence of its famous Rock — Gibraltar can sometimes feel claustrophobic.

"I've been on the Rock now for a couple of months, without having stepped foot on Spain. That's a big part of our lives, going across the border, visiting new cities each weekend. That's what I'm looking forward to most," said Christian Segovia, a 24-year-old engineer who works at a shipping company.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 38 of 86

With over 15,000 people fully vaccinated and an additional 11,000 awaiting their second dose, people in their 20s are now being called in for their first shots. Non-Gibraltarians who come in to work in health care or other frontline jobs are already vaccinated, and authorities are now trying to inoculate all the remaining trans-border workers.

Vanesa Olivero commutes every day, crossing on foot the airport landing strip that separates Gibraltar from Spain's La Línea de la Concepción. Some 15,000 workers were making the same trip before the pandemic, but the numbers are lower now because tourism remains closed.

The 40-year-old, who sells tobacco and spirits in one of Gibraltar's many duty-free shops, says she can't wait to get her shots because facing customers puts her at risk. She suffers from asthma, has two daughters and older relatives to take care of.

"Just tell me where and when and I'll present both of my arms," joked Olivero. "I want all this to be over, to return to normality, to be able to give a hug, to give a kiss, to go for some drinks with friends."

Gibraltar has issued vaccination cards to people who get their second shot. It's also developing an app storing vaccine data and test results that authorities want to link with other platforms elsewhere to revive international travel. Critics, though, say such passports discriminate against those unable to access vaccines, especially in poorer countries.

Gino Jiménez, president of Gibraltar's Catering Association, harbors some doubts but welcomes the app if that helps bring back foreign tourists. His restaurant, a popular local hangout for breakfast and lunch, is following health guidelines to draw back those who "are still testing the waters to see if it's safe to go out."

"We are a very close, very sociable community. And there's nothing like sitting around the table having a cup of coffee and talking," said Jiménez, who is lobbying the government to quickly vaccinate the nearly 2,000 employees of restaurants and pubs, most of them Spaniards.

Waiters wear two masks, tables are reserved for a maximum of six and there are no afternoon alcohol sales.

After re-opening schools, pushing back the night-time curfew from 10 p.m. to midnight and lifting mandatory mask-wearing in low-density, non-commercial areas, the next big thing The Rock is looking forward to is Gibraltar's soccer match against the Netherlands on March 30. The World Cup qualifier will be a test for the resumption of mass events, allowing 50% stadium capacity and requiring fans to prove immunity.

While they wait, Gibraltarians are enjoying their new normality. At the Chatham Counterguard, an 18th-century defensive bastion now turned into a strip of pubs and restaurants, a dozen teammates of the Collegians Gibraltar Hockey Team celebrate over pints their first training session since November.

"This is what normality is ... to be able to get a beer with your own people," said Adrian Hernandez, 51. "God, did I miss this!"

AP journalists Renata Brito and Bernat Armangue contributed.

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

Gulf opens door to public Jewish life amid Israel ties

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Half a year after the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain established diplomatic relations with Israel, discreet Jewish communities in the Gulf Arab states that once lived in the shadow of the Arab-Israeli conflict are adopting a more public profile.

Kosher food is now available. Jewish holidays are celebrated openly. There is even a fledgling religious court to sort out issues such as marriages and divorces.

"Slowly, slowly, it's improving," said Ebrahim Nonoo, leader of Bahrain's Jewish community, which recently hosted an online celebration of the Purim holiday for Jews in the Gulf Arab region.

Nonoo is among the founders of the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities, a new umbrella group for

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 39 of 86

the tiny Jewish populations in the six Arab monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Their goal is to win greater acceptance of Jewish life in the region.

"It's just going to take a bit of time to seep through before we see a Jewish restaurant or a kosher restaurant spring up from somewhere," said Nonoo, a former member of Bahrain's parliament.

Even a modest online gathering like the Purim celebration would have been unthinkable a few years ago, when relations with Israel were taboo and Jews kept their identities out of public view for fear of offending their Muslim hosts.

That changed with last year's accords between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain that brought thousands of Israeli tourists and business people to the region and led to a fledgling industry of Jewish weddings and other celebrations aimed at Israeli visitors. Emirati and Bahraini authorities have launched a public relations blitz to cultivate their image as Muslim havens of inclusion and tolerance for Jews, in stark contrast to regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran.

"A door has been opened," said Elie Abadie, the new senior rabbi of the Jewish Council of the Emirates. "I think there is more openness and more welcome and enthusiasm for the presence of a Jewish community or Jewish individuals or Jewish tradition and culture."

The Lebanon-born Abadie, a member of the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities, said he is certain the shift is taking place across the Gulf, not only in the UAE.

The association aims to provide support and services for the small Jewish populations in Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE. These might include kosher certifications for hotels, restaurants and food products, a rabbinic court and pastoral guidance for religious events like bar mitzvahs, circumcisions and burials.

Their tiny Jewish populations are almost all comprised of foreign nationals who have come to the region for business. Only Bahrain has a rooted Jewish community. Its 80 or so members are descendants of Iraqi Jews who arrived in the late 19th century, seeking opportunity in trade.

The Jewish community in the UAE is the largest, with an estimated 1,000 members. It is also one of the newest, and Abadie said he has to "start things from scratch."

Only about 200 are active members of the community. The rest, like most Jews in Gulf Arab states, keep a low profile. Given the growing enthusiasm about Jewish life in the UAE, Abadie said he expects that "more of them will kind of come out to the light."

Jewish communities had flourished for centuries across the Islamic world. For long periods, they enjoyed a protected status, and occasionally, as in medieval Muslim Andalusia, thrived in a golden age of coexistence. Most of those communities vanished following Israel's establishment in 1948, when hundreds of thousands of Jews were driven out or fled.

Given the large numbers of Palestinians, Lebanese, Egyptians and Pakistanis who live in the Gulf Arab countries, some Jews have been uncomfortable in recent years in sharing their religious identity in public. Residency permits in the UAE, for instance, require applicants to state their religion, and "Jewish" is not an option.

Most Arab states have conditioned a normalization of diplomatic ties with Israel on ending the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the Israeli occupation of lands the Palestinians seek for an independent state.

But recently, those attitudes have eroded among some Arab leaders, even as hostility toward Israel — in part because of its policies toward Palestinians — has persisted among their populations.

The Gulf Arab monarchies have a few scattered remnants of bygone Jewish communities, said Jason Guberman, executive director of the American Sephardi Federation.

Saudi Arabia is home to sites that predate the advent of Islam in the 7th century, and Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman have old Jewish cemeteries. The UAE emirate of Ras al-Khaimah is home to a solitary Jewish headstone, possibly from a traveling merchant — like most of the Jews arriving in Dubai today.

"Jews have been in the Gulf for a very long time, and now it's kind of a return to this historical pattern of people coming in for trade," Guberman said, adding it was "very exciting to see some of this return of the pluralist past of the Middle East."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 40 of 86

Jean Candiotte, a TV director from New York who has been in Dubai for seven years, said the new atmosphere is liberating.

"We used to be this small, little family of Jewish people. We would find each other in hidden ways and everyone thought they were the only one," she said. "We were sensitive to the fact that we were in a Muslim country and didn't know if everyone was ready for us."

"Now it feels quite the opposite," she said. "I truly feel like I can be myself here, more openly attending ceremonies and Jewish celebrations. Jewish life here is becoming more like Jewish life anywhere else."

Still, this new reality remains fragile. Some countries have been slower to change. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have long been criticized for promoting anti-Semitic attitudes in textbooks.

Security remains a concern, as illustrated by the recent attack on an Israel-owned ship in the Persian Gulf. Israel has blamed archenemy Iran, and officials fear other Jewish and Israeli targets could be vulnerable. Many Jews in the region keep their religious identities a secret.

A Jewish businessman who has lived and worked in Oman for the past several decades said he is one of perhaps 20 Jews living in the sultanate.

He said the country has a more tolerant approach to religious diversity than its neighbors, but still insisted on anonymity because he was concerned about repercussions from local officials.

During the coronavirus pandemic, he said that Zoom Sabbath services organized by the Jewish Community of the Emirates on Friday evenings have been a lifeline for him. He said he hopes the new Gulf communal organization "will generate a feeling of a bit of security to come out of the closet, so to speak."

Associated Press writer Isabel DeBre in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, contributed to this report.

Miles out at Kansas over behavior with women while at LSU

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

Les Miles is out as Kansas' head coach just days after he was placed on administrative leave amid sexual misconduct allegations from his tenure at LSU.

Kansas announced Miles' departure Monday night, describing it as a mutual agreement to part ways. Miles has three years left on his original five-year contract with the school that pays him \$2.775 million annually through December 2023 and includes several bonuses, among them a \$675,000 retention bonus paid last November.

"I am extremely disappointed for our university, fans and everyone involved with our football program," Kansas athletic director Jeff Long said in a statement. "We will begin the search for a new head coach immediately with an outside firm to assist in this process. We need to win football games, and that is exactly what we're going to do."

The 67-year-old Miles was 3-18 in two seasons with the Jayhawks. Offensive coordinator Mike DeBord was named acting head coach.

"This is certainly a difficult day for me and for my family," Miles said in a statement. "I love this university and the young men in our football program. I have truly enjoyed being the head coach at KU and know that it is in a better place now than when I arrived."

Last week, LSU released a 148-page review by a law firm about the university's handling of sexual misconduct complaints campus-wide. One part described how Miles "tried to sexualize the staff of student workers in the football program by, for instance, allegedly demanding that he wanted blondes with big breasts, and 'pretty girls.'"

The report also revealed then-LSU athletic director Joe Alleva recommended firing Miles in 2013 to university officials.

Kansas placed Miles on leave later that day and said it would conduct a review of allegations against the coach that it had previously been unaware of.

Kansas said terms of the agreement with Miles on his departure will be released in the coming days.

Miles spent 11-plus seasons with LSU, leading the school to a national title in 2007. He was fired four

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 41 of 86

games into the 2016 season.

Miles was investigated at LSU after two female student workers in the football program accused the coach of inappropriate behavior in 2012.

While that 2013 investigation by the Taylor Porter law firm found Miles showed poor judgment, it did not find violations of law or that he had a sexual relationship with any students. Taylor Porter also concluded it could not confirm one student's allegation that Miles kissed her while they were in the coach's car with no one else present.

In an email dated June 2013 and sent to the president of LSU, Alleva wrote Miles was guilty of "insubordination, inappropriate behavior, putting the university, athletic (department) and football program at great risk."

The Taylor Porter review had been kept confidential for about eight years until a redacted version of it was released this week after a lawsuit filed by USA Today.

For Kansas, Miles' departure is just the latest setback for what has been college football's worst Power Five program for a decade. The Jayhawks have not won more than three games in a single season since 2009.

Miles had been out of coaching for two years when Long hired him after the 2018 season, hoping a notable name and experienced coach could help break the apathy that has enveloped the Kansas program for a decade.

Long and Miles were friends dating to their time at Michigan in the late 1980s.

While recruiting has improved under Miles, little else has changed. The Jayhawks were winless last season for the third time in program history, losing by an average of more than 30 points per game.

Kansas has not had a winning season since 2008, the year before Mark Mangino was fired amid allegations of verbal and physical abuse. He was followed by Turner Gill, who won five games over two seasons, and Charlie Weis, who was 6-22 before getting fired four games into the 2014 season.

David Beaty was 6-42 in four seasons in charge of the Jayhawks and sued Kansas for withholding his buyout because of NCAA infractions. Beaty reached a \$2.55 million settlement with the school last summer.

Now, with spring football practice around the corner, Kansas is starting over again, still stuck in a deep hole.

AP Sports Writer Dave Skretta contributed to this report.

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

Child tax credit expansion sets up showdown with GOP

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The massive coronavirus relief plan making its way to President Joe Biden's desk includes a plan to temporarily raise the child tax credit that could end up permanently changing the way the country deals with child poverty.

It also sets up a potential political showdown with Republicans over an issue that Democrats believe could drive significant wins for the party in the 2022 midterm elections and beyond.

The American Rescue Plan, expected to receive final approval this week, temporarily raises the child tax credit, now at a maximum of \$2,000, to as much as \$3,600 per child annually. The plan also expands the credit so it's fully available to the poorest families, instead of restricting it based on the parents' tax liability. And it will be paid out in monthly installments, to offer families struggling during the pandemic a more consistent lifeline.

In the short term, said Democratic strategist Josh Schwerin, the expansion of the tax credit and other immediate aid included in the \$1.9 trillion bill provide real evidence of Democratic action to help middle-class families.

"One of the good things politically about this bill is the direct and obvious impact it's going to have on

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 42 of 86

American families in a way they can see and feel in an immediate way," he said.

The legislation gives families up to \$3,600 annually for each child under age 6 and as much as \$3,000 for those up to 17. The credit starts to phase out for individual parents earning more than \$75,000 and couples making \$150,000. The legislation also expands the credit to millions of families currently making too little to qualify for the full benefits.

The benefit is aimed at providing support to millions of families affected by the coronavirus pandemic, with parents forced to cut down on work or give up their jobs entirely to take care of children after losing access to childcare. Democrats have embraced an analysis that found the proposal would cut child poverty among Black families by more than 50%, and by 45% overall.

Republicans charge the move amounts to an expansion of the welfare state that will disincentivize parents from seeking work. But Democrats hold out the proposal as a fundamental rethinking of the way the country approaches child poverty and an opportunity to address the income inequality that's been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Connecticut Rep. Rosa DeLauro, a Democrat who has been advocating for an expansion of the credit since 2003, said in a statement that "this legislation forever changes the way that our nation supports both middle class families and children in poverty."

DeLauro and other Democrats on Capitol Hill see the current legislation as laying the groundwork for a permanent expansion of the credit. Indeed, Biden himself told House Democrats during a private call last week that he supports legislation that would permanently increase the child tax credit to \$3,000 per child.

While Republicans broadly support the idea of expanding benefits for children, some have opposed the Biden plan for its price tag, and others have criticized it for divorcing the benefit from any work requirement.

Scott Winship, director of poverty studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said his concern is that a permanent child allowance might make parents less likely to work and reduce the number of two-parent households, since there would be a stream of income from the government. He wants to reduce child poverty but is concerned that doing so this way might worsen factors such as unemployment and single-parenthood that contribute to poverty.

"The feeling is we win the battle against child poverty but we lose the war in the long run because we've created incentives that make it tougher to reduce poverty," Winship said.

That's the case made by some Republican lawmakers in offering an alternative to the Biden proposal. Sens. Mike Lee of Utah and Marco Rubio of Florida have released their own expansion of the credit that ties the benefit to work.

Rubio, in a recent National Review op-ed, called the Biden proposal "corrosive."

"If pulling families out of poverty were as simple as handing moms and dads a check, we would have solved poverty a long time ago," he wrote.

But the expanded benefits included in the coronavirus relief plan set up a precedent that could put Republicans on defense on the issue. Because the benefit currently expires after a year, the Biden plan essentially creates a potential fiscal cliff for child poverty. This could set up a political showdown during an election year on whether voters believe it's acceptable for millions of children to lose the added aid and become impoverished once again.

"When it's up for renewal, Republicans will be in the awkward position of opposing payments to families delivered through a credit that they pioneered, and championed as recently as 2017," said Samuel Hammond, director of poverty and welfare policy at the Niskanen Center. "The alternative is to rally behind some Plan B."

"No Republican wants to run on taking money away from families of any income," Hammond said.

Hammond helped to develop one such "Plan B" for Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, whose plan is different from Biden's because it eliminates some other popular tax breaks to make the proposal deficit-neutral, which means it's unlikely to gain much support from Democrats.

Indeed, Schwerin suggested that, looking toward the midterm elections, the attack ads aimed at Republicans would simply highlight the party's votes for tax cuts during the Trump administration in contrast with their votes against the Biden plan.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 43 of 86

"It's as simple as, when it was a vote on tax cuts for billionaires, Republicans voted yes, and when it was a check for you, they voted no," he said.

Biden's big relief package a bet gov't can help cure America

By JOSH BOAK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden wants America to know that he's from the government and he's here to help.

That sentiment became a well-worn punchline under Ronald Reagan and shaped the politics of both parties for four decades. Democrat Bill Clinton declared the era of big government over in the 1990s, Barack Obama largely kept his party in the same lane and Republican Donald Trump campaigned on the premise that Washington was full of morons, outplayed by the Chinese and others.

But Biden is now staking his presidency on the idea that the government can use his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief plan not only to stop a pandemic and jobs crisis but also to catapult the country forward to tackle deep issues of poverty, inequality and more. The massive bill could be approved by Congress as early as Tuesday.

"When I was elected, I said we were going to get the government out of the business of battling on Twitter and back in the business of delivering for the American people," Biden said after the huge bill passed the Senate on Saturday. "Of showing the American people that their government can work for them."

Taken together, provisions in the 628-page bill add up to one of the largest enhancements to the social safety net in decades, pushing the country into uncharted territory.

Besides stopping the pandemic and jumpstarting hiring, money in the rescue package — now awaiting final approval in the House — is supposed to start fixing income inequality, halve child poverty, feed the hungry, save pensions, sustain public transit, let schools reopen with confidence and help repair state and local government finances. And Biden is betting that the government can do all of this with the speed of a nation mobilizing for war without touching a tripwire of inflation.

"People have lost faith government can do good for them," says Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, who spoke daily with Biden while ushering the bill through the Senate last weekend. Now, as vaccines become more available and other changes take place, "people are going to see that government actually is making their lives better — which is how Americans used to think of it, and we've gotten away from it."

Republicans say Americans have plenty of reason to be skeptical, calling the American Rescue Plan excessive and wasteful. They warn the sweeping package will run up the national debt to precarious new heights after \$4 trillion in aid has already been provided.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell argues against the package as missing the moment — too big at a time when the virus is showing signs of easing and the economy is poised to come "roaring" back.

Instead of working across the aisle toward unity, as Biden has promised, McConnell says Democrats are "ramming through what they call 'the most progressive domestic legislation in a generation,'" quoting the White House chief of staff.

"They explained their intent very clearly: to exploit this crisis as 'a tremendous opportunity to restructure things to fit our vision,'" McConnell says. This is the first COVID-19 bill that had zero support from Republicans in the House or Senate.

Biden's bet, more than others in modern politics and economics, is full of questions.

Can the federal money push economic growth above 6% for the first time since Reagan in 1984? Will the 9.5 million lost jobs quickly return? Will inflation surge? Will the national debt spook voters in next year's midterm elections? Biden has placed the biggest of markers on the theories of the 20th Century British economist John Maynard Keynes that the government can stimulate a dormant economy back to health.

Sweeping in scope, Biden's plan largely relies on existing health care and tax credits, rather than new programs, but it expands that standard fare in ambitious new ways that are designed to reach more people who are suffering in an unprecedented time.

"We haven't done this before," said Syracuse University economics professor Len Burman, a co-founder of the Tax Policy Center. "If it actually does work the way it does in theory and the economy is back at

full employment in a year, that would be amazing. It would save a lot of hardship and suffering.”

