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Attention Groton Area Service Clubs

The Groton Daily Independent is doing an article on service clubs in the Groton Area. To make sure your service club is featured, please contact Dorene Nelson at gnelson@nvc.net. Thank you!



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

**Weber
Landscaping
Greenhouse
opening this
Spring!**



**We will have a full greenhouse of beautiful
annuals and vegetables.**

Opening First Week of May!

**Located behind 204 N State St, Groton
(Look for the flags)**

**LET US HELP YOU BRIGHTEN
UP YOUR YARD!**

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Groton Area presents Disney's Frozen Jr.

The first of two school play performances was held Thursday night in the GHS Gym. The second performance will be this evening starting at 5 p.m. In the photo above, Elsa, played by Julianna Kosel, throws her unexpected power to her sister Anna, played by Alexis Hanten. The Snow Chorus are Shaylee Peterson, Anna Bisbee and Camryn Kurtz. Admission is \$5 at the door. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Cast in order of appearance

Young Anna - Alyssa Fordham, Young Elsa - Ashtyn Bahr, King Agnarr - Isaac Smith, Queen Iduna - Hailey Monson, Pabbie - Steven Paulson, Bulda - Cadance Tullis, Middle Anna - Alyssa Fordham, Middle Elsa - Ashtyn Bahr, Bishop - Steven Paulson, Housekeeper - Shaylee Peterson, Butler - Nevaeh Pardick, Handmaiden - Anna Bisbee, Cook - Camryn Kurtz, Anna - Alexis Hanten, Elsa - Julianna Kosel, Kristoff - Carter Barse, Sven - Sage Mortenson, Hans - Braden Freeman, Steward - Ashlyn Feser, Duke of Weselton - Ashtyn Bahr, Olaf - Noah Theisen, Oaken - Isaac Smith.

Townspeople: Nevaeh Pardick, Natalia Warrington, Ashlyn Feser, Cambria Bonn.

Castle Staff: Shaylee Peterson, Nevaeh Pardick, Anna Bisbee, Camryn Kurtz.

Snow Chorus: Shaylee Peterson, Anna Bisbee, Camryn Kurtz.

Hidden Folk: Cambria Bonn, Natalia Warrington, Ashlyn Feser, Nevaeh Pardick.

Summer Chorus: Shaylee Peterson, Anna Bisbee, Camryn Kurtz, Nevaeh Pardick, Ashlyn Feser.

Oaken's Family: Alyssa Fordham, Ashtyn Bahr, Steven Paulson, Hailey Monson, Cambria Bonn, Natalia Warrington.

Production Team

Director/Sound: Austin Fordham

Stage Manager/Music: Samantha Pappas

Lights: Eric Bishop

Tech Crew: Elliana Weismantel and Rease Jandel.

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Young Anna, played by Alyssa Fordham (left) and young Elsa, played by Ashtyn Bahr (right), talk with their parents, King Agnarr (Isaac Smith) and Queen Iduna (Hailey Monson).

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Anna (Alexis Hanten) talks with Hans (Braden Freeman).



Here are Kristoff (Carter Barse) and Sven (Sage Mortenson).



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Olaf comes onto the scene, played by Noah Theisen.



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Samantha Pappas gets the computer ready to go for the play. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

#418 in a series

Covid-19 update: by Marie Miller

I am not seeing much change, just fluctuation around an unacceptably high rate of new case reporting and too many deaths. Today, we're up to 31,586,500 total cases in the US, 0.3% more than yesterday. There were 81,500 new cases reported. Hospitalizations are slightly down at 45,497. And there were 930 deaths reported today. The total lives lost to this virus in the US are up to 565,626, which is 0.2% more than yesterday's total.

On April 16, 2020, one year ago today, the US had 667,228 cases and 30,659 deaths. Close to 2900 service members had been infected. Worldwide, there had been at least 2.1 million cases and more than 143,000 deaths.

We've administered 202,282,923 doses of vaccine in the US out of the 258,502,815 doses delivered. Almost four million were given yesterday. We're up to 24 percent of Americans, just about 81 million, fully vaccinated and 39 percent, almost 128 million, who've received at least one dose. The government is planning another federally-run mass vaccination site, this one in Alabama to add to the one announced earlier this week for Oregon. That will take us to 37 such sites in 26 states.

So here's an issue on which I've been getting questions from people with children: Now that adults may be vaccinated and their kids aren't, folks are wondering what things they can and should not do. It helps to understand that, at this point, assessing risk is complicated. There are things that are definitely fairly safe and other things that are definitely foolhardy, and then there's some territory in between these two. A couple of things to get straight from the start: (1) Vaccinated people may become infected, and some percentage of those will become very ill. There is a tiny chance you could die as a result. The percentages are really small, but they are not zero. (2) Vaccinated people may be able to transmit infection to unvaccinated children, some of whom may become very ill. There is a small chance of death in children as well.

First things first: It seems likely vaccine will be available to children as young as 12 fairly soon. Pfizer/BioNTech have applied for an amendment of their emergency use authorization (EUA) to extend the age down to 12, and I would expect action on that before too many weeks pass. I also think Moderna won't be too far behind, so I'm thinking we'll have both of the mRNA vaccines available to children well before summer's end. Younger kids are going to be a while yet. Last projection I saw had EUAs issued down to age five by the end of the year and down to six months of age early next year. Sooner is better, but we certainly don't want any shortcuts—and I don't seriously think anyone believes they could get away with any shady business at this point anyhow. I'm feeling pretty good about the decision-making process that is in place. The FDA says a vaccine is safe for a certain age group, I'm inclined to believe them; I want to hear from outside experts, but my default setting is to trust the process.

So now we have this situation where, if both parents are fully vaccinated, they have a lot of freedom to do things; but since children are unvaccinated, there will be limitations to what's safe to do with the whole family. It is safe for you to take the children to visit fully-vaccinated grandparents and other older relatives or friends, indoors and unmasked, as long as the children don't have any health conditions that place them at high risk for severe disease. Those health conditions include asthma, diabetes, congenital heart disease, immunosuppression from any cause, and a list of genetic and metabolic conditions. Your physician can tell you whether your child's condition places him or her at high risk and knows your kid better than I do, so I'll leave it at that. Same for discussions of just how high your child's risk is and how much risk you're prepared to tolerate.

Remember that unvaccinated people from two or more households are not yet advised to meet indoors without masks, so if the whole family wants to visit fully-vaccinated Grandma and Grandpa at the same time and more than one family has unvaccinated children, that is more problematic. As summer comes on and you can do these events outdoors, the risk falls. Wearing masks also mitigates much of the risk, so an indoor event with other unvaccinated kids when everyone is masked is a relatively safe activity. That covers play dates too; whereas being indoors and unmasked is extremely high-risk, being outdoors and/or masking changes a high-risk, do-not-do activity into one that is not risk-free, but for which the risk is

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going to be acceptable to many people. And children are in serious need of some socializing with others their age, especially if you've kept them home and been very cautious. I know it's easy for me to talk big since my children are all adults; but I would look for ways to permit my children to socialize to some degree if I had young ones around the house these days.

With summer coming, many people are wondering about family travel for vacations. Right now, the CDC is not advising travel outside the US for anyone, and many countries will not permit US residents to enter at the present time anyhow; so foreign trips are probably not on the schedule, at least in the short term, possibly for longer. Vaccinated people are quite unlikely to transmit infection to others or to acquire