But Burman also has misgivings about the design of Biden’s package because it distributes direct payments and other benefits to almost every household in the United States, rather than directing the money to the poor and to businesses and organizations most damaged by the pandemic and ensuing shutdowns.

“It kind of reminded me of this idea when I was in grad school of helicopter money — which was basically dropping money from the air and seeing if it raised incomes,” he said. “The money could have been better targeted.”

Final passage of the bill is expected this week — before expanded unemployment benefits are set to expire mid-March. But Biden’s signing celebration will just be the start. His administration will have to show that the funds can be spent effectively and efficiently, helping those in need while giving the broader public enough confidence to awaken growth through hiring and spending.

Felicia Wong, CEO of the liberal Roosevelt Institute, sees parallels to the Great Depression, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt brought about an unprecedented series of government interventions that realigned U.S. politics. Wong said she is monitoring the process by which the money from the COVID-19 relief package gets distributed.

“That’s going to matter as much as the scale of the package because it’s going to build trust,” Wong said.

Republicans are poised to portray the spending as bloated and inefficient, much the way they attacked the Obama-era recovery act during the 2009 financial crisis.

At the same time, much of the aid is temporary, set to expire in a year or so, leaving Congress to assess Biden’s approach ahead of the next election season.

Associated Press writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Indian activist’s arrest spotlights crackdown on dissent

By KRUTIKA PATHI and SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — To her friends, Disha Ravi, a 22-year-old Indian climate activist, was most concerned about her future in a world of rising temperatures. She was drawn to veganism, enjoyed watching Netflix and spent time on social media.

But her life changed last month when she became a household name in India, dominating headlines after police charged her with sedition, a colonial-era law that carries a sentence up to life in prison.

Her alleged crime: sharing an online handbook meant to raise support for months-long farmer protests on Twitter.

“If highlighting farmers’ protest globally is sedition, I am better (off) in jail,” she said in court two weeks ago.

She was released after 10 days in custody. Her mother told reporters in Ravi’s hometown of Bengaluru that the case “has reinforced our faith in the system,” and called her daughter strong and brave.

Going after activists isn’t new in India, but Ravi’s saga has stoked fear and anxiety. Observers say what happened to Ravi — a young, middle class, urban woman — hit home for a lot of Indians, who suddenly feared they could be jailed for sharing something on social media. Criminal lawyers also point to a troubling frequency in the way sedition is invoked. Many say checks and balances employed by lower courts, often overwhelmed with cases, are fading.

The incident has raised questions over India’s democracy, with critics decrying it as the latest attempt by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist government to mute dissent and criminalize it.

“They targeted someone not usually targeted by the Hindu right-wing — a young girl from South India, who doesn’t have a Muslim name and is not linked to left-wing student politics,” said prominent historian Ramachandra Guha. “The message they wanted to send is that they can go after anyone.”

Earlier in February, Ravi, part of the Indian wing of Fridays for Future, a global climate change movement founded by Greta Thunberg, was charged with sedition for allegedly compiling and editing a Google document that explains how to carry out a social media campaign. It aimed to help farmers, camped

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 45 of 86

outside New Delhi since November, amplify protests that have convulsed India, posing one of Modi's biggest challenges.

The farmers, a majority of whom are from the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, want a repeal of laws passed last year that they say will favor large corporate farms and devastate their income. The government says the laws are necessary to modernize Indian agriculture.

Many of the protesters are from India's minority Sikh religion — but their grievances are rooted in economic issues, not religious ones.

Police say the document Ravi shared spread misinformation, "tarnished the image of India," and may have incited the farmers to turn violent on Jan. 26, when clashes with police left hundreds injured and one protester dead.

Modi's government has increasingly brandished sedition against critics, intellectuals, activists, filmmakers, students and journalists, with police arguing that words or actions of dissent make them a threat to national security. Even though convictions remain rare, police do not need an arrest warrant, making it an easy law to invoke, said Chitranshu Sinha, a lawyer who has written a book on the history of sedition law.

An accused person is often in custody until the case is taken up by a high court, since many lower courts are not empowered to dismiss such cases, he said.

The case has left a chilling effect on activists, with some spotlighting a culture of intimidation that runs deep, sometimes even before an arrest is made.

Mukund Gowda, a 25-year-old public works activist and youth leader for the opposition Aam Aadmi Party in Bengaluru, was questioned by local police for almost a full day last year after he wrote a letter to the prime minister's office to draw attention to a faulty road in his neighborhood and called out his local representatives for not taking action. He shared the letter on his social media, which quickly went viral and landed him inside a police station, he said.

"They (the police) tried to scare me, saying they could charge me with sedition," Gowda said.

He was let go. Police said his actions were "politically motivated" but denied threatening him. The experience made him and his family anxious. He stopped posting on social media and took a step back from activism for a few months.

Another activist, Tara Krishnaswamy, said peaceful demonstrators are sometimes questioned by police even when partaking in small-scale civic protests in Bengaluru.

"The intimidation comes in many forms. The data for activists arrested doesn't show the full picture — it's much more pervasive," she said.

Washington-based Freedom House last week downgraded India from "free" to "partly free" in its annual democracy survey. The drop reflects "a multiyear pattern in which the Hindu nationalist government and its allies have presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters," it said in a report.

The report also underscored how colonial-era laws are being continuously invoked to punish criticism by ordinary citizens.

The government called the report "misleading, incorrect and misplaced."

The use of sedition is the responsibility of state governments and their authorities trying to preserve "public order," it said. The government "attaches highest importance to the safety and security of all residents of the country, including journalists."

According to Guha, the historian, India's democracy is in its worst state since the Emergency in the 1970s, when then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended elections, curbed civil rights, jailed political opponents and censored the press.

He said that previous governments have also tried to control independent institutions, but that "a recovery, even a partial one" always followed.

"I fear that this time our democratic traditions may not be able to recover from this assault," Guha said.

'Lula' convictions dismissed; could run again in Brazil

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and DAVID BILLER Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — A top judge has thrown out both corruption convictions of former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, opening the way for a possible battle against conservative incumbent Jair Bolsonaro in next year's elections.

Supreme Court Justice Luiz Edson Fachin on Monday annulled the convictions on procedural grounds, arguing the cases were tried in the wrong jurisdiction. That means the ruling may not affect numerous other convictions of powerful businessmen and politicians also swept up in the sprawling "Car Wash" investigations centered on the state-run oil giant Petrobras.

He said the case should be retried in the capital, though former prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol suggested on Twitter it may be too late for that because the statute of limitations for prosecution of the 75-year-old ex-leader could have expired.

The government can appeal Fachin's ruling to the full court and da Silva still faces other prosecutions in Brasilia and Sao Paulo, though those are far from any final decision.

Da Silva, universally known as "Lula," was wildly popular during his 2003-2010 presidency, when poverty fell as Brazil boomed, thanks in part to a commodities prices. He left office with an approval rating in the mid-80s. But his star dimmed in recent years as Brazil's economy slumped and corruption scandals involving the former leader and those around him gained traction.

Even so, he was leading in the polls for the 2018 presidential race before the initial conviction ruled him out as a candidate. That opened the door for Bolsonaro, a right-wing lawmaker who won election with the image of an anti-corruption outsider.

Bolsonaro quickly responded to the court ruling, calling the administration of da Silva's Workers' Party "catastrophic. I think the Brazilian people don't even want a candidate like that in 2022, much less think about his possible election."

Analyst Thiago de Aragão, director of strategy at political consultancy Arko Advice, said the pugnacious Bolsonaro may benefit from a ruling that could help galvanize his hardcore backers, who see the Supreme Court as an enemy due to several rulings against the administration.

As news of the ruling broke, chants of "Lula livre!" — "Lula free!" — and recordings of jingles from his presidential campaigns echoed from windows in some cities. There were also cries of "Bolsonaro Out!"

Political consultant Thomas Traumann, who worked in the administration of da Silva's protege and successor, Dilma Rousseff, said the annulment of da Silva's conviction gives new life to the Workers' Party in which he remains the dominant figure.

He also projected that a polarizing campaign against Bolsonaro would make it tough for other rivals.

"These two will take a lot of room from any third-way candidate. They are two names with nationwide recognition, very clear projects, and allowing little space for any other bidders to thrive," Traumann said. "The election is only in October of next year, but it is fair to say that today kicks off a lot of the process."

Da Silva was sentenced to 12 years and seven months for allegedly receiving an apartment worth about \$1 million as a bribe from construction company OAS. Da Silva has always denied ownership of the apartment.

Another conviction involved his alleged ownership of a ranch in Atibaia, outside Sao Paulo.

Da Silva was released from prison in November 2019 due to a decision of the country's top court that a person can be imprisoned only after all appeals have been exhausted.

The decision also affects the reputation of former federal Judge Sergio Moro, who sentenced da Silva in the first case, was involved in the second and left his post to become justice minister in Bolsonaro's administration. He resigned in April last year after falling out with the president.

Da Silva's legal team had wanted the top court to deem Moro biased after a series of messaging app leaks published by The Intercept Brasil showed apparent coordination between the then-judge and Car Wash prosecutors to land the leftist leader behind bars.

Gustavo Badaró, a law professor at the University of Sao Paulo, said Fachin's decisions appeared aimed

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 47 of 86

at preserving other Car Wash prosecutions and testimonies taken during the cases involving da Silva.

Had the Supreme Court determined Moro was biased, top executives and others he sentenced to prison as part of the investigation could have moved to have their own cases annulled.

"Fachin knows that his decision basically means Lula will not be punished, but he wants to save whatever is left of Car Wash," Badaró said.

Billier reported from Rio de Janeiro.

Explosive Harry, Meghan interview reverberates across globe

By DANICA KIRKA and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry and Meghan's explosive TV interview divided people around the world on Monday, rocking an institution that is struggling to modernize with claims of racism and callousness toward a woman struggling with suicidal thoughts.

During the two-hour appearance with Oprah Winfrey, Harry also revealed the problems had ruptured relations with his father, Prince Charles, and brother, Prince William, illuminating the depth of the family divisions that led the couple to step away from royal duties and move to California last year.

The palace has not yet responded to the interview, in which Meghan described feeling so isolated and miserable inside the royal family that she had suicidal thoughts and said a member of the family had "concerns" about the color of her unborn child's skin.

The family member was not Queen Elizabeth II or Prince Philip, according to Harry, sparking a flurry of speculation about who it could be.

Leaders around the world were asked about the interview, and citizens of many countries had an opinion.

In Accra, Ghana, Devinia Cudjoe said that hearing that a member of the royal family was worried about the color of the skin of an unborn child was insulting to people of the Commonwealth, the grouping of Britain and its former colonies that is headed by the queen.

"That is pure racism," Cudjoe said. "(The) Commonwealth is supposed to foster unity, oneness amongst black people, amongst white people. But if we are hearing things like this ... I think that is below the belt."

In Nairobi, Kenya, Rebecca Wangare called Meghan "a 21st-century icon of a strong woman. She has faced racism head-on."

Asma Sultan, a journalist in Karachi, Pakistan, said the interview "is going to tarnish the image of the royal family."

"There is so much controversy ever since Diana's death, so it is new Pandora box which is opened up," she said.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson refused to comment on the interview, praising the queen but saying that "when it comes to matters to do with the royal family the right thing for a prime minister to say is nothing."

Asked whether U.S. President Joe Biden and his wife Jill had any reaction to the interview, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Meghan's decision to speak about her struggles with mental health "takes courage" and "that's certainly something the president believes in."

But she said she wouldn't offer additional comment on the situation "given these are private citizens, sharing their own story and their own struggles."

Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said the interview bolstered his argument for Australia severing its constitutional ties to the British monarchy. Turnbull met the couple in April 2018, four months before he was replaced by current Prime Minister Scott Morrison in an internal power struggle within the conservative government.

"It's clearly an unhappy family, or at least Meghan and Harry are unhappy. It seems very sad," Turnbull told Australian Broadcasting Corp. "After the end of the queen's reign, that is the time for us to say: OK, we've passed that watershed. Do we really want to have whoever happens to be the head of state, the king or queen of the U.K., automatically our head of state?"

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 48 of 86

Britain's monarch is Australia's head of state. Turnbull was a leading advocate for Australia selecting an Australian citizen as its head of state when he was chairman of the Australian Republican Movement from 1993 to 2000.

News of the interview was reported in Chinese state media, including the overseas edition of the ruling Communist Party's flagship newspaper, People's Daily, and was widely discussed on the popular Weibo social media platform.

The allegations are especially damaging because many observers hoped Harry and Meghan, who is bi-racial, would help the tradition-bound monarchy relate to an increasingly multicultural nation. In the early days of their marriage, Harry and Meghan joined William and his wife, Catherine, in projecting a glamorous, energetic image for the young royals.

That partnership was severed when Harry and Meghan left the country, saying they wanted to earn their own living and escape what they called intrusive, racist coverage by the British media.

But the interview brought that criticism into the palace itself, with the couple directing allegations of racism at an unidentified member of the royal family.

Meghan said that when she was pregnant with her son, Archie, Harry told her that the royal family had "concerns and conversations about how dark his skin might be when he's born."

Harry confirmed the conversation, saying: "I was a bit shocked." He said he wouldn't reveal who made the comment. Winfrey later said Harry told her the comment didn't come from Queen Elizabeth II or Prince Philip, his grandparents.

Meghan, 39, acknowledged she was naive at the start of her relationship with Harry and unprepared for the strictures of royal life. A successful actress before her marriage, she said she bridled at the controlling nature of being royal, squirming at the idea that she had to live on terms set by palace staff. This was compounded by the fact that the staff refused to help her when she faced racist attacks from the media and internet trolls, she said.

The situation became so difficult that at one point, "I just didn't want to be alive anymore," Meghan told Winfrey.

But when she sought help through the palace's human resources department, she was told there was nothing it could do because she wasn't an employee, Meghan said.

The implications for the interview — which was broadcast Sunday evening in the United States and will air in Britain on Monday night — are only beginning to be understood. Emily Nash, royal editor at Hello! Magazine, said the revelations had left her and many other viewers "shell-shocked."

"I don't see how the palace can ignore these allegations, they're incredibly serious," she said. "You have the racism allegations. Then you also have the claim that Meghan was not supported, and she sought help even from the HR team within the household and was told that she couldn't seek help."

The younger royals have made campaigning for support and awareness around mental health one of their priorities. But Harry said the royal family was completely unable to offer that support to its own members.

"For the family, they very much have this mentality of 'This is just how it is, this is how it's meant to be, you can't change it, we've all been through it,'" Harry said.

The couple had faced severe criticism in the United Kingdom before the interview. Prince Philip, 99, is in a London hospital recovering from a heart procedure, and critics saw the decision to go forward as being a burden on the queen — even though CBS, rather than Harry and Meghan, dictated the timing of the broadcast.

In the United States, sympathy for the couple poured in. Tennis star Serena Williams, a friend who attended Harry and Meghan's wedding, said on Twitter that the duchess's words "illustrate the pain and cruelty she's experienced."

"The mental health consequences of systemic oppression and victimization are devastating, isolating and all too often lethal," Williams added.

Britain could be less forgiving once the full interview is broadcast, since some see the pair as putting personal happiness ahead of public duty.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 49 of 86

Meghan — then known as Meghan Markle, who had starred on the American TV legal drama “Suits” — married Harry at Windsor Castle in May 2018.

But even that was not what it seemed: The couple revealed in the interview that they exchanged vows in front of Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby three days before their spectacular wedding ceremony at the castle.

Archie was born the following year and in a rare positive moment in the interview, the couple revealed their second child, due in the summer, would be a girl.

Harry said he had lived in fear of a repeat of the fate of his mother, Princess Diana, who was covered constantly by the press and died in a car crash in Paris in 1997 while being pursued by paparazzi.

“What I was seeing was history repeating itself, but definitely far more dangerous — because then you add race in, and you add social media in,” Harry said.

Both Meghan and Harry praised the support they had received from the monarch.

“The queen has always been wonderful to me,” Meghan said.

But Harry revealed he currently has a poor relationship with William and said things got so bad with his father that at one point Prince Charles stopped taking his calls.

“There is a lot to work through there,” Harry said of his father. “I feel really let down. He’s been through something similar. He knows what pain feels like. And Archie is his grandson. I will always love him, but there is a lot of hurt that has happened.”

If you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts, you can seek help from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the United States on 1-800-273-8255. The Samaritans in the United Kingdom can be reached on 116 123.

Trial for ex-cop charged in Floyd’s death forges on, for now

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The trial of a former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd’s death is forging ahead with jury selection, even though a looming appellate ruling could halt the case and delay it for weeks or even months as the state tries to add a third-degree murder count.

Prosecutors are asking the Court of Appeals to put Derek Chauvin’s trial on hold until the issue of adding the third-degree murder count is resolved. The appeals court did not immediately rule on that request, and Judge Peter Cahill said Monday that he intends to keep the trial on track until he’s told to stop.

“Unless the Court of Appeals tells me otherwise, we’re going to keep moving,” he said. Jury selection is expected to begin Tuesday, a day later than scheduled.

Chauvin is charged with second-degree murder and manslaughter in Floyd’s death. The Court of Appeals last week ordered Cahill to consider reinstating a third-degree murder charge that he had dismissed. Legal experts say reinstating the charge would improve the odds of getting a conviction. Chauvin’s attorney, Eric Nelson, said Monday he would ask the state Supreme Court to review the issue.

On Monday, prosecutors and defense attorneys agreed to dismiss 16 of the first 50 jurors they reviewed “for cause,” based on their answers to a lengthy questionnaire. The dismissals weren’t debated in court, but such dismissals can be for a host of reasons, such as views that indicate a juror can’t be impartial.

Floyd was declared dead on May 25 after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against the Black man’s neck for about nine minutes, holding his position even after Floyd went limp. Floyd’s death was captured on widely seen bystander video and sparked sometimes violent protests in Minneapolis and beyond, leading to a nationwide reckoning on race.

Chauvin and three other officers were fired; the others face an August trial on aiding and abetting charges.

Hundreds of people gathered outside the courthouse as proceedings began Monday, many carrying signs that read, “Justice for George Floyd” and “Convict Killer Cops.”

One speaker, DJ Hooker, took a microphone and decried the “cage” of concrete barriers topped by chain-link fencing, barbed wire and razor wire up around the courthouse, part of at least \$1 million that

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 50 of 86

has been spent to fortify the downtown area during the trial.

Hooker went on to ridicule talk of the Chauvin trial as “the trial of the century,” saying the jury simply needs to “do the right thing.”

He led the crowd in chants of, “The whole world is watching!”

Inside the courtroom, Chauvin, in a blue suit and black mask, followed the proceedings attentively, making notes on a legal pad. No one attended to support him. Bridgett Floyd, George Floyd’s sister, sat in the seat allocated to Floyd’s family.

Afterward, Bridgett Floyd said the family was glad the trial had finally arrived and is “praying for justice.”

“I sat in the courthouse today and looked at the officer who took my brother’s life,” she said. “That officer took a great man, a great father, a great brother, a great uncle.”

The unintentional second-degree murder charge requires to prosecutors to prove that Chauvin’s conduct was a “substantial causal factor” in Floyd’s death, and that Chauvin was committing felony assault at the time. The third-degree murder charge would require them to prove that Chauvin caused Floyd’s death through a dangerous act without regard for human life.

Jury selection could take at least three weeks and will end when 14 jurors are picked — 12 who will deliberate and two alternates. The potential jurors — who must be at least 18, U.S. citizens and residents of Hennepin County — were sent questionnaires to determine how much they have heard about the case and whether they’ve formed any opinions. Besides biographical and demographic information, jurors were asked about prior contacts with police, whether they have protested against police brutality and whether they believe the justice system is fair.

Some of the questions get specific, such as how often a potential juror has watched the bystander video of Floyd’s arrest, or whether they carried a sign at a protest and what that sign said.

Jurors will be questioned individually. The judge, defense attorney and prosecutors can all ask questions. In addition to both sides being able to argue for an unlimited number of “for cause” dismissals, the defense can object to up to 15 potential jurors without giving a reason; prosecutors can block up to nine without providing a reason. Either side can object to these peremptory challenges if they believe the sole reason for disqualifying a juror is race or gender.

Even if a juror says they have had a negative interaction with the police or hold negative views about Black Lives Matter, the key will be trying to find out whether they can put those past experiences or opinions aside and be fair, said Mike Brandt, a local defense attorney.

“We all walk into these with biases. The question is, can you put those biases aside and be fair in this case,” he said.

Associated Press writer Mohamed Ibrahim contributed this report.

Find AP’s full coverage of the death of George Floyd: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

Myanmar protesters defy curfew; media outlets ordered shut

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Demonstrators in Myanmar’s biggest city came out Monday night for their first mass protests in defiance of an 8 p.m. curfew, seeking to show support for an estimated 200 students trapped by security forces in a small area of one neighborhood.

The students and other civilians earlier took part in one of the many daily protests across the country against the military’s seizure of power last month that ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The military government also placed a major curb on media coverage of the crisis. It announced that the licenses of five local media outlets — Mizzima, DVB, Khit Thit Media, Myanmar Now and 7Day News — have been canceled.

“These media companies are no longer allowed to broadcast or write or give information by using any kind of media platform or using any media technology,” it said on state broadcaster MRTV.

All five had been offering extensive coverage of the protests, often with livestreaming video online. The

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 51 of 86

offices of Myanmar Now were raided by the authorities Monday before the measure was announced.

DVB said it was not surprised by the cancellation and would continue broadcasting on satellite TV and online.

"We worry for the safety of our reporters and our staff, but in the current uprising, the whole country has become the citizens' journalists and there is no way for military authorities to shut the information flow," Executive Director Aye Chan Naing told The Associated Press.

The government has detained dozens of journalists since the coup, including a Myanmar Now reporter and Thein Zaw of AP, both of whom have been charged under a public order law that carried a penalty of up to three years in prison.

The night's street protests began after police cordoned off part of Yangon's Sanchaung neighborhood and were believed to be conducting door-to-door searches for those who fled attacks by security forces to seek shelter in the homes of sympathetic strangers.

News of their plight spread quickly on social media, and people poured into the streets in neighborhoods all over the city to show solidarity and in hopes of drawing some of the pressure off the hunted protesters. On some streets, they constructed makeshift barricades with whatever was at hand.

In the Insein district, they spread across road junctions, singing songs, chanting pro-democracy slogans and banging objects together.

The diplomatic missions of the United States, Britain, Canada and the European Union all issued statements urging the security forces to allow the trapped people to return safely to their homes. Although all have been sharply critical of the Feb. 1 coup and police violence, it is unusual for such diplomatic statements to be issued in connection with a specific, ongoing incident.

"There is heightened tension caused by security forces surrounding Kyun Taw Road in Sanchaung Township, Yangon. We call on those security forces to withdraw and allow people to go home safely," said the U.S. Embassy's statement.

Reports on social media citing witnesses said as many as 50 people were arrested overnight in Sanchaung and other parts of the city, but many of those who had been hiding were able to leave safely at dawn Tuesday, a few hours after police abandoned their search.

On Monday night, security forces chased crowds, harassed residents watching from windows, and fired stun grenades. They also were some reports of injuries from rubber bullets.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was following developments in the Sanchaung district where "many of those trapped are women, who were peacefully marching in commemoration of International Women's Day," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

"He calls for maximum restraint and urges for the safe release of all without violence or arrests," Dujarric said, and for respect of the rights to freedom of assembly and expression for peaceful demonstrators voicing "their hopes and desires for the future of their country."

Guterres also called the occupation of a number of public hospitals in Myanmar by security forces "completely unacceptable," the U.N. spokesman said.

The nighttime hours have become increasingly dangerous in Myanmar. Police and army units routinely range through neighborhoods, shooting randomly to intimidate residents and disrupt their sleep, and making targeted arrests.

Security forces shot and killed two people in northern Myanmar during the day, local media reported.

The Irrawaddy online newspaper said the victims were shot in the head during anti-coup protests in Myitkyina in Kachin State. Graphic video on social media showed protesters backing away from tear gas, responding with rocks and then fleeing after a fusillade of what seemed to be automatic gunfire.

Demonstrators hurriedly carried away the injured, including one apparent fatality, a person with a severe head wound. A second body was seen later on a stretcher, his head covered with a cloth.

Another shooting death took place in Pyapon, a city about 120 kilometers (75 miles) south of Yangon.

To date, the government's violent crackdown has left more than 50 protesters dead. At least 18 people were fatally shot Feb. 28 and 38 on Wednesday, according to the U.N. Human Rights Office.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 52 of 86

Security forces also clamped down on anti-coup protesters elsewhere Monday, firing tear gas to break up a crowd of about 1,000 people demonstrating in Pyinmana, a satellite town of the capital, Naypyitaw. The protesters deployed fire extinguishers to create a smokescreen as they fled from authorities.

Thousands of protesters who marched in Mandalay, the second-largest city, dispersed on their own amid fears that soldiers and police were planning to break up their demonstration with force.

Meanwhile, an armed force from one of Myanmar's ethnic groups was deployed to protect anti-coup marchers in the wake of a brutal crackdown by the junta.

The unit from the Karen National Police Force arrived shortly after dawn to accompany about 2,000 protesters near Myitta in Tanintharyi Region in southeastern Myanmar. They carried an assortment of firearms including assault rifles as they marched ahead of the column down dusty rural roads.

The Karen police force is under the control of the Karen National Union, one of many ethnic organizations that have been fighting for greater autonomy from the central government for decades. The KNU employs both political and, through its armed wing, military means to achieve its aims.

Large-scale protests have occurred daily in many cities and towns since Myanmar's military seized power, and security forces have responded with ever greater use of lethal force and mass arrests.

On Sunday, police occupied hospitals and universities and reportedly arrested hundreds of people involved in protesting the military takeover.

Japan seeks 'recovery of people's hearts' decade after quake

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and HARUKA NUGA Associated Press

TOMIOKA, Japan (AP) — Ten years after Japan's earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, the lives of many who survived are still on hold.

On March 11, 2011, one of the biggest temblors on record touched off a massive tsunami, killing more than 18,000 people and setting off catastrophic meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. Nearly half a million people were displaced. Tens of thousands still haven't returned home.

More than 30 trillion yen (\$280 billion) has been spent on reconstruction so far — but even Reconstruction Minister Katsuei Hirasawa acknowledged recently that while the government has charged ahead with new buildings, it has invested less in helping people to rebuild their lives, for instance, by offering mental health services for trauma.

The Associated Press talked to people affected by the disasters about how far they have come — and how much more needs to be done.

"AS LONG AS MY BODY MOVES"

Yasuo Takamatsu, 64, lost his wife, Yuko, when the tsunami hit Onagawa, in Miyagi prefecture.

He has been looking for her ever since.

He even got his diving license to try to find her remains, and for seven years he has gone on weekly dives — 470 and counting.

"I'm always thinking that she may be somewhere nearby," he said.

Besides his solo dives, once a month he joins local authorities as they conduct underwater searches for some 2,500 people whose remains are still unaccounted for across the region.

Takamatsu said the city's scars have largely healed, "but the recovery of people's hearts ... will take time."

So far, he has found albums, clothes and other artifacts, but nothing that belonged to his wife.

He said he will keep searching for his wife "as long as my body moves."

"In the last text message that she sent me, she said, 'Are you okay? I want to go home,'" he said. "I'm sure she still wants to come home."

"STARTING LINE AGAIN"

Just a month after a tsunami as high as 17 meters (55 feet) smashed into the city of Rikuzentakata, Michihiro Kono took over his family's soy sauce business.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 53 of 86

That he was even able to continue the two-century-old business is a miracle, he says. The precious soy yeast was only saved because he had donated some to a university lab.

For the last decade, Kono has worked to rebuild the business in Iwate prefecture, and later this year he will finish construction on a new factory, replacing the one that was destroyed, on the same ground where his family started making soy sauce in 1807. He has even launched a soy sauce named "Miracle" in honor of the saved yeast.

"This is a critical moment to see if I can do something meaningful in the coming 10 years," said the ninth-generation owner of Yagisawa Shoten Co. "I was born here, and now I'm at the starting line again."

But challenges remain: His customer base has been decimated. The city's population has plunged more than 20% to about 18,000, so he is trying to build business networks beyond the city.

Kono often thinks of the people killed by the tsunami, many of whom he used to discuss town revitalization plans with.

"Those folks all wanted to make a great town, and I want to do things that will make them say, 'Well done, you did it,' when I see them again in the next life," he said.

WHO WANTS TO COME BACK?"

About 10 kilometers (6 miles) south of the wrecked nuclear plant, rice farmer Naoto Matsumura defied a government evacuation order a decade ago and stayed on his farm to protect his land and the cattle abandoned by neighbors.

He's still there.

Most of the town of Tomioka reopened in 2017. But dozens of neighboring homes around Matsumura are still empty, leaving the area pitch dark at night.

The Fukushima prefecture town's main train station got a facelift. A new shopping center was built. But less than 10% of Tomioka's former population of 16,000 has returned after massive amounts of radioactive material spewing from the plant forced evacuations from the town and other nearby areas. Parts of the town remain off-limits; houses and shops stand abandoned.

"It took hundreds of years of history and effort to build this town, and it was destroyed instantly," he said. "I grew up here ... but this is nothing like a home anymore."

Because it took six years to lift the evacuation order, many townspeople already found jobs and homes elsewhere. Half of the former residents say they have decided never to return, according to a town survey.

This has been true across the region.

In Tomioka, radioactive waste from decontamination efforts in the town are still stored in a no-go zone.

"Who wants to come back to a place like this?" Matsumura asked. "I don't see much future for this town."

For company, Matsumura has several cows, a pony and a family of hunting dogs that help him chase away wild boars. The cows are descendants of those from neighboring farms that he has kept, as a protest, after the government issued an order to destroy thousands because of radiation fears.

This spring, for the first time since the disaster, the 62-year-old farmer plans an experimental rice planting, and to expand his beekeeping efforts.

"I will stay here until the end of my life," he said.

THEIR HOME IS STILL HERE"

Yuya Hatakeyama was 14 when he was forced to evacuate from Tomioka after the disaster.

Now 24, the former third baseman for the Fukushima Red Hopes, a regional professional league team, is in his first year working at the Tomioka town hall — but he still hasn't returned to live in the town, joining the many who commute into it from outside.

Hatakeyama has bittersweet memories of Tomioka. The area that's now a no-go zone includes Yonomori park, where people used to gather for a cherry blossom festival. Decontamination work is being stepped up in the area and the town plans to lift the rest of the no-go zone in 2023.

"I want to reach out to the residents, especially the younger generation, so they know their home is still

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 54 of 86

here," Hatakeyama said. One day, he said, he wants to see young families playing catch, like he used to do with his father.

"A PLACE OF COMFORT"

Hazuki Sato was 10 when she fled from her elementary school in Futaba, home of the wrecked nuclear plant.

She's now preparing for the coming-of-age ceremony that is typical for Japanese 20-year-olds, hoping for a reunion in town so she can reconnect with her former classmates who have scattered.

Despite horrifying memories of escaping from her classroom, she still considers Futaba her home.

After studying outside the region for eight years, Sato now works for her hometown — though from an office in Iwaki, another city in the Fukushima prefecture.

None of Futaba's 5,700 residents can return to live there until 2022, when the town is expected to re-open partially. An area outside a train station reopened last March only for a daytime visit to bring in the Olympic torch.

Sato has fond memories of Futaba — a family barbecue, riding a unicycle after school and doing homework and snacking with friends at a childcare center while waiting for her grandma to pick her up.

"I want to see this town become a place of comfort again," she said.

Trump, RNC clash over using his name in fundraising

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican National Committee is defending its right to use former President Donald Trump's name in fundraising appeals after he demanded they put an end to the practice.

In a Monday letter to Trump attorney Alex Cannon, RNC chief counsel J. Justin Riemer said the committee "has every right to refer to public figures as it engages in core, First Amendment-protected political speech" and said "it will continue to do so in pursuit of these common goals."

But he maintained that Trump had also "reaffirmed" to the chair of the RNC, Ronna McDaniel, over the weekend "that he approves of the RNC's current use of his name in fundraising and other materials, including for our upcoming donor retreat event at Palm Beach at which we look forward to him participating."

Trump responded to the letter with a statement that put that agreement in doubt. "No more money for RINOS," or Republican in name only, he stated. "They do nothing but hurt the Republican Party and our great voting base — they will never lead us to Greatness." He instead again urged his supporters to send their contributions directly to his own Save America PAC by using his personal website, adding, "We will bring it all back stronger than ever before!"

The flap reflects the tensions that have divided the GOP in the months since Trump left the White House. The party is eager to tap into his popularity among the Republican base to raise money ahead of next year's midterms. But that runs counter to Trump's instinct to control the use of his name and image as he aims to position himself as the undisputed leader of the GOP.

In his first major speech since leaving office, Trump urged his supporters to give their money to Save America, his political action committee, instead of the GOP's traditional fundraising organizations. And on Friday, his group sent letters to the RNC and others asking them to "immediately cease and desist the unauthorized use of President Donald J. Trump's name, image, and/or likeness in all fundraising, persuasion, and/or issue speech," according to the RNC letter.

The House and Senate Republican campaign committees and a Trump spokesman did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The RNC and Trump's campaign worked hand-in-hand during the 2020 election, including raising money through a joint fundraising committee. And ties between them remain.

Trump is scheduled to speak at the RNC's spring donor retreat in April in Palm Beach, Florida, and has told McDaniel that he wants to continue raising money for the RNC even as he amasses cash for his own pursuits. That includes exacting revenge by backing challengers to Republican incumbents who crossed

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 55 of 86

him by voting to impeach him for inciting the Capitol riot.

Despite the letters, the RNC and others have continued to fundraise off of Trump's name.

"CONGRATULATIONS! You have been selected as one of the FIRST to be invited to claim your Trump Legacy Membership," the RNC wrote in one appeal on Sunday.

"We NEED 10,000 patriots who still stand with President Trump before midnight tonight," "URGENT: TRUMP SUPPORTERS NEEDED," added the National Republican Senatorial Committee Monday afternoon.

Brazil justice annuls Lula's sentences, enabling 2022 run

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and DAVID BILLER Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — A Supreme Court justice on Monday annulled all convictions against former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a ruling that potentially would allow him to run again for the presidency next year.

The decision also laid bare the country's political divisions, with leftists celebrating their 75-year-old leader's return to the political arena as conservatives said the rulings were tantamount to impunity.

Others saw the ruling, based on procedural grounds, as an attempt to preserve a vast but embattled corruption investigation that has led to numerous convictions of powerful businessmen and politicians but that has been accused of impropriety.

The decision by Justice Luiz Edson Fachin drew no conclusions about the mammoth "Car Wash" investigation centered on state-run giant Petrobras, from which the da Silva probes emerged. It said, instead, that the federal court in the Southern city of Curitiba, which convicted da Silva twice of corruption and money laundering, didn't have jurisdiction to put the leftist leader on trial.

Fachin said the cases will be sent to the federal court of Brazil's Federal District, where they can begin anew.

But Deltan Dallagnol, who prosecuted da Silva as head of the the Car Wash task force, said on Twitter that the ruling may end the case against the former president altogether because the statute of limitations may have run out. Da Silva still faces other prosecutions in Brasilia, but those are far from any final decision.

Da Silva's lawyers issued a statement welcoming the decision, saying it "is aligned with everything we have said for more than five years in these suits."

But Brazilian media reported that the country's prosecutor-general Augusto Aras, an ally of conservative President Jair Bolsonaro, is preparing to appeal the decision.

Da Silva has been a dominant figure in Brazilian politics for decades, first as firebrand metalworkers' union organizer who launched failed bids for the presidency, then as the charismatic everyman whose popularity grew on the job as president from 2003 to 2010 thanks to hefty government handouts to the poor and infrastructure investments during the country's commodities boom.

He left office with an approval rating in the mid-80s, and former U.S. President Barack Obama referred to him as the most popular politician on earth. But his star fell in recent years as Brazil's economy slumped and corruption scandals involving the former leader and those around him gained traction.

He was boxed out of the 2018 election by the first of his two criminal convictions, which came in July 2017.

Maurício Santoro, professor of political science at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, said by phone the move will boost da Silva and the Workers' Party, which has been dented by corruption investigations. However, he questioned whether Lula would gain enough impetus to actually make another run for president, given there are still many who reject him and his party.

"We have seen in recent months Lula's popularity rising again. That has to do with the pandemic and the humanitarian disaster we're living through now. When you put all that together, we have a political mood in Brazil right now that is a little more sympathetic than three years ago," Santoro said by phone. "But I think there is a limit to how far that movement can go."

People in some cities went to their windows and chanted, "Lula livre!" — "Lula free!" — or blasted jingles from his presidential campaigns. There were also cries of "Bolsonaro Out!" that have appeared at times since the COVID-19 pandemic hit Brazil one year ago.

Da Silva has been sentenced to 12 years and seven months for allegedly receiving an apartment worth

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 56 of 86

about \$1 million as a bribe from construction company OAS. Da Silva has always denied ownership of the apartment.

Another conviction involved his alleged ownership of a ranch in Atibaia, outside Sao Paulo.

He was imprisoned in April 2018 while leading polls for the presidential election then just months off.

With da Silva out, conservative lawmaker Bolsonaro won the election handily. Da Silva was released from prison in November 2019 due to a decision of the country's top court that a person can be imprisoned only after all appeals have been exhausted.

The decision also affects the reputation of former federal Judge Sergio Moro, who sentenced da Silva in the first case, was involved in the second and left his post to become justice minister in Bolsonaro's administration. He resigned in April last year after falling out with the president.

Da Silva's legal team had wanted the top court to deem Moro biased after a series of messaging app leaks published by The Intercept Brasil showed apparent coordination between the then-judge and Car Wash prosecutors to land the leftist leader behind bars.

By sidestepping those motions, Fachin's decision effectively preserves other Car Wash prosecutions, according to Paulo Calmon, a political science professor at the University of Brasilia.

Had the Supreme Court determined Moro was biased, top executives and others he sentenced to prison as part of the investigation could have moved to have their own cases annulled.

"What happened here was a transfer of jurisdiction," Calmon said.

Biller reported from Rio de Janeiro.

Biden's big relief package a bet gov't can help cure America

By JOSH BOAK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden wants America to know that he's from the government and he's here to help.

That sentiment became a well-worn punchline under Ronald Reagan and shaped the politics of both parties for four decades. Democrat Bill Clinton declared the era of big government over in the 1990s, Barack Obama largely kept his party in the same lane and Republican Donald Trump campaigned on the premise that Washington was full of morons, outplayed by the Chinese and others.

But Biden is now staking his presidency on the idea that the government can use his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief plan not only to stop a pandemic and jobs crisis but also to catapult the country forward to tackle deep issues of poverty, inequality and more.

"When I was elected, I said we were going to get the government out of the business of battling on Twitter and back in the business of delivering for the American people," Biden said after the huge bill passed the Senate on Saturday. "Of showing the American people that their government can work for them."

Taken together, provisions in the 628-page bill add up to one of the largest enhancements to the social safety net in decades, pushing the country into uncharted territory.

Besides stopping the pandemic and jumpstarting hiring, money in the rescue package — now awaiting final approval in the House — is supposed to start fixing income inequality, halve child poverty, feed the hungry, save pensions, sustain public transit, let schools reopen with confidence and help repair state and local government finances. And Biden is betting that the government can do all of this with the speed of a nation mobilizing for war without touching a tripwire of inflation.

"People have lost faith government can do good for them," says Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, who spoke daily with Biden while ushering the bill through the Senate last weekend. Now, as vaccines become more available and other changes take place, "people are going to see that government actually is making their lives better — which is how Americans used to think of it, and we've gotten away from it."

Republicans say Americans have plenty of reason to be skeptical, calling the American Rescue Plan excessive and wasteful. They warn the sweeping package will run up the national debt to precarious new heights after \$4 trillion in aid has already been provided.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 57 of 86

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell argues against the package as missing the moment — too big at a time when the virus is showing signs of easing and the economy is poised to come “roaring” back.

Instead of working across the aisle toward unity, as Biden has promised, McConnell says Democrats are “ramming through what they call ‘the most progressive domestic legislation in a generation,’” quoting the White House chief of staff.

“They explained their intent very clearly: to exploit this crisis as ‘a tremendous opportunity to restructure things to fit our vision,’” McConnell says. This is the first COVID bill that had zero support from Republicans in the House or Senate.

Biden’s bet, more than others in modern politics and economics, is full of questions.

Can the federal money push economic growth above 6% for the first time since Reagan in 1984? Will the 9.5 million lost jobs quickly return? Will inflation surge? Will the national debt spook voters in next year’s midterm elections? Biden has placed the biggest of markers on the theories of the 20th Century British economist John Maynard Keynes that the government can stimulate a dormant economy back to health.

Sweeping in scope, Biden’s plan largely relies on existing health care and tax credits, rather than new programs, but it expands that standard fare in ambitious new ways that are designed to reach more people who are suffering in an unprecedented time.

“We haven’t done this before,” said Syracuse University economics professor Len Burman, a co-founder of the Tax Policy Center. “If it actually does work the way it does in theory and the economy is back at full employment in a year, that would be amazing. It would save a lot of hardship and suffering.”

But Burman also has misgivings about the design of Biden’s package because it distributes direct payments and other benefits to almost every household in the United States, rather than directing the money to the poor and to businesses and organizations most damaged by the pandemic and ensuing shutdowns.

“It kind of reminded me of this idea when I was in grad school of helicopter money — which was basically dropping money from the air and seeing if it raised incomes,” he said. “The money could have been better targeted.”

Final passage of the bill is expected this week — before expanded unemployment benefits are set to expire mid-March. But Biden’s signing celebration will just be the start. His administration will have to show that the funds can be spent effectively and efficiently, helping those in need while giving the broader public enough confidence to awaken growth through hiring and spending.

Felicia Wong, CEO of the liberal Roosevelt Institute, sees parallels to the Great Depression, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt brought about an unprecedented series of government interventions that realigned U.S. politics. Wong said she is monitoring the process by which the money from the COVID relief package gets distributed.

“That’s going to matter as much as the scale of the package because it’s going to build trust,” Wong said.

Republicans are poised to portray the spending as bloated and inefficient, much the way they attacked the Obama-era recovery act during the 2009 financial crisis.

At the same time, much of the aid is temporary, set to expire in a year or so, leaving Congress to assess Biden’s approach ahead of the next election season.

Associated Press writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Fiery chants for justice from marchers at Chauvin trial

By MOHAMED IBRAHIM Associated Press/Report for America

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Hundreds of people gathered Monday outside the fortified courthouse for the first day of the trial of a former police officer charged in George Floyd’s death, with chants of “No justice, no peace!” and speakers imploring the jurors to “do the right thing.”

Many in the crowd carried banners, some reading “Justice for George Floyd” and “Convict Killer Cops.”

As the judge and attorneys convened high above in an 18th-floor courtroom — with jury selection almost immediately stalling over the state’s effort to add a third-degree murder charge against Derek Chauvin —

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 58 of 86

organizer DJ Hooker lamented the concrete barriers, chain-link fencing, barbed wire and razor wire that has gone up around the courthouse, along with National Guard troops and police standing guard behind.

"We ain't in that cage over there. What do they call it, the First Amendment zone? The Freedom Zone, I call it a cage," said Hooker, an organizer with Twin Cities Coalition for Justice 4 Jamar, which was formed after the 2015 death of Jamar Clark in a confrontation with Minneapolis police. "Look what they did to our beautiful downtown. They turned this into a war zone."

Later, he ridiculed talk of the Chauvin trial as "the trial of the century," noting the widely seen citizen video of Floyd's arrest and saying all the jury needs to do is "do the right thing."

Then he led the crowd in chants of "The whole world is watching!"

The protesters later marched around downtown. The protest featured several speakers that ranged from activists of various organizing groups to the parents of Black men killed by police.

Sam Martinez, an organizer with Twin Cities Coalition for Justice 4 Jamar, said organizers plan similar protests for dates that coincide with significant points in Chauvin's trial, including opening statements, closing arguments and the verdict.

Martinez said the biggest turnout likely will be on the day of the verdict.

"When the people know that there needs to be justice, they'll come out," Martinez said. "We trust in the people, we know they'll back us up."

Mohamed Ibrahim is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Find AP's full coverage of the death of George Floyd at: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

Officer says he arrested reporter after pepper spray blasts

By RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — A police officer testified Monday that he arrested a journalist at an unruly Black Lives Matter protest last year in Iowa after she did not leave when he repeatedly shot clouds of pepper spray to disperse the crowd.

Des Moines Officer Luke Wilson said he wasn't aware Andrea Sahouri was a Des Moines Register reporter when he responded to a chaotic scene where protesters were breaking store windows and throwing rocks and water bottles at police outside Merle Hay mall on May 31.

Wilson said he sprayed the chemical irritant from a device known as a fogger to clear a commercial parking lot and that it worked in scattering the rest of the group, including Sahouri's then-boyfriend Spenser Robnett. But he said Sahouri stayed put despite the spray, which can cause a burning sensation and temporary blindness.

"Once I determined she wasn't leaving, I had to take action," Wilson testified, adding that he still didn't know who she was.

Wilson, who was wearing a riot helmet and gas mask, said he approached and grabbed Sahouri with his left hand while still holding the fogger in his right. He said he shot more pepper spray when Robnett returned and tried to pull Sahouri out of his custody, hitting them both again from close range.

Wilson testified on the first day of trial for Sahouri and Robnett on misdemeanor charges of failure to disperse and interference with official acts. Prosecutors pressed ahead with their case despite local, national and international pressure to drop the rare effort to punish a working reporter.

If convicted, they would be fined hundreds of dollars and have a criminal record. A judge could also sentence them up to 30 days in jail on each count, although that would be unusual.

Advocates for journalism and human rights in the U.S. and abroad have pressed Iowa authorities to drop the charges, arguing that Sahouri was simply doing her job by documenting the newsworthy event. Iowa Democrats have blasted one of their own, longtime Polk County Attorney John Sarcone, for pursu-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 59 of 86

ing the case.

The pair are standing trial in a courtroom at Drake University in Des Moines as part of a unique program that allows first-year law students to observe real trials. The university is broadcasting the proceedings, which are expected to last two days. A six-member jury was empaneled mid-day and heard opening statements and prosecution testimony Monday. The trial will resume Tuesday.

The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker has not recorded any other trials of working journalists in the country since 2018. Sahouri was among more than 125 reporters detained or arrested during the civil unrest that unfolded across the U.S. in 2020. Thirteen, including Sahouri, still face prosecution although the majority of those arrested were not charged or their charges were dismissed, the group says.

Employees in the Gannett newspaper chain, which owns USA Today, the Register and hundreds of other newspapers, have flooded social media with support for Sahouri in recent days. The company is funding her defense. Columbia Journalism School, where Sahouri graduated in 2019 before joining the Register, expressed solidarity Monday by promoting the hashtags #StandWithAndrea and #JournalismIsNotACrime.

Amnesty International also publicized her case and demanded the charges be dismissed.

Sahouri was assigned to cover the protest where activists were demanding better treatment for people of color days after the death of George Floyd, a Black man who was declared dead after a white officer put his knee on his neck for about nine minutes.

Prosecutor Brecklyn Carey told jurors that body camera footage will show police giving a dispersal order to a crowd that included both defendants around 6:30 p.m. at an intersection outside the mall. Testimony will show that the pair was arrested 90 minutes later near the same intersection, and that Robnett tried to pull Sahouri away from the officer who arrested them, she said.

Carey urged jurors in an opening statement to keep their "eyes on the ball" and answer only three questions: was there a dispersal order, did the two disperse, and did they pull away from the officer?

But defense lawyer Nicholas Klinefeldt told jurors that the case was about a journalist who was wrongly arrested while doing her job, adding that Robnett accompanied her to the event for safety purposes.

He said the 6:30 p.m. dispersal order was intended only to clear people who were blocking an intersection and that both complied. Body camera audio played for jurors showed officers yelling to "get back" and to protest peacefully, while an order to "disperse" could only faintly be heard.

"Nobody was telling anybody to leave the scene. Quite the opposite," Klinefeldt said.

When police deployed tear gas before 8 p.m., Sahouri and Robnett ran away and around the corner of a Verizon store. Wilson then grabbed her and blasted pepper spray into her face as she put her hands in the air and yelled that she was press, Klinefeldt said.

The officer told Sahouri "that's not what I asked," Klinefeldt said. Then, Wilson shot pepper spray at Robnett after he yelled that she was a journalist. A second Register reporter who was nearby was ordered to leave but not arrested, he said.

Sahouri was loaded into a police van and jailed for a couple of hours.

Wilson testified that he did not "have a whole lot of conversation" with Sahouri when he arrested her. He said he believed he had activated his body camera but later learned he had failed to do so and never sought to use a camera function to retrieve the video afterward before it was erased.

Jury selection paused for ex-cop charged in Floyd's death

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Jury selection for a former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death was halted before it began Monday by the state's effort to add a third-degree murder charge.

As hundreds of protesters rallied outside the courthouse to call for Derek Chauvin's conviction, Judge Peter Cahill said he did not have jurisdiction to rule on whether the third-degree murder charge should be reinstated while the issue is being appealed.

Cahill initially ruled jury selection would begin as scheduled, but after prosecutors asked the Court of Appeals to put the case on hold, the judge sent the potential jurors home for the day and the rest of the

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 60 of 86

day was spent ruling on motions. Cahill later said jury selection would resume Tuesday barring an order from the appellate court.

There was no indication when that court will rule, but a hold could delay Chauvin's trial for weeks.

Prosecutors and defense attorneys agreed to dismiss 16 of the first 50 jurors they reviewed "for cause" based on their answers to a lengthy questionnaire. These dismissals weren't debated in court, but can happen for a host of reasons, such as views that indicate a juror can't be impartial.

Chauvin is charged with second-degree murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death. The Court of Appeals last week ordered Cahill to consider reinstating a third-degree murder charge that he had dismissed. Legal experts say reinstating the charge would improve the odds of getting a conviction. Chauvin's attorney, Eric Nelson, said Monday he would ask the state Supreme Court to review the issue.

For the unintentional second-degree murder charge, prosecutors have to prove Chauvin's conduct was a "substantial causal factor" in Floyd's death, and that Chauvin was committing felony assault at the time. For third-degree murder, they must prove that Chauvin's actions caused Floyd's death, and that his actions were reckless and without regard for human life.

Floyd was declared dead May 25 after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against the Black man's neck for about nine minutes, holding his position even after Floyd went limp. Floyd's death sparked sometimes violent protests in Minneapolis and beyond, and led to a nationwide reckoning on race.

Chauvin and three other officers were fired; the others face an August trial on aiding and abetting charges.

Hundreds of people gathered outside the courthouse as proceedings began, many carrying signs that read, "Justice for George Floyd" and "Convict Killer Cops."

One speaker, DJ Hooker, took a microphone and decried the concrete barriers topped by chain-link fencing, barbed wire and razor wire set up around the courthouse, and ridiculed talk of the Chauvin trial as "the trial of the century," saying the jury simply must "do the right thing."

He led the crowd in chants of "The whole world is watching!"

Inside the courtroom, Chauvin, in a blue suit and black mask, followed the proceedings attentively, making notes on a legal pad. No one attended to support him. Bridgett Floyd, George Floyd's sister, sat in the seat allocated to Floyd's family.

Afterward, Floyd said her family is glad the trial has finally arrived and is "praying for justice."

"I sat in the courthouse today and looked at the officer who took my brother's life," she said. "That officer took a great man, a great father, a great brother, a great uncle."

Jury selection could take at least three weeks, as prosecutors and defense attorneys try to weed out people who may be biased against them.

Jurors must be at least 18, U.S. citizens and residents of Hennepin County. Potential jurors were sent questionnaires to determine how much they have heard about the case and whether they've formed any opinions. Besides biographical and demographic information, jurors were asked about prior contacts with police, whether they have protested against police brutality and whether they believe the justice system is fair.

Some of the questions get specific, such as how often a potential juror has watched the bystander video of Floyd's arrest, or whether they carried a sign at a protest and what that sign said.

Potential jurors will be questioned individually. The judge, defense attorney and prosecutors can all ask questions. In addition to both sides being able to argue for an unlimited number of "for cause" dismissals, the defense can object to up to 15 potential jurors without giving a reason; prosecutors can block up to nine without providing a reason. Either side can object to these peremptory challenges if they believe the sole reason for disqualifying a juror is race or gender.

Some jurors could remain on the panel, even if they have had a negative interaction with the police or hold negative views about Black Lives Matter, local defense attorney Mike Brandt said.

"We all walk into these with biases. The question is, can you put those biases aside and be fair in this case," Brandt said.

Jury selection will end after 14 people are picked — 12 jurors who will deliberate the case and two alternates who won't be part of deliberations unless needed.

The earliest opening statements will begin is March 29.

Associated Press writer Mohamed Ibrahim contributed this report.

Find AP's full coverage of the death of George Floyd: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

Child tax credit expansion sets up showdown with GOP

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The massive coronavirus relief plan making its way to President Joe Biden's desk includes a plan to temporarily raise the child tax credit that could end up permanently changing the way the country deals with child poverty.

It also sets up a potential political showdown with Republicans over an issue that Democrats believe could drive significant wins for the party in the 2022 midterm elections and beyond.

The American Rescue Plan, expected to receive final approval this week, temporarily raises the child tax credit, now at a maximum of \$2,000, to as much as \$3,600 per child annually. The plan also expands the credit so it's fully available to the poorest families, instead of restricting it based on the parents' tax liability. And it will be paid out in monthly installments, to offer families struggling during the pandemic a more consistent lifeline.

In the short term, said Democratic strategist Josh Schwerin, the expansion of the tax credit and other immediate aid included in the \$1.9 trillion bill provide real evidence of Democratic action to help middle-class families.

"One of the good things politically about this bill is the direct and obvious impact it's going to have on American families in a way they can see and feel in an immediate way," he said.

The legislation gives families up to \$3,600 annually for each child under age 6 and as much as \$3,000 for those up to 17. The credit starts to phase out for individual parents earning more than \$75,000 and couples making \$150,000. The legislation also expands the credit to millions of families currently making too little to qualify for the full benefits.

The benefit is aimed at providing support to millions of families affected by the coronavirus pandemic, with parents forced to cut down on work or give up their jobs entirely to take care of children after losing access to childcare. Democrats have embraced an analysis that found the proposal would cut child poverty among Black families by more than 50%, and by 45% overall.

Republicans charge the move amounts to an expansion of the welfare state that will disincentivize parents from seeking work. But Democrats hold out the proposal as a fundamental rethinking of the way the country approaches child poverty and an opportunity to address the income inequality that's been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Connecticut Rep. Rosa DeLauro, a Democrat who has been advocating for an expansion of the credit since 2003, said in a statement that "this legislation forever changes the way that our nation supports both middle class families and children in poverty."

DeLauro and other Democrats on Capitol Hill see the current legislation as laying the groundwork for a permanent expansion of the credit. Indeed, Biden himself told House Democrats during a private call last week that he supports legislation that would permanently increase the child tax credit to \$3,000 per child.

While Republicans broadly support the idea of expanding benefits for children, some have opposed the Biden plan for its price tag, and others have criticized it for divorcing the benefit from any work requirement.

Scott Winship, director of poverty studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said his concern is that a permanent child allowance might make parents less likely to work and reduce the number of two-parent households, since there would be a stream of income from the government. He wants to reduce child poverty but is concerned that doing so this way might worsen factors such as unemployment and single-parenthood that contribute to poverty.

"The feeling is we win the battle against child poverty but we lose the war in the long run because we've

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 62 of 86

created incentives that make it tougher to reduce poverty," Winship said.

That's the case made by some Republican lawmakers in offering an alternative to the Biden proposal. Sens. Mike Lee of Utah and Marco Rubio of Florida have released their own expansion of the credit that ties the benefit to work.

Rubio, in a recent National Review op-ed, called the Biden proposal "corrosive."

"If pulling families out of poverty were as simple as handing moms and dads a check, we would have solved poverty a long time ago," he wrote.

But the expanded benefits included in the coronavirus relief plan set up a precedent that could put Republicans on defense on the issue. Because the benefit currently expires after a year, the Biden plan essentially creates a potential fiscal cliff for child poverty. This could set up a political showdown during an election year on whether voters believe it's acceptable for millions of children to lose the added aid and become impoverished once again.

"When it's up for renewal, Republicans will be in the awkward position of opposing payments to families delivered through a credit that they pioneered, and championed as recently as 2017," said Samuel Hammond, director of poverty and welfare policy at the Niskanen Center. "The alternative is to rally behind some Plan B."

"No Republican wants to run on taking money away from families of any income," Hammond said.

Hammond helped to develop one such "Plan B" for Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, whose plan is different from Biden's because it eliminates some other popular tax breaks to make the proposal deficit-neutral, which means it's unlikely to gain much support from Democrats.

Indeed, Schwerin suggested that, looking toward the midterm elections, the attack ads aimed at Republicans would simply highlight the party's votes for tax cuts during the Trump administration in contrast with their votes against the Biden plan.

"It's as simple as, when it was a vote on tax cuts for billionaires, Republicans voted yes, and when it was a check for you, they voted no," he said.

Oprah's deft royal interview shows why she's still the queen

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — There were royal victims and villains in Harry and Meghan's tell-all — or tell enough — interview with Oprah Winfrey. But there was only one immediate and clear winner: the American media queen.

While the couple drew both strong support and rebukes for detailing why they fled Britain and their royal roles, Winfrey burnished her stature as a master interviewer with Sunday's special that rivaled "The Crown" for drama and heartache.

She was in her element, breaking news and making entertainment. In past big "gets," Winfrey had grilled Lance Armstrong about doping, Whitney Houston about her troubled life and Michael Jackson on whether he'd lightened his skin to deny his Blackness.

In those encounters, Winfrey played prosecutor or mother confessor. This time, she asked the couple holding hands in a manicured California garden to reveal the sins of a monarchy with 1,200 years of history.

The answers, including claims of palace bigotry and callousness that Meghan said put her on the brink of suicide, reverberated with U.S. viewers and in the U.K. even before the special's planned airing there Monday night. Hugh Jackman recommended the "courageous interview" for its candor about mental health, and Serena Williams praised her friend Meghan for being "so brave." The British tabloids that Meghan also blamed for her emotional pain feasted on the interview while labeling it self-serving.

Winfrey carefully framed the interview's legitimacy at the outset, asking Meghan to confirm that questions hadn't been provided in advance, no subject was off limits and the couple wasn't compensated. CBS reportedly paid Winfrey's production company, Harpo, up to \$9 million to air it and, according to early Nielsen estimates, was rewarded with 17 million viewers, an unusually large audience amid multiplying choices.

"The thing that struck me first and I think will stay with me the longest is that she began the interview"

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 63 of 86

with ethics-related disclosures, said Kathleen Bartzen Culver, director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "That was such a fantastic way to be transparent about what we were going to see in that interview last night, and how we as viewers can judge its credibility."

Winfrey also pointedly noted that she had attended the couple's wedding — thanking Meghan for the invite — and that they were neighbors in the posh Montecito area of Southern California.

The veteran interviewer, actor and media mogul, whose talk show aired for more than two decades, had a willing partner in Meghan. Looking movie-star glamorous yet vulnerable in her visible pregnancy, the former "Suits" actor came prepared to "speak your truth today," as Winfrey put it at one point.

When Meghan revealed the depth of her emotional distress, however, she stopped short of confirming that she considered suicide. Winfrey guided her toward that bleak revelation with a deftness honed by long experience.

Her questions were short and direct, including this memorable query to Meghan: "Were you silent, or silenced?" A careful listener, she let nothing escape her notice, including when Harry almost offhandedly mentioned that his father, Prince Charles, stopped taking his calls at some point. Winfrey coaxed Harry to explore the rift.

Other intimate details poured out, including what Meghan and Harry called a lack of palace support over Meghan's harsh treatment by U.K. tabloids and dismaying accounts of how their son, Archie, was perceived as lesser than other royal offspring.

That included one of the interview's bombshells from Meghan: That someone in the palace, whom the couple refused to identify, had speculated on how dark Meghan and Harry's then-unborn son, Archie, would be.

"What? Hold up," a shocked Winfrey replied, a potent exchange made more so because it involved two African American women with a shared perspective.

Bartzen Culver saw another value in Winfrey and her skillful performance.

"She is just so tremendously talented that it just sort of, in an unspoken way, undercut the racism" directed at Meghan, she said.

With the special fixed firmly on Harry and Meghan's comments, there was scant room for context or clarification. That included the unanswered question of who had commented on Archie, a void that created a frenzy of speculation. It wasn't until Monday morning, when Winfrey appeared on "CBS This Morning," that viewers learned that Harry had disclosed that his grandparents, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, were in the clear.

In an almost defensive tone, Winfrey said she had pressed Harry for the person's name during the edited interview that in all spanned more than three hours. She also explained the palace bureaucracy that dictates aspects of royal lives, aside from the wishes of the queen, something that U.S. viewers may be unfamiliar with.

John Doyle, television critic for Canada's The Globe and Mail newspaper, said Winfrey was "the best kind of person" for the job.

While she is "a media superstar, incredibly rich and successful," Doyle said, she's able to view the British monarchy as a representative American who's fascinated by it but "cannot quite understand all of the nuances and subtleties involved.

"I think she played that role and did it very well," he said.

AP Media Writer David Bauder in New York contributed to this report.

VIRUS TODAY: Massachusetts nurses go on strike over staffing

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Monday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

THE NUMBERS:

VACCINES: More than 60 million people, or 18.1% of the U.S. population, have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some 31.2

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 64 of 86

million people have completed their vaccination, or 9.4% of the population.

CASES: According to data from Johns Hopkins University, the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the U.S. decreased over the past two weeks, going from 66,162.4 on Feb. 21 to 57,971.5 on Sunday.

DEATHS: According to data from Johns Hopkins University, the seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. decreased over the past two weeks, going from 1,873 on Feb. 21 to 1,677.1 on Sunday.

POSITIVITY RATE: The seven-day rolling test positivity rate in the U.S. decreased from 4.9% on Feb. 21 to 4.1% on Sunday, according to data from the COVID Tracking Project. The three states with the highest rates of positive coronavirus tests: Idaho (25.9%), Alabama (19.6%) and Iowa (18.1%). Idaho's rate rose in the past two weeks from 19.91% on Feb. 21 to 25.89% on Sunday.

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— Hundreds of nurses at a Massachusetts hospital walked off the job after failing to reach an agreement with Dallas-based Tenet Healthcare over staffing levels. Nurses and their supporters gathered outside St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester at dawn Monday holding signs that said "Safe Staffing Now" and "Picketing for our Patients and our Community."

— One year into the pandemic, Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak is still attempting to strike the right balance between keeping the state's tourism industry afloat while also containing the coronavirus. Sisolak said in an interview with The Associated Press that he plans to use Nevada's safety protocols as a selling point to bring tourists, conventions and trade shows back to Las Vegas.

— More than \$23.5 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds was split up among 25 applicants for the first two rounds of the South Dakota small business grant program. Some proprietors are questioning the process. The Argus Leader newspaper reports that those companies in the top 25 consisted mostly of hospitality, agriculture and commercial real estate and construction businesses.

QUOTABLE: "We are sad to see that Tenet holds so little value for our patients, yet we are resolved to do whatever it takes for as long as it takes to protect our patients, as it is safer to strike now than allow Tenet to continue endangering our patients every day on every shift," nurse Marlena Pellegrino, co-chair of the local bargaining unit of the Massachusetts Nurses Association, said in a statement.

ICYMI: Students in Michigan's largest school district returned to classrooms for in-person learning Monday for the first time in months. Detroit schools stopped face-to-face learning in November because of rising COVID-19 infection rates in the city.

ON THE HORIZON: Gov. Andrew Cuomo says restaurants in New York state outside of New York City will be allowed to fill three-fourths of their seats starting March 19. The move to 75% capacity will take place on the same day that neighboring Connecticut goes to 100% capacity for restaurants

Find AP's full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Emails: FBI was looking for gold at Pennsylvania dig site

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM Associated Press

Go for the gold? The U.S. government went for it.

FBI agents were looking for an extremely valuable cache of fabled Civil War-era gold — possibly tons of it — when they excavated a remote woodland site in Pennsylvania three years ago this month, according to government emails and other recently released documents in the case.

On March 13, 2018, treasure hunters led the FBI to Dent's Run, about 135 miles (220 kilometers) north-east of Pittsburgh, where legend has it an 1863 shipment of Union gold was either lost or stolen on its way to the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia.

The FBI has long refused to confirm why exactly it went digging, saying only in written statements over the years that agents were there for a court-authorized excavation of "what evidence suggested may have been a cultural heritage site."

In any event, the FBI says, the dig came up empty.

But the father-son duo who brought a small army of federal agents to the site remain convinced the FBI

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 65 of 86

uncovered something there — and their lawyer, Bill Cluck, is still pressing the case, successfully suing for access to government emails about the dig.

Those documents, which Cluck provided to The Associated Press, show that federal law enforcement was indeed after buried treasure.

"We believe the cache itself is in the neighborhood of 3x5x8 (feet) to 5x5x8," wrote K.T. Newton, an assistant U.S attorney in Philadelphia, in a 2018 email marked "Confidential."

Since the Elk County site was on state-owned land, the FBI had to secure a federal court order to gain access. The legal maneuvering generated emails between Newton and Audrey Miner, chief lawyer for the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

On March 13, as FBI agents clambered up a hill to the target, Miner bluntly asked Newton: "Can you please provide the basis upon which the Office of the United States Attorney asserts that the gold, if found, belongs to the federal government?"

Newton replied that a federal affidavit in the case was sealed. She instead offered to "discuss this generally with you on the phone," according to email records released by the state under court order.

The federal government followed a well-worn path to the woods of northwestern Pennsylvania, where legendary tales of buried Civil War gold had inspired generations of treasure hunters — including Dennis and Kem Parada.

The Paradas, who co-own the treasure-hunting outfit Finders Keepers, had spent years looking for the long-lost booty before going to the FBI with their evidence in January 2018, saying their sophisticated detector had registered a hunk of metal they suspected was the gold of lore.

Within weeks, the FBI hired geophysical consulting firm Envirosca to survey the hilltop site. Envirosca's gravimeter also indicated a large metallic mass with the density of gold, according to Warren Getler, who worked closely with the Paradas and the FBI.

An FBI agent told them the location of the mass was "one or two feet off Denny's sweet spot," recalled Getler, author of "Rebel Gold," a book exploring the possibility of buried Civil War-era caches of gold and silver. "Then I went to ask how big is it. And he said, '7 to 9 tons.' And I literally said, 'You've got to be kidding!'"

That much gold would be worth hundreds of millions of dollars today — and, assuming it was there, would almost certainly touch off a legal fight over how to divvy up the spoils.

Envirosca co-founder Timothy Bechtel declined comment to the AP about what his instruments detected, citing client confidentiality. Bechtel said the FBI has asked him to keep quiet about his findings.

John Louie, a geophysics professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, unconnected to the dig, said the gravimeter is a powerful tool that can yield important clues about what's underground.

"But it doesn't prove it," he said. "It doesn't make any elemental analysis. It's indicative, it's suggestive, but it can't prove it."

To prove it, the FBI needed to dig.

The Paradas and Getler have previously said they had an agreement with the FBI to watch the excavation. Officers instead confined them to their car for most of the dig, then, at the end of the second and final day, escorted them to the site — by that time a large, empty hole.

The FBI has long been adamant that whatever the agents were looking for, they didn't find it.

"The FBI unequivocally rejects any claims or speculation to the contrary," a spokesperson said last week.

On March 16, 2018, two days after the dig ended, Newton emailed Miner that "we are all disappointed and scratching our heads over the several scientific test results."

It's unclear what she meant, but the U.S. Attorney's Office in Philadelphia said last week it considers the matter to be closed.

The dig drew plenty of media attention at the time. On March 28, Miner asked Newton for an update on the federal investigation, telling her "the gold story still has legs, and the DCNR is now getting a lot of 'gold-diggers' interested in Dent's Run."

In her reply, Newton told Miner: "For your knowledge only ... we have no other scientific evidence, other than what the excavation had been based on, that any gold is hidden in that area."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 66 of 86

Miner emailed back: "I guess you can't come right out and state there is no gold to be found at Dent's Run?"

"Unfortunately, we cannot," the prosecutor replied.

Through a spokesperson, Miner declined comment.

Three years later, the Dent's Run story is not likely to go away, government denials notwithstanding. The Paradis and Getler are planning a news conference on Wednesday to keep the spotlight on their claims. Residents have told of hearing a backhoe and jackhammer overnight — when the excavation was supposed to have been paused — and seeing a convoy of FBI vehicles, including large armored trucks.

"I gotta find out what happened to all that gold," Dennis Parada said in a phone interview last week.

The FBI assertion of an empty hole is "insulting all the credible people who did this kind of work," he said. "It was a slap in the face, really, to think all these people could make that kind of mistake."

Cluck, meanwhile, is still pursuing government material on the case — nearly 2,400 pages, as well as video files, that the FBI has promised to turn over in response to his Freedom of Information Act request.

All documents in the federal court case about the dig remain sealed. For that reason, a state appeals judge recently declined to order the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to give Cluck the federal writ of entry and seizure warrant that the FBI agents relied on to gain access to the site.

In rejecting Cluck's petition, though, state Commonwealth Court Judge Kevin Brobson left a tantalizing clue. In a footnote of his Jan. 28 opinion, Brobson revealed, for the first time, the name of the sealed federal case:

"In the Matter of: Seizure of One or More Tons of United States Gold."

Fully vaccinated people can gather without masks, CDC says

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Fully vaccinated Americans can gather with other vaccinated people indoors without wearing a mask or social distancing, according to long-awaited guidance from federal health officials.

The recommendations also say that vaccinated people can come together in the same way — in a single household — with people considered at low-risk for severe disease, such as in the case of vaccinated grandparents visiting healthy children and grandchildren.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced the guidance Monday.

The guidance is designed to address a growing demand, as more adults have been getting vaccinated and wondering if it gives them greater freedom to visit family members, travel, or do other things like they did before the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world last year.

"With more and more people vaccinated each day, we are starting to turn a corner," said CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky.

During a press briefing Monday, she called the guidance a "first step" toward restoring normalcy in how people come together. She said more activities would be ok'd for vaccinated individuals once caseloads and deaths decline, more Americans are vaccinated, and as more science emerges on the ability of those who have been vaccinated to get and spread the virus.

The CDC is continuing to recommend that fully vaccinated people still wear well-fitted masks, avoid large gatherings, and physically distance themselves from others when out in public. The CDC also advised vaccinated people to get tested if they develop symptoms that could be related to COVID-19.

The CDC guidance did not speak to people who may have gained some level of immunity from being infected, and recovering from, the coronavirus.

Officials say a person is considered fully vaccinated two weeks after receiving the last required dose of vaccine. About 31 million Americans — or only about 9% of the U.S. population — have been fully vaccinated with a federally authorized COVID-19 vaccine so far, according to the CDC.

Authorized vaccine doses first became available in December, and they were products that required two doses spaced weeks apart. But since January, a small but growing number of Americans have been fully vaccinated, and have been asking questions like: Do I still have to wear a mask? Can I go to a bar now?

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 67 of 86

Can I finally see my grandchildren?

The guidance was “welcome news to a nation that is understandably tired of the pandemic and longs to safely resume normal activities,” said Dr. Richard Besser, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and a former acting director of the CDC.

“I hope that this new guidance provides the momentum for everyone to get vaccinated when they can and gives states the patience to follow the public health roadmap needed to reopen their economies and communities safely,” said Besser, in a statement.

But some said the guidance is too cautious.

Dr. Ali Khan, dean of the University of Nebraska College of Public Health, said the guidance is reasonable in many respects — with the exception of travel.

The CDC did not change its recommendations on travel, which discourages unnecessary travel and calls for getting tested within a few days of the trip. That could seem confusing to vaccinated people hoping to visit family across the country or abroad.

“They need to relax travel for those vaccinated” and to immediately publish electronic standards for documents that show whether a person is fully vaccinated, said Khan, who formerly was a leading CDC disease detective.

The new guidance also says nothing about going to restaurants or other places, even though governors are lifting restrictions on businesses, said Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician and public health professor at George Washington University who formerly was Baltimore’s health commissioner.

Wen has said the CDC should have had some kind of post-vaccination guidance ready in January, when some people first began to finish their second doses. And she called the guidance that came out Monday “far too cautious.”

“The CDC is missing a major opportunity to tie vaccination status with reopening guidance. By coming out with such limited guidance, they are missing the window to influence state and national policy,” Wen said, in an email.

But some people who are fully vaccinated were pleased by Monday’s news.

Ruth Michienzi was among those receiving her second and final vaccine dose at a pharmacy inside a Stop and Shop supermarket in Woburn, Massachusetts on Monday morning.

The 91-year-old resident of nearby Burlington said she’s fine with having to still wear a facemask in public and follow other safety guidelines even after being fully vaccinated.

But Michienzi also said she’s excited to finally be able to take off her mask in front of her three great grandchildren. She’s seen them in person since receiving her first shot about a month ago, but has kept her mask on.

“I hope they remember me,” she said.

“I’ve been doing all of that for a year, and I don’t want that year to be wasted,” Michienzi said of the safety regulations. “I think it’s smart to wait.”

A pair of customers, who weren’t in line to receive shots, though, openly groused about the continued restrictions and voiced fears that stricter mandates on travel and socializing would follow, even as more are vaccinated.

Grace McShane, 61, of Melrose, also received her second dose Monday at the same supermarket.

She says she qualified for the vaccine because she’s high risk, including suffering a heart attack last year. The in-home caregiver said she too was fine with the continued restrictions even after being vaccinated.

“Even if you’re vaccinated, it’s better to be safe than sorry. This is the new normal. This is part of life and you just have to adapt to it,” McShane said.

She said she’s looking forward to hugging her three grandchildren without having to wear a mask. Her grown children have also been vaccinated as essential workers, she said.

“Just cuddle and give them hugs,” McShane said. “That’s all I want to do.”

Associated Press reporters Phil Marcelo in Boston and Zeke Miller in Washington contributed to this report.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 68 of 86

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Exciting 2nd half awaits NBA, but virus may still have a say

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

While LeBron James was largely resting through the All-Star Game, the Brooklyn Nets were adding another piece for a run at his title.

With James still near the top of his game and the Nets on top of the league in scoring, it's easy to envision a coast-to-coast NBA Finals when a champion is crowned in July.

But, when most teams resume play Thursday — the same date last season was suspended — the leaders in the Eastern Conference might be doing so without their two best players.

As proven again when Philadelphia's Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons had to sit out the All-Star Game, the coronavirus might still have a say on this season, making uncertainty a sizable obstacle in the title chase.

"You're playing every other day. You don't know when you're going to have practice time. You don't know as far as what the restrictions and with COVID and things of that nature if you're going to have all your guys," James said. "So it's very challenging for all teams, not just us."

The bigger problem for the Lakers has been the absence of All-Star Anthony Davis because of a right calf injury. The defending champions have struggled without him, dropping six of eight to end the first half and falling 3 1/2 games behind surprising West leader Utah.

The Nets have also been without an All-Star, though they've hardly missed Kevin Durant because of the brilliance of James Harden and Kyrie Irving. Blake Griffin agreed to join them Sunday night after the six-time All-Star cleared waivers after securing his buyout from Detroit.

"We're fortunate to be able to add a player of Blake's caliber to our roster at this point in the season," Nets general manager Sean Marks said.

Brooklyn comes out of the break a half-game behind Philadelphia. Embiid has been a force this season and become a leading MVP candidate, but he and Simmons were ruled out of the All-Star Game on Sunday morning because they got haircuts from a barber who tested positive for COVID-19.

They may not be cleared to return until the weekend, after the Sixers have played their first two games of the second half.

"We start on the road, back-to-back games, with one practice. That's a challenge in itself, right?," Sixers coach Doc Rivers said. "Then, obviously, not having those guys, that's a lot of points, our two best defenders. So, obviously, it would hurt."

Teams are used to it after a first half in which the unavailability of players and coaches because of health and safety protocols forced 31 games to be called off. For every team, the first big test of the second half is the coronavirus one that will determine who is good to go upon returning from break.

Once that's finished, teams can look ahead to a busy and exciting stretch run. With many clubs bunched in the standings and another play-in tournament opening up additional paths to the postseason, even teams that weren't as sharp as they hoped in the first half have reason for hope.

That includes teams such as Miami and Boston — last season's Eastern Conference finalists — plus Dallas and Golden State, all at or barely above .500 but perhaps just one hot streak from a nice leap up the standings.

Or maybe Milwaukee, which was running away with the best record in the East last year when the season stopped but has been inconsistent this season, can discover its old form. The Bucks will be fearsome again if Giannis Antetokounmpo shoots anywhere near the way he did in the All-Star Game, when he went 16 for 16 en route to MVP honors.

"I've got to keep working hard and I've got to keep enjoying the game of basketball, and hopefully more important things can come, and hopefully my goal is to be a champion one day," the two-time regular-season MVP said. "Hopefully we can hold the big trophy."

A number of teams could have a shot. The Lakers may have looked like a solid favorite to repeat when

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 69 of 86

the season started, but Davis' health throws that into question.

Perhaps the Jazz can capitalize. They were the team whose coronavirus issues caused the season to stop last March 11. Now, they have three All-Stars and a league-leading 27-9 record.

"It's definitely been rewarding but at the end of the day we're not here to celebrate and act like we've done something and it's only March," Donovan Mitchell said. "I think we've got to continue to get better."

Gonzaga remains No. 1, Baylor back to No. 2 in AP Top 25

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Basketball Writer

Gonzaga's bid to go wire-to-wire No. 1 is in its final week.

The Zags received 61 of 63 first-place votes from a media panel in The Associated Press men's college basketball poll released Monday as they attempt to become the first wire-to-wire No. 1 since Kentucky in 2014-15.

Baylor had two first-place votes and moved back into the No. 2 slot after dropping a spot last week.

Illinois, Michigan and Iowa rounded out the top 5. No. 8 Arkansas is in the top 10 for the first time since reaching No. 1 in 1994-95.

Gonzaga won its ninth consecutive West Coast Conference regular-season title after going 14-0 and is the lone remaining undefeated team in Division I. The Zags (24-0) play Saint Mary's in the WCC Tournament semifinals Monday night and would advance to the title game Tuesday with a win.

Win those two and Gonzaga will become the fifth team in the last 45 years to head into the NCAA Tournament undefeated.

"I don't know about how important it is and all that. I mean it would be a heck of an accomplishment, quite frankly," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. "It's hard to be the front-runner and lead the mile all four laps. Everybody's gunning for you."

Gonzaga will likely be a No. 1 seed regardless of what happens this week and could be gunning to become the first team to finish a perfect season since Indiana in 1975-76.

BEARS BOUNCE BACK

Baylor dropped to No. 3 last week after losing at Kansas on Feb. 27, in their second game back from three weeks without any games because of COVID-19 issues within the program.

The Bears were back to their dominating ways last week, winning all three games in six days. They won in overtime at No. 10 West Virginia before taking down No. 12 Oklahoma State and No. 20 Texas Tech by double digits at home.

The win over the Mountaineers gave Baylor its first Big 12 regular-season title and moved it back into the No. 2 slot this week. The Bears finished undefeated at home for the first time in 73 years.

RISING RAZORBACKS

Arkansas has made quite a jump in two seasons under coach Eric Musselman.

The Razorbacks were in decent shape to make the NCAA Tournament in Musselman's first year before the pandemic wiped out the end to the 2019-20 season.

Arkansas finished the regular season 21-5 and closed it out with seven consecutive wins, including at Kentucky and at then-No. 10 Missouri.

The Razorbacks entered the AP Top 25 on Feb. 15 and have made a quick climb, reaching No. 12 last week. Wins against South Carolina and Texas A&M last week moved them into the top 10 for the first time since Nolan Richardson led them to a No. 1 ranking and the 1995 national championship game.

POLL MOVEMENT

No. 12 Oklahoma State and No. 16 Virginia had the biggest jumps of the week, moving up five spots each. ... No. 25 Oklahoma had the biggest drop, falling nine places after losing four consecutive games, including 69-65 to No. 13 Texas on Thursday. ... Southern California moved into the Top 25 at No. 24 after beating Stanford and rival UCLA last week. ... Wisconsin dropped out from No. 25 following losses to Iowa and No. 23 Purdue.

This story has been corrected to show that Baylor lost to Kansas, not West Virginia.

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/College-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Guilt, envy, distrust: Vaccine rollout breeds mixed emotions

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Before posting a selfie with her COVID-19 vaccination card on Twitter, Aditi Juneja debated whether to include an explanation for why she was eligible for a shot.

“The first draft of the tweet had an explanation,” says Juneja, a 30-year-old lawyer in New York City.

After some thought, she decided to leave out that her body mass index is considered obese, putting her at higher risk of serious illness if infected. A friend who disclosed the same reason on social media was greeted with hateful comments, and Juneja wanted to avoid that.

The rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S. is offering hope that the pandemic that has upended life around the world will finally draw to an end. But as distribution widens in the U.S., varying eligibility rules and unequal access to the coveted doses are also breeding guilt, envy and judgment among those who’ve had their doses — particularly the seemingly young and healthy — and the millions still anxiously awaiting their turn.

Adding to the second-guessing about who should be getting shots is the scattershot feel of the rollout, and the sense that some might be gaming the system. Faced with a patchwork of confusing scheduling systems, many who aren’t as technically savvy or socially connected have been left waiting even as new swaths of people become eligible.

The envy and moral judgments about whether others deserve to be prioritized are understandable and could reflect anxieties about being able to get vaccines for ourselves or our loved ones, says Nancy Berlinger, a bioethicist with the Hastings Center.

“There’s the fear of missing out, or fear of missing out on behalf of your parents,” she says.

Stereotypes about what illness looks like are also feeding into doubts about people’s eligibility, even though the reason a person got a shot won’t always be obvious. In other cases, Berlinger says judgments could reflect entrenched biases about smoking and obesity, compared with conditions that society might deem more “virtuous,” such as cancer.

Yet even though a mass vaccination campaign is bound to have imperfections, Berlinger noted the goal is to prioritize people based on medical evidence on who’s most at risk if infected.

Nevertheless, the uneven rollout and varying rules across the country have some questioning decisions by local officials.

In New Jersey, 58-year-old software developer Mike Lyncheski was surprised when he learned in January that smokers of any age were eligible, since he knew older people at the time who were still waiting for shots.

“It didn’t seem like there was medical rationale for it,” says Lyncheski, who isn’t yet eligible for the vaccines. He also noted there’s no way to confirm that people are smokers, leaving the door open for cheating.

The suspicions are being fueled by reports of line-jumpers or those stretching the definitions for eligibility. In New York, a Soul Cycle instructor got vaccinated after teachers became eligible in January, the Daily Beast reported, and later apologized for her “terrible error” in judgment. In Florida, two women wore bonnets and glasses to disguise themselves as elderly in hopes of scoring shots. Hospital board members, trustees and donors have also gotten shots early on, raising complaints about unfair access.

It’s why some feel obligated to explain why they were able to get the vaccine. In an Instagram post, Jeff Klein held up his vaccination card and noted he was given a shot as a volunteer at a mass vaccination hub.

“I definitely mentioned it on purpose, because I didn’t want people to get the wrong idea,” says Klein, a 44-year-old musician in Austin, Texas.

As she waited for a shot in Jacksonville, Florida, 33-year-old Amanda Billy said it could be frustrating seeing people her age in other states posting about getting vaccinated. She understood that state rollouts

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 71 of 86

vary, but felt anxious because she has a medical condition that makes COVID-19 "very real and scary."
"I'm just happy for them that they got it. But also, I want it," she said in an interview before getting her first shot.

Others are finding they are opening themselves up to criticism when sharing news that they got a shot. Public figures in particular might become targets of second-guessing by strangers.

In New York, local TV news co-host Jamie Stelter posted a photo of herself after getting a first shot last month. Many replies were positive, but others noted that she didn't look old enough or that she must "have connections."

Afterward, Stelter's co-host Pat Kiernan weighed in and tweeted that the "you don't look that sick to me" commentary she received was "evidence of the hell that COVID has placed us in."

For Juneja, the decision to get a shot after becoming eligible wasn't easy, given the struggles she knew others were having securing appointments because of technology, language or other barriers. But she realized it wouldn't help for her to refrain from getting vaccinated.

"It's not like with other types of things where I could give my spot to someone else who I think is more in need," she says. "We are sort of all in this situation where we can only really decide for ourselves."

Candice Choi, a reporter on The Associated Press' Health & Science team, has been covering the pandemic and vaccine rollout in the United States.

Pope weighed Iraq virus risk but believes God will protect

By NICOLE WINFIELD and SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

ABOARD THE PAPAL PLANE (AP) — Pope Francis said Monday he weighed the risks of a high-profile trip to Iraq during the coronavirus pandemic, but said he decided to go ahead with it after much prayer and belief that God would look out for the Iraqis who might get exposed.

Francis described his decision-making process en route home from Iraq amid concerns that his four-day visit, which featured oftentimes maskless crowds in packed churches, singing — could result in the spread of infections in a country with a fragile health care system and a sustained surge in new cases.

Francis said the idea of a trip "cooks over time in my conscience," and that the pandemic was the issue that weighed most heavily on him. Francis has experienced close-up the ravages of COVID-19 in Europe given Italy has had one of the worst outbreaks in the world, with the official death toll soon to hit 100,000.

"I prayed a lot about this. And in the end I took the decision freely," Francis said. "It came from inside. I said 'He who makes me decide this way will look after the people.'"

"I took the decision this way, but after prayer and knowing the risks," he said.

Francis on Monday wrapped up the first-ever papal trip to Iraq, which was aimed at bringing hope to the country's marginalized Christian minority while boosting relations with the Shiite Muslim world.

At every turn of his trip, Francis urged Iraqis to embrace diversity — from Najaf in the south, where he held a historic face-to-face meeting with powerful Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to Nineveh to the north, where he met with Christian victims of the Islamic State group and heard their testimonies of survival.

But at every turn he also experienced crowds that often ignored social distancing norms and mask requirements, even though the Vatican and Iraqi church officials had promised anti-virus measures would be enforced.

Francis, the Vatican delegation and traveling media were vaccinated against COVID-19, while most Iraqis haven't been. Infectious disease experts had questioned the wisdom of such a trip given Iraq's latest cases are being spurred by the more infectious strain that first appeared in the U.K.

Iraq recorded 4,068 infections Saturday, up significantly from infection rates at the start of the year. In total, 13,500 people have died among a total 720,000 confirmed infections.

While Francis said he prayed on the decision, it was clear the globe-trotting pope of the peripheries was also getting antsy being cooped up in the Vatican for more than a year. He said he hoped he soon might

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 72 of 86

be able to resume public audiences at the Vatican, which have been suspended for months, and hinted at a possible trip to Lebanon.

"After these months of imprisonment, and truly I felt a bit imprisoned, this for me is to live again," he said of the chance to be close to his flock. "To live again because it's touching the church, the holy people of God."

In one of the historic highlights of the trip, Francis was invited into the home of the notoriously reclusive al-Sistani, among the most influential and revered Shiite clerics, and together they delivered a powerful message of peaceful coexistence and affirmed the rights of Iraqi Christians. The Vatican hopes the message can help preserve the place of the thinning Christian population in Iraq's tapestry of faith and ethnic groups.

Francis said he was "honored" to have been received by al-Sistani, whom he called "a great man, a wise man, a man of God."

"He was very respectful," Francis said, publicly acknowledging the rare honor the 90-year-old al-Sistani showed him by standing up to greet him.

"He never stands up for the greeting. He stood up to greet me — twice," Francis said. "This meeting was good for my soul. He is a luminary."

Francis counted the meeting as the second major step forward in the Vatican's interfaith efforts with Muslims after he penned a landmark document on shared Christian-Muslim values with a top Sunni cleric in 2019.

Francis also shot back at critics who questioned his outreach to Muslims as watering down of Catholic doctrine or downright heresy, saying "sometimes you have to take risks to take steps forward."

"These are risks that you take in prayer and in dialogue, in seeking advice and in reflection," he said. "They are not (based on) whims."

The trip, however, was taxing on the 84-year-old pope, whose sciatica nerve pain was apparently flaring and making him walk with a pronounced limp.

Francis said he wasn't sure if he would have to slow down his usual whirlwind pace on future trips.

"I do confess that on this trip I got a lot more tired than during other ones," he said, noting his age. "It's a consequence. But we'll see."

The next likely trip is to Budapest, Hungary, to close out an international Eucharistic conference in September, with a possible side trip to Bratislava, Slovakia, he said. The Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest Peter Erdo later confirmed the visit to Budapest to Hungarian news agency MTI, while the Slovak Bishops' Conference said the pope's possible trip to Slovakia hasn't been confirmed yet.

Otherwise, the only other trip Francis has promised to make is to Lebanon, though he offered no time frame.

"Lebanon is suffering," Francis said, referring to its political, economic, social and coronavirus crises. He said the country's patriarch had asked him to add a Beirut leg onto his Iraq trip but that he had declined, thinking it would be like tossing the country "crumbs," given all Lebanon's current problems.

"But I wrote him a letter and promised I'd go to Lebanon."

Samya Kullab reported from Baghdad.

Judge ends shooting case against Breonna Taylor's boyfriend

By DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — A judge in Kentucky has signed an order permanently closing a criminal case against Breonna Taylor's boyfriend, who shot a police officer during the deadly raid that killed Taylor.

Prosecutors dismissed an attempted murder of a police officer charge against Kenneth L. Walker in May, about two months after Taylor's death. But prosecutors left open the opportunity to revisit the charge against Walker if new evidence surfaced.

Taylor was fatally shot by police who burst through her door with a narcotics warrant on March 13, 2020.

She and Walker had settled in for the night when police arrived and knocked down the door. Walker said he thought an intruder was breaking in and he fired a single shot that struck an officer in the leg.

A motion from Walker's attorney asking for the permanent dismissal said Walker "acted in self-defense and that he did not know that police were on the other side of the door."

Jefferson Circuit Judge Olu Stevens' order on Monday dismissed the 2020 indictment against Walker with prejudice, meaning it can't be reconsidered.

The officer who was shot, Sgt. Jonathan Mattingly, recovered from the leg wound and remains on the Louisville police department. Two other officers who fired shots at Taylor's apartment have been dismissed from the department.

COVID-19 claims 15 people in life of one Milwaukee woman

By CARRIE ANTLFINGER Associated Press

MILWAUKEE (AP) — The first person Kimberly Montgomery lost to COVID-19 was her aunt. She had trouble breathing, so her daughter dropped her off at the emergency room. It was the last time her daughter saw her alive.

Then, one after another, 14 other people in Montgomery's world — family members, friends, friends who were like family — succumbed to the same disease.

There was the retired police officer who was an usher and deacon at her church. A friend's brother who was a restaurant cook. A close friend who was a nurse caring for virus patients in Atlanta. A cousin who came home from the hospital after 12 days thinking she was getting better, but didn't. An artist and drummer for an African dance company.

It was an unimaginable string of losses in the year since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and all but one of those who died was Black, like Montgomery.

"I don't know if I ever will ... process all of them," said Montgomery, 59. She added: "The shock factor, it never wears off. But it tempers."

Nationwide, Black people represent about 12 percent of the population, but they account for nearly 15 percent of all coronavirus deaths of known race, according to the APM Research Lab, which is tracking mortality from the disease.

More than 73,000 Black Americans have died from COVID-19, and they have the second-highest mortality rate of all racial groups, behind Indigenous people.

At the same time, Montgomery has seen her community grapple with a nationwide reckoning on race and policing and other systemic issues. Her personal pain has only strengthened her resolve to work for the public good — including in her job as director of intergovernmental relations for the city of Milwaukee.

"Hearing the statistics ... seeing the incidents in Minnesota and the George Floyd incidents and the Kenosha incidents, that's what keeps me going," she said. "Because these victims are looking like me."

Montgomery has spent much of her time in the past year advocating for COVID-related funding for Milwaukee. She's also working with the Milwaukee alumni chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, a historically Black sorority, to raise awareness about vaccines and testing through social media and virtual events.

She works closely with Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, who says Montgomery has always known the importance of her work, but he's recently sensed more urgency.

"This is not a theoretical exercise for her. It's very real," Barrett said.

Her experiences, he added, have sharpened his perspective as well: "It brings home how devastating this last year and this pandemic has been."

Montgomery de-emphasizes her own bereavement, saying others have suffered greater losses, of spouses or parents. She grieves for her friends and family, especially her cousin Ingrid Davis, who took her mother to the emergency room, never to see her again.

Davis, who also lost a cousin to COVID-19, says she stays home a lot due to the pandemic, so she does not see Montgomery as much, but they talk often.

"Kim is a social butterfly," she said. "I call her the second mayor of Milwaukee, but I think that with all

that has happened, I have seen a little decline of that.”

Montgomery works mostly from home and is diligent about wearing a mask when she’s out. She gets tested before visiting her parents in Tennessee, terrified she will infect them.

“I get very emotional about that. I find myself getting upset if people, if I see individuals who don’t even have the mask over their nose. It’s ineffective. And it really bothers me,” she said.

But Montgomery also has a newfound appreciation for life, noticing things like the birds chirping in the background when she speaks to her 31-year-old son on the phone. She is one of those people who laughs easily and a lot, earning the nickname “Sunshine” throughout her life.

Still, COVID-19 is never far from her thoughts.

“My prayer every night is for any and everybody who’s dealing with this disease.”

With virus aid in sight, Democrats debate filibuster changes

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With President Joe Biden on the verge of his first big legislative victory, a key moderate Democrat says he’s open to changing Senate rules that could allow for more party-line votes to push through other parts of the White House’s agenda such as voting rights.

West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin stressed Sunday that he wants to keep the procedural hurdle known as the filibuster, saying major legislation should always have significant input from the minority party. But he noted there are other ways to change the rules that now effectively require 60 votes for most legislation. One example: the “talking filibuster,” which requires senators to slow a bill by holding the floor, but then grants an “up or down” simple majority vote if they give up.

“The filibuster should be painful, it really should be painful and we’ve made it more comfortable over the years,” Manchin said. “Maybe it has to be more painful.”

“If you want to make it a little bit more painful, make him stand there and talk,” Manchin added. “I’m willing to look at any way we can, but I’m not willing to take away the involvement of the minority.”

On Monday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki reiterated that President Joe Biden has no interest in tweaking the filibuster.

“His preference is not to make changes to the filibuster rules. But he believes that with the current structure that he can work with Democrats and Republicans to get work and business done,” she said.

Democrats are beginning to look to their next legislative priorities after an early signature win for Biden on Saturday, with the Senate approving a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan on a party-line 50-49 vote.

Final passage is expected Tuesday in the House if leaders can hold the support of progressives frustrated that the Senate narrowed unemployment benefits and stripped out an increase of the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour.

Over the weekend, 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 Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., also characterized the changes as “relatively minor concessions” and emphasized the bill retained its “core bold, progressive elements.”

Biden says he would sign the measure immediately if the House passed it. The legislation would allow many Americans to receive \$1,400 in direct checks from the government this month.

“Lessons learned: If we have unity, we can do big things,” a jubilant Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., told The Associated Press in an interview after Saturday’s vote.

Still, the Democrats’ approach required a last-minute call from Biden to Manchin to secure his vote after he raised late resistance to the breadth of unemployment benefits. That immediately raised questions about the path ahead in a partisan environment where few, if any, Republicans are expected to back planks of the president’s agenda.

Democrats used a fast-track budget process known as reconciliation to approve Biden’s top priority without Republican support, a strategy that succeeded despite the reservations of some moderates. But work in the coming months on other issues such as voting rights and immigration could prove more difficult.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 75 of 86

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., pledged that Senate Republicans would block passage of a sweeping House-passed bill on voting rights. The measure, known as HR 1, would restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, strike down hurdles to voting and bring transparency to the campaign finance system. It would serve as a counterweight to voting rights restrictions advancing in Republican-controlled statehouses across the country in the wake of Donald Trump's repeated false claims about a "stolen" election.

"Not one Republican is going to vote for HR 1 because it's a federal takeover of elections, it sets up a system where there is no real voter security or verification," Graham said. "It is a liberal wish list in terms of how you vote."

The Senate is divided 50-50, but Democrats control the chamber because Vice President Kamala Harris can cast the tie-breaking vote. With 60 votes effectively needed on most legislation, Democrats must win the support of at least some Republicans to pass Biden's agenda.

When asked about the voting rights bill, Manchin on Sunday left the door open to supporting some kind of a workaround to allow for passage based on a simple majority, suggesting he could support "reconciliation" if he was satisfied that Republicans had the ability to provide input. But it was unclear how that would work as voting rights are not budget-related and would not qualify for the reconciliation process.

"I'm not going to go there until my Republican friends have the ability to have their say also," Manchin said.

On Sunday, the anti-filibuster advocacy group "Fix Our Senate" praised Manchin's comments as a viable way to get past "pure partisan obstruction" in the Senate.

"Sen. Manchin just saw Senate Republicans unanimously oppose a wildly popular and desperately-needed COVID relief bill that only passed because it couldn't be filibustered, so it's encouraging to hear him express openness to reforms to ensure that voting rights and other critical bills can't be blocked by a purely obstructionist minority," the group said in a statement.

Manchin spoke on NBC's "Meet the Press," "Fox News Sunday," CNN's "State of the Union" and ABC's "This Week," and Graham appeared on Fox News Channel's "Sunday Morning Futures."

Associated Press writers Alan Fram and Lisa Mascaró contributed to this report.

The Latest: Estimated 17.1 million watched royals interview

MONTECITO, Calif. (AP) — The latest on Oprah Winfrey's interview with Meghan and Harry, their first since stepping away from royal life. All times Pacific Standard Time:

9:15 p.m.

Oprah Winfrey's explosive interview with Prince Harry and Meghan reached an estimated 17.1 million viewers in the United States on Sunday.

That's according to preliminary numbers from the Nielsen company. Winfrey guided the two as they discussed racism and dysfunction inside the royal family in a two-hour special on CBS.

CBS gave the interview a good time slot, following the popular newsmagazine "60 Minutes." In an era when many people are making their own TV schedules, reaching that kind of live audiences is unusual now unless it's a big sporting event.

Nielsen said it had the largest audience for any prime-time entertainment special so far this television season.

In the interview, Meghan said she considered suicide, while Harry said he and his family were "trapped" in an oppressive institution.

9:10 a.m.

The White House is emphasizing America's "special partnership" with the U.K. government in the wake of the bombshell interview in which Prince Harry and Meghan alleged racism and widespread misconduct within the royal family.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki was asked Monday if, given their relationship with Harry and

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 76 of 86

Meghan, President Joe Biden and his wife Jill had any reaction to the interview. She said that Meghan's decision to speak about her struggles with mental health "takes courage" and said "that's certainly something the president believes in." But she said she wouldn't offer additional comment on the situation "given these are private citizens, sharing their own story and their own struggles."

Psaki added that the U.S. has "a strong and abiding relationship with the British people and a special partnership with the government of the United Kingdom on a range of issues, and that will continue."

8:45 a.m.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is steadfastly refusing to comment on the explosive allegations of racism and dysfunction inside the royal family made by Prince Harry and Meghan in a television interview.

Asked about the interview at a coronavirus news conference, Johnson said he had "always had the highest admiration for the queen and the unifying role that she plays in our country and across the Commonwealth."

But he said that "when it comes to matters to do with the royal family the right thing for a prime minister to say is nothing."

In contrast, Keir Starmer, leader of the main opposition Labour Party, says the palace has to take the allegations seriously.

"The issues that Meghan has raised of racism and mental health are really serious issues," he said. "It is a reminder that too many people experience racism in 21st-century Britain."

7 a.m.

Oprah Winfrey has revealed that while Harry would not say who in the royal family made comments about his son's skin color, he did share who hadn't.

Appearing Monday on "CBS This Morning," Winfrey said Harry told her neither his grandmother, Queen Elizabeth II, nor his grandfather, Prince Philip, were part of conversations about Archie's skin tone.

"He did not share the identity with me, but he wanted to make sure I knew and if I had the opportunity to share it that it was not his grandmother nor his grandfather that were a part of those conversations," Winfrey said.

In her bombshell interview which aired Sunday, Meghan described that when she was first pregnant with son Archie, there were "concerns and conversations about how dark his skin might be when he's born."

The Duchess of Sussex declined to say who had this conversation with Harry that he relayed to her, saying revealing their name would be "very damaging."

Winfrey said Monday she had tried to get the identity of whoever had those conversations both off-camera and on but came up empty.

1:10 a.m.

Tennis star Serena Williams says she's "proud" of Meghan Markle following her interview with Oprah Winfrey.

Williams called Meghan "my selfless friend" in an Instagram post after the sit-down aired Sunday night in the U.S. praising the Duchess of Sussex as "brave."

"I know it is never easy," Williams said in the caption. "You are strong- both you and Harry."

Meghan revealed in the interview that she experienced suicidal thoughts after joining the royal family. She also said there were concerns within the palace while she was pregnant with son Archie about how dark his skin might be.

Williams said Meghan's words "illustrate the pain and cruelty" Meghan has experienced.

"I know first hand the sexism and racism institutions and the media use to vilify women and people of color to minimize us, to break us down and demonize us," Williams wrote. "The mental health consequences of systemic oppression and victimization are devastating, isolating and all too often lethal."

Williams said she wants her daughter, Meghan's daughter and "your daughter," referring to readers, "to live in a society that is driven by respect."

Meghan and Harry announced during the interview that they are expecting a daughter.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 77 of 86

8:40 p.m.

New Zealand's prime minister says the country is unlikely to become a republic anytime soon or otherwise break from observing Britain's Queen Elizabeth II as head of state.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was asked by a reporter whether the unflattering picture of the British royal family painted by Harry and Meghan had given her pause about New Zealand's constitutional ties to Britain.

"I've said before that I've not sensed an appetite from New Zealanders for significant change in our constitutional arrangements, and I don't expect that's likely to change quickly," she said.

Asked whether Harry and Meghan had ever inquired about living in New Zealand, Ardern said they hadn't in any official capacity, as far as she was aware.

And asked about her personal friendship with Meghan since the couple toured the country in 2018, Ardern said she had kept in touch. "It is fair to say in the past I've had contact here and there," she said. "But ultimately, the matters that are being canvassed here I see as for Meghan and Harry to respond to directly. These are matters about their personal lives and their personal decisions, and I don't think it deserves a commentary from anyone else."

6:50 p.m.

Prince Harry says he was "trapped" in the royal family before Meghan helped free him.

Oprah Winfrey asked Harry in their interview airing Sunday night whether he would have stepped down from his royal duties if he had never met Meghan.

"I wouldn't have been able to," the Duke of Sussex replied, "because I myself was trapped as well" until "the moment that I met Meg."

Meghan said allegations that the couple's departure was due to her scheming made no sense.

"I left my career, my life. I left everything because I love him," she said. "Our plan was to do this forever."

Harry said "we did everything we did to make it work" and would never have left had the palace been supportive of Meghan.

Harry also said his family cut him off financially in early 2020 after they announced they were eschewing their duties, and that they were only able to depart because of the money left him by his mother, the late Princess Diana.

Harry says Diana would have been "very angry at how this has played out, and sad. But ultimately, all she'd ever want is for us to be happy."

6:20 p.m.

Meghan and Harry say their second child is a girl.

The two made the revelation in their interview with Oprah Winfrey that aired on Sunday night, a rare positive moment in a conversation that dwelt mostly on their struggles within the royal family.

Their first child, son Archie, turns 2 in May.

Harry said "to have a boy and then a girl, what more can you ask for? But now we've got our family. We've got the four of us and our two dogs."

Harry, wearing a gray suit as he sat next to his wife at a distance from Winfrey, joined the interview after Meghan talked to Winfrey alone.

He denied blindsiding the queen with the news that he and Meghan were stepping down from their royal duties, saying it was preceded by several conversations.

"I've never blindsided my grandmother," Harry said. "I have too much respect for her."

He did however say that his father, Prince Charles, has stopped taking his calls.

6:05 p.m.

Meghan Markle told Oprah Winfrey that she had suicidal thoughts after marrying Prince Harry, and the palace prevented her from getting help.

Meghan told Winfrey in the interview airing Sunday night that she "just didn't see a solution" to the

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 78 of 86

mental suffering she had experienced since joining the royal family and that she told Harry she "didn't want to be alive anymore."

She said she went to a senior royal staffer and said she needed to get help for her mental health, but was told it would be bad for the family if she did.

She described the moment as a breaking point leading to her and Harry stepping aside from their royal duties.

Meghan said she "wasn't planning to say anything shocking" during the interview, "I'm just telling you what happened."

5:45 p.m.

Meghan Markle told Oprah Winfrey that she realized soon after marrying Prince Harry that she learned that the institution of the royal family would not protect her.

In their pre-taped interview on Sunday night, Meghan told Winfrey that "not only was I not being protected, but they were willing to lie to protect other members of the family, but they weren't willing to tell the truth to protect me and my husband." She did not give specific examples.

She said when she was first pregnant with son Archie, there were "concerns and conversations about how dark his skin might be when he's born." The statement led Winfrey to ask "What," incredulously and sit in silence for a moment.

Meghan declined to say who had this conversation with Harry that he relayed to her, saying revealing their name would be "very damaging."

Meghan also said she was stunned when she was told he would not be a prince and would not receive security from the palace.

Meghan said she did not worry about being a divorced, mixed-race American actress entering the British royal family, but later she "thought about it because they made me think about it."

Meghan said it was not so much the royal family members themselves who treated her this way, but the people behind the institution.

She emphasized that the queen herself "has always been wonderful to me."

5:15 p.m.

Meghan Markle told Oprah Winfrey that she didn't "fully understand what the job was" when she married Prince Harry.

Winfrey's hotly anticipated two-hour pre-recorded interview with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex began its airing on CBS in the U.S. on Sunday night, with Meghan sitting alone with Winfrey.

The two talked about the early days before the royal marriage, with Meghan saying "there was no way to understand what the day-to-day was going to be like.

"That's what was really tricky over those past few years, is when the perception and the reality are two very different things," Meghan said. "And you're being judged on the perception, but you're living the reality of it."

Meghan also revealed that she and Harry were technically married a few days before the ceremony watched by the world.

After a brief intro with Winfrey narrating a recounting of the couple's wedding and subsequent announcement that they were stepping down from their royal duties, Meghan walked into the backyard garden setting of the interview.

"You really are having a baby!" Winfrey shouted when she saw Meghan's baby bump under her black empire-style dress.

Meghan said she would reveal the sex of the baby later in the interview when Harry joined them.

Winfrey and Meghan said they were at the home of a friend of Winfrey's because they liked the setting.

They clarified that no questions would be off limits and that Meghan and Harry would not be paid for the interview.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 79 of 86

The long game: COVID changed the way we play, watch, cheer

By EDDIE PELLIS National Writer

It's the predictable rhythm of sports that draws us in.

Not so much the results of the games themselves as the steady cadence of the seasons -- the cutting down of nets and hoisting of trophies, the pregame hype and postgame deconstructions, the trade talk and injury crises that envelop each passing year with the regularity of an atomic clock.

So, when two NBA basketball teams were hastily sent back to their locker rooms, not to return, after pregame introductions on March 11, 2020, and, then, a day later, when two college basketball teams walked off the floor at halftime and also didn't come back -- "Game Ppd, pandemic" -- it was a shock to the system.

It was one thing for the still-nascent collection of COVID-19 numbers, the interviews with lawmakers and the warnings from Dr. Anthony Fauci to overtake CNN, Fox News and MSNBC. Quite another for all those updates to find their way onto ESPN.

It was a sign that the steadily streaming loop of games we play, and watch -- games that have been played amid crisis, in the aftermath of catastrophe and that even resumed less than a week after the 9/11 terrorist attacks -- could no longer be taken for granted. For the first time in anyone's memory, sports were as much at the mercy of an uncontrolled, unpredictable and ever-changing health crisis as any other segment of life.

A year after the worldwide coronavirus pandemic stopped all the games in their tracks, the aftershocks are still being felt across every sector.

It's true in the pros and colleges, where leagues and conferences found themselves scrambling to figure out how to resume in bubbles, pods and cohorts. Once jam-packed, stadiums are now being used as mass vaccination venues or, in cases where they've reopened their gates to significant numbers of fans, scapegoated as potential superspreader sites. The goal of it all is a return to something resembling "normal," to get back to providing the masses with the programming they sorely missed while still accounting for the high risk the players take for the sake of our round-the-clock entertainment (and, yes, their millions in salaries and profit).

It's also true at the grassroots, where little leagues, swim teams, gymnastics camps and running clubs all went dark, leaving the very existence of their businesses, to say nothing of the sports they fortify from the ground all the way to the elite and Olympic levels, up in the air.

And at the outdoor playgrounds and courts and courses, which were shuttered, roped off and padlocked for weeks, sometimes months, before slowly gaining cachet as a new, somewhat safer haven for millions of restless citizens shut in by government mandate, or fear, or concern, or some combination of the three.

Some of what was lost, or stopped, has come back over the ensuing 12 months, with the rapid development of a vaccine and a sometimes-begrudging acceptance of mask-wearing and social distancing becoming norms that are now being relaxed in certain parts of the U.S. In many cases, lessons learned in sports have been applied to society in general, and helped make things better. The NFL, for instance, offered a veritable instruction manual for bringing large groups back into the workplace. (You must have resources, however.)

But the sporting life at all these levels does not look the same, and some of it might never look "normal" again.

"Urinals, water fountains and hot dog stands where someone hands you food directly; buying game programs and taking ticket stubs home; athletes signing autographs and passing a pen back to you," said sports marketing guru Joe Favorito, spelling out just a short list on how the fan experience has changed for good.

Said media expert Dennis Deninger: "We will never return to the old model of sending commentators, analysts and producers to every game that is going to be broadcast." It will save money but come at a cost, he said: "The broadcast product cannot help but be diminished if those who we as fans count on to be our eyes and ears at an event are not there."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 80 of 86

Indeed, we as sports journalists have become comfortable forgoing the locker rooms for interviews via Zoom. The whole concept of "access" will generate debate for what's left of the media when the world regains its health and sports discovers its new normal.

The prospect of sports without reporters or fans in the stands went from a far-flung germ of an idea to an everyday reality. I worked on a story a year ago this week that never saw the light of day. Topic: What would the NCAA Tournament look like without fans? There was no NCAA Tournament. There will be one this year, albeit in front of 25% capacity crowds and with the entire three weeks' worth of games packed into one city, Indianapolis.

One takeaway that is as relevant today as it was a year ago came from the esteemed media commentator Bob Thompson of Syracuse: A big part of the show IS the fans – the crying flute players, the painted chests, the cheerleaders. Without all that, he said, sports wouldn't feel quite the same, the TV program wouldn't be as fun, maybe the popcorn wouldn't taste as good, even if the games did go on as planned.

How right he was.

To be sure, LeBron James, Tom Brady and the LA Dodgers may very well have won titles even had the seasons not been contested amid the very different, pandemic-altered sports landscape that underscored the 2020-21 sports calendar. The championships were as richly deserved as any they've collected, maybe even more so given the new protocols and hurdles that had to be cleared to get to kickoff or first pitch, or even the next day's practice.

But a shortened season, or a playoff series in a bubble, or a game played on the road against the backdrop of piped-in crowd noise and completely empty stands is ... just that. Not normal. Not what we're used to. Not quite the "real thing."

The International Olympic Committee is holding out hope that its 2020 Games, now planned for the summer of 2021, might bring a semblance of normalcy back to sports and the world in general. Like or dislike the leaders who run that enterprise, there might not be a return as badly needed as this one.

To be sure, the billionaires will still get theirs whether the games go on or not. But the thousands of athletes who make up the backbone of the Olympics, and the smaller, grassroots organizations that fund their training – some of them multimillion-dollar operations, but many more just ma-and-pop-sized nonprofits – cannot survive much longer without the revenue and spotlight afforded by this global sports extravaganza.

For all its warts and conflicts of interest, college sports, and college football specifically, also helps underwrite many members of those Olympic teams, to say nothing of the dreams of thousands of amateur athletes – fencers and rowers and swimmers and even football and basketball players -- whose last chance at glory will come not as a highly paid professional, but on campus. Last week, the perennial football powerhouse at the University of Alabama boldly stated it intended to play all its football games during the 2021 season in front of 100% capacity crowds. There's much money to be made by allowing folks to watch the Tide roll in person. Is this good? Bad? You be the judge.

"Business and education, for example, will never be able to fully wean themselves from the convenient technological tricks they've learned over the last year," Thompson said in a follow-up email last week. "But sports are another matter. Close physical proximity of the players is a fundamental property of the games, packing in crowds is built into the architecture and economies of the venues that present those games, and the behavior of viewers who watch them on TV never changed that much in the first place."

And when we're not shuffling into the stands or watching on TV? Simply playing the games we love has become a much different enterprise, as well.

At first, we were warned that it might not be safe even to pass someone while running on an outdoor trail, lest the droplets from a passerby's deep breath or cough be trapped into your own airstream and lead to a COVID-19 case.

Golf courses closed. Tennis courts were padlocked. Parents took their kids to playgrounds, only to find them cordoned off with yellow crime-scene tape.

All those lockdowns ended up feeling like mere hiccups in the grand scheme of things. Using proper hygiene – keep the flag in, trade a fist bump for a handshake -- golf turned out to be the perfect social-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 81 of 86

distancing sport. There were nearly 60 million more rounds played in 2020 – an increase of 14 percent over the previous year -- across America and golf pros spoke of seeing members back at their clubs who they hadn't seen in years.

There were more hikers, more campers -- anyone try to buy a mountain bike in 2020? These were signs that people were finding more ways to make their own outdoor fun, albeit with a steady dose of caution and social distancing attached.

But not all the numbers spiked. An estimated 6,000 gyms and fitness facilities shuttered as they, along with so many other businesses, asked the government for help, while also trying to come up with new, safe models to stay relevant — and open.

A survey by The Aspen Institute found kids were spending about 6 ½ hours less per week playing sports during the pandemic than they had before. Participation in youth leagues suffered — especially in low-income areas where virus-fighting resources weren't as readily available — as parents weighed the risks of putting their kids in crowded hockey rinks or dugouts versus the need for some socialization, some exercise and, yes, a chance for their children to hear a different adult voice beseeching them for action.

To survive, all the leagues and camps weren't that far removed from the NBAs and NFLs and MLBs in this way: They had to rethink their way of doing business, leaning into hand washing, sanitizer, thermometers, contact tracing and, ultimately, not taking so much for granted.

"A huge paradigm shift," youth-sports expert Bill Kerig called it. "If you think about it, going back a year and a half, there wasn't a single youth or amateur sports organization that would have asked all its athletes every day: 'How do you feel?'"

But if sports taught us anything over this last harrowing year of COVID-19, it's that, whether we're on an NFL gridiron or tossing a ball in our own backyard, we need to keep asking each other that question. And listening to the answers.

Heads up: Some sea slugs grow new bodies after decapitation

By SETH BORENSTEIN and MAYUKO ONO Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Scientists have discovered the ultimate case of regeneration: Some decapitated sea slugs can regrow hearts and whole new bodies.

This "wonder of nature," reported in a biology journal on Monday, could eventually help scientists better understand and tackle regeneration of human tissue.

Biology researcher Sayaka Mitoh said she loves studying Japanese sea slugs because they are small, cute and weird. They can even briefly photosynthesize like a plant drawing food from the sun.

One day in the lab, she saw something bizarre: A sea slug had decapitated itself and the head kept on moving and living. Then a couple more did the same, according to a study in *Current Biology*.

So the doctoral student and Nara Women's University aquatic ecology professor Yoichi Yusa tried it themselves, cutting the heads off 16 sea slugs. Six of the creatures started regeneration, with three succeeding and surviving. One of the three even lost and regrew its body twice. Two different species of Japanese sea slugs did this regeneration trick.

Other creatures can cast off body parts when needed, like when some lizards drop their tails to get away from a predator, in a biological phenomenon called autotomy.

"We think that this is the most extreme case of autotomy," Yusa said. "Some animals can autotomize their legs or appendages or tails, but no other animal shed their whole body."

Scientists had thought that such a relatively large animal — one of the sea slug species can grow to 6 inches (15 centimeters) long — couldn't survive without a heart to pump blood and nutrients to the brain, said Canadian marine biologist Susan Anthony, who wasn't part of the study.

But the same thing that makes this species spectacular is probably what helps it pull off the trick, said Anthony and Yusa.

When these sea slugs eat a certain type of algae they can photosynthesize their food from sunlight and oxygen, just like a plant, for about 10 days, Yusa said. What's probably happening after decapitation is

that the head sort of acts like a plant, he said. It turns a shade of green and gets its energy from oxygen and sunlight. The fact that it becomes tiny helps, he said.

These species probably developed the feat as a way of fighting off parasites, Mitoh and Yusa said.

Humans may be able to learn something useful from the sea creatures, several scientists said. What's especially intriguing is that these sea slugs are more complex than flatworms or other species that are known to regenerate, said Nicholas Curtis, a biology professor at Ave Maria University who wasn't part of the study.

"It is of course a wonder of nature, but understanding the underlying molecular mechanisms involved could help us to understand how our cells and tissues can be used to repair damage," Curtis said in an email.

Borenstein reported from Kensington, Maryland. Follow him on Twitter at @borenbears.

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Jill Biden sees teachable moment in the depths of a pandemic

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WATERFORD, Pa. (AP) — Jill Biden sees a teachable moment in the depths of the coronavirus pandemic.

The first lady sat in a socially distanced circle in the library at Fort LeBoeuf Middle School in Pennsylvania, listening and taking notes as parents expressed relief that the school had reopened and their kids were back in the classroom.

One mother talked about the "bumpy patches" of online learning and said reopening "has been so to the T" that she doesn't worry about her son and daughter. Another mom said the district included parent input and she was comfortable her children were in a "safe environment."

A teacher herself, Biden praised the small circle of parents, teachers and administrators for working together to help reopen Fort LeBoeuf. And she repeated a message she had delivered earlier that day while visiting Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in Meriden, Connecticut.

"We've been through really tough, hard times, but I think the one good thing about educators that I love — and that includes the cafeteria workers, the bus drivers, the teachers, everyone involved — is we've all learned from this," Biden said of the pandemic and its emotional, social and human toll.

"We're all going to take everything that we've learned and are going to turn it into opportunity to make things better for students as we move forward," she said.

The first lady seems intent on turning every aspect of her new job into an opportunity, for that matter, especially anything related to her triple passions for education, fighting cancer and supporting military families.

A few days after she became first lady, Biden told governors' spouses during a virtual meeting at the White House that her new platform is "one that I would never let go to waste."

She's long been focused on education, having taught at a high school, a psychiatric hospital and community colleges for more than three decades. She's still teaching, virtually from the White House, and pining for the day she can go back to the classroom.

Finding a cure for cancer also motivates her and President Joe Biden.

The couple lost son Beau to brain cancer in 2015 at age 46. Her parents died of cancer, and one of her sisters had a stem cell transplant. Doctors also gave the dreaded breast cancer diagnosis to four of her girlfriends within a one-year period in the 1990s.

The Bidens also advocate for service members and their families, an appreciation that stems from Beau Biden's service in the Delaware Army National Guard, including a deployment to Iraq. Jill Biden intends to revive a military family support program that she led with former first lady Michelle Obama when Biden's

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 83 of 86

husband was President Barack Obama's vice president.

Jill Biden quickly set her agenda as first lady by highlighting all three of her longtime causes in her first weeks.

She has been busy with virtual meetings, teaching her community college English class, official travel, running errands in the Washington area and settling the family's dogs into the White House. Even the light blue scrunchie she wore in her hair has gone viral.

Biden, known for springing surprises and practical jokes, also is intent on injecting some levity into things as her husband faces daunting crises: She woke him up to show him giant hearts she had displayed on the White House front lawn for Valentine's Day.

"She's off to a fast start, and I think a very solid one," said Myra Gutin, author of "The President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century."

The first lady is also keeping a robust travel schedule despite the pandemic.

Her first official outing was to a nonprofit community health center in Washington to highlight services for cancer patients. From there, she made a detour to personally deliver chocolate chip cookies to National Guard troops stationed at the U.S. Capitol.

She recently traveled to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond to tour its Massey Cancer Center, where researchers study the socioeconomic and cultural factors that contribute to disparities in cancer outcomes.

The first lady delivered remarks Monday at the State Department's virtual International Women of Courage Awards ceremony before she was to hop on a plane to spend Tuesday and Wednesday visiting U.S. military installations in Washington state and California.

Biden also met virtually with the leaders of teachers' unions, the spouses of defense officials and governors, military kids and their teachers, and government cancer researchers, among others. She sent pre-recorded remarks to several conferences, and taped a public service commercial with Champ and Major, the family German shepherds, urging people to wear face masks.

Tammy Vigil, author of "Melania & Michelle: First Ladies in a New Era," said Biden's experience as the spouse of a longtime U.S. senator and vice president was an asset that helped her quickly put together a staff. She also didn't need time to figure out the issues she wanted to focus on.

There apparently are no incognito errand runs for Jill Biden.

Unlike some recent first ladies who tried to hide their identities on unofficial outings in the Washington area, as Michelle Obama once did on a shopping run to Target, Jill Biden goes out as herself.

Stephen Bota said he knew a VIP visit was in the offing when plainclothes U.S. Secret Service agents showed up unannounced at his DuPont Circle newsstand in late January, but they left him to guess about who it would be. Hours later, Jill Biden walked through the door.

"I was kind of, 'Oh my God, it's the first lady,'" Bota, an immigrant from Kenya who owns The Newsroom, recalled in an interview. He and his employees — just his wife and sister-in-law — are featured in a photo with the first lady now on display in the store.

"I told her that we are so grateful that she came to see us," Bota said.

Biden also bought coffee at Brewer's Cafe in Richmond and confections at The Sweet Lobby on Capitol Hill, both of them Black-owned. The president, for his part, stopped his motorcade after church one Sunday for son Hunter Biden to pick up a bagel order.

"She seems more inviting," Vigil said, noting that everyone can relate to running errands.

With the purchases, the Bidens appear to be encouraging support for small businesses, which generate most of the jobs in the U.S. but are struggling to survive the pandemic.

They also seem to be signaling that they will participate in city life.

Former President Donald Trump went only to his hotel near the White House or his golf club in northern Virginia. For dinner in a city with a robust restaurant scene, he opted to dine exclusively at the hotel restaurant. His wife, Melania Trump, kept any outings in the Washington area in an unofficial capacity under

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 84 of 86

the radar.

After Jill Biden released a photo of herself at the counter of The Sweet Lobby, the boutique bakery wasn't the only thing that became an instant hit.

The powder blue scrunchie holding up the first lady's hair went viral.

Biden said she had no idea until daughter Ashley called to tell her.

"I said, 'What scrunchie?' I didn't know what she was talking about," the first lady told talk-show host Kelly Clarkson during an interview at the White House. "I still don't understand it."

Spring-break partying falls victim to COVID-19 crisis

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH, KELLI KENNEDY and ANILA YOGANATHAN Associated Press
FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Goodbye, sunshine. Hello, study sessions.

Colleges around the U.S. are scaling back spring break or canceling it entirely to discourage partying that could spread the virus and raise infection rates back on campus.

Texas A&M University opted for a three-day weekend instead of a whole week off. The University of Alabama and the University of Wisconsin-Madison also did away with spring break but are giving students a day off later in the semester.

Even some students who have the time to get away aren't in the mood. Michigan Tech's weeklong break began Friday, but 21-year-old Justin Martin decided to visit family in Michigan instead of making that epic senior-year trip to Florida he once envisioned.

"I don't want to travel all that way, first of all, especially with everything being shut down. It just doesn't seem worth it, especially with COVID too," he said.

To be sure, many college students looking to blow off steam or escape the cold and snowy North are still going to hit big party spots such as Florida, Mexico, California and Las Vegas to soak up the sun and go bar-hopping at night. Others will go skiing in the mountains or hit other tourist spots.

But many others say they will be reluctantly skipping trips this year.

"Definitely, no planned trips. Definitely wearing masks this year," said Brady Stone, a 21-year-old journalism major at Texas A&M. "We are kind of hunkering down and staying safe." He added: "I think most of us, if we are going anywhere, it is back to their hometowns."

Tourism is the Sunshine State's No. 1 industry, generating over \$91 billion in 2018, and last year spring break was one of the first big casualties of the pandemic as the U.S. went into strict lockdowns, shutting down beaches across Florida just as alarming scenes of college students heedlessly drinking, dancing and getting up close without masks were plastered across social media.

Miami tourism officials say they lost billions of dollars during those three months last year.

Now, those beach towns are hoping to make up for some of those losses, even as they take precautions to discourage reckless behavior and curb the spread of the virus. Miami tourism officials have spent \$5 million on the city's biggest national advertising campaign in 20 years.

Some communities say they are starting to see visitors return, even though health experts warn that the outbreak that has killed more than a half-million Americans is far from over.

Airline travel to Miami is down more than half from last year, said Rolando Adeo, chief operating officer of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors bureau. But hotel occupancy is expected to reach 70% in Miami Beach this month, he said. While that's down from 85% in 2019 pre-pandemic, it's still a marked improvement from 43% last year.

Fort Lauderdale Mayor Dean Trantalis reported: "Hotel rates are very competitive and occupancy is also very high, so we're excited for that."

University of Louisville student Josie Hornback and four girlfriends spread their colorful towels as they tanned on Florida's Clearwater Beach last Tuesday, unfazed by the virus.

"I'm with people I know. I'm not an at-risk person," she said.

Florida has no statewide mask rules, limits on capacity or other such restrictions, courtesy of Republican

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 85 of 86

Gov. Ron DeSantis' pro-business stance. But local governments can impose rules, and they vary widely. In Miami Beach, tourists are receiving cellphone messages warning, "Vacation Responsibly or Be Arrested."

"Spring break in Miami Beach may be one of the great rites of passage, but only if you plan on following the rules. Otherwise, you might as well just stay home and save yourself the court costs," the message reads, followed by a reminders that alcohol, coolers and tents are banned from its beach, a midnight curfew is in effect countywide, and no alcohol can be sold after 10 p.m.

"If you want to party without restrictions, then go somewhere else. Go to Vegas," Miami Beach City Manager Raul Aguila said during a recent virtual city meeting.

Around the state, many are taking the party to the open waters, where guests can imbibe under less-watchful eyes.

Andrew Cohen, co-owner of Staying Afloat Party Boat, said his boats are nearly sold out for the rest of the month in Tampa and Fort Lauderdale.

"A lot of them are coming down from the colder states," he said. "And they were just sick of being cooped up for the year."

California is discouraging visitors from out of state, warning tourists they will have to quarantine for 10 days on arrival, and a season that ordinarily would see crowds at beaches, theme parks and ski mountains is expected to be thin. The state, with miles of coastline and popular spring break spots like Disneyland and the Santa Monica Pier, has some of the nation's toughest pandemic restrictions.

At the University of Mississippi, which canceled spring break and will instead end the semester a week early, senior Eliza Noe had been planning a "last hurrah-type getaway trip" with her girlfriends, but that isn't going to happen now.

"Spring break is your last moment to lose your mind before becoming an adult, so that was kind of the plan," she said, "but then the world ended."

Hollingsworth reported from Mission, Kansas, and Yoganathan reported from Atlanta.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, March 9, the 68th day of 2021. There are 297 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 9, 1841, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *United States v. The Amistad*, ruled 7-1 in favor of a group of illegally enslaved Africans who were captured off the U.S. coast after seizing control of a Spanish schooner, *La Amistad*; the justices ruled that the Africans should be set free.

On this date:

In 1916, more than 400 Mexican raiders led by Pancho Villa (VEE'-uh) attacked Columbus, New Mexico, killing 18 Americans. During the First World War, Germany declared war on Portugal.

In 1933, Congress, called into special session by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, began its "hundred days" of enacting New Deal legislation.

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. B-29 bombers began launching incendiary bomb attacks against Tokyo, resulting in an estimated 100,000 deaths.

In 1954, CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow critically reviewed Wisconsin Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy's anti-communism campaign on "See It Now."

In 1959, Mattel's Barbie doll, created by Ruth Handler, made its public debut at the American International Toy Fair in New York.

In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, raised the standard for public officials to prove they'd been libeled in their official capacity by news organizations.

In 1976, a cable car in the Italian ski resort of Cavalese fell some 700 feet to the ground when a supporting line snapped, killing 43 people.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 09, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 246 ~ 86 of 86

In 1987, Chrysler Corp. announced it had agreed to buy the financially ailing American Motors Corp.

In 1989, the Senate rejected President George H.W. Bush's nomination of John Tower to be defense secretary by a vote of 53-47. (The next day, Bush tapped Wyoming Rep. Dick Cheney, who went on to win unanimous Senate approval.)

In 1990, Dr. Antonia Novello was sworn in as surgeon general, becoming the first woman and the first Hispanic to hold the job.

In 1997, gangsta rapper The Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace) was killed in a still-unsolved drive-by shooting in Los Angeles; he was 24.

In 2000, John McCain suspended his presidential campaign, conceding the Republican nomination to George W. Bush. Bill Bradley ended his presidential bid, conceding the Democratic nomination to Vice President Al Gore.

Ten years ago: After a trip to the International Space Station, shuttle Discovery ended its career as the most flown U.S. spaceship, returning from orbit for the last time. Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn signed legislation abolishing the death penalty in his state and commuting the sentences of all remaining death row inmates.

Five years ago: Six days before the Florida primary, Democrats Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders tangled in an intense debate in Miami over who was the true friend of American Hispanics, and had even worse things to say about Republican front-runner Donald Trump. During a Trump rally in Fayetteville, North Carolina, John Franklin McGraw struck protester Rakeem Jones as Jones was being removed by sheriff's deputies (McGraw, who later apologized for his actions, received a 30-day suspended sentence).

One year ago: Global stock markets and oil prices plunged, reflecting mounting alarm over the impact of the coronavirus. An alarmingly sharp slide at the opening bell on Wall Street triggered the first automatic halt in trading in more than two decades; the Dow industrials finished nearly 8% lower. A cruise ship with at least 21 infected people aboard was allowed to dock in Oakland, California after days idling at sea while dozens of those aboard were tested. Italy's premier put the entire country on lockdown to combat the coronavirus, urging all 60 million Italians to stay home. The Capitol's attending physician said "several" members of Congress had contact with a person who had attended a recent political conference and had later developed COVID-19. More than two dozen people, including the trainer of champion horse Maximum Security, were charged in what authorities described as a widespread scheme to drug racehorses to make them run faster.

Today's Birthdays: Former Sen. James L. Buckley, Conservative-N.Y., is 98. Singer Lloyd Price is 88. Actor Joyce Van Patten is 87. Country singer Mickey Gilley is 85. Actor Trish Van Devere is 80. Singer-musician John Cale (The Velvet Underground) is 79. Singer Mark Lindsay (Paul Revere and the Raiders) is 79. Former ABC anchorman Charles Gibson is 78. Rock musician Robin Trower is 76. Singer Jeffrey Osborne is 73. Country musician Jimmie Fadden (The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) is 73. Actor Jaime Lyn Bauer is 72. Magazine editor Michael Kinsley is 70. TV newscaster Faith Daniels is 64. Actor Linda Fiorentino is 63. Actor Tom Amandes is 62. Actor-director Lonny Price is 62. Country musician Rusty Hendrix (Confederate Railroad) is 61. Actor Juliette Binoche is 57. Rock musician Robert Sledge (Ben Folds Five) is 53. Rock musician Shannon Leto (30 Seconds to Mars) is 51. Rapper C-Murder (AKA C-Miller) is 50. Actor Emmanuel Lewis is 50. Actor Jean Louisa Kelly is 49. Actor Kerr Smith is 49. Actor Oscar Isaac is 42. Comedian Jordan Klepper (TV: "The Daily Show") is 42. Rapper Chingy is 41. Actor Matthew Gray Gubler is 41. Rock musician Chad Gilbert (New Found Glory) is 40. NHL defenseman Brent Burns is 36. Actor Brittany Snow is 35. Rapper Bow Wow is 34. Rapper YG is 31. Actor Luis Armand Garcia is 29. Actor Cierra Ramirez is 26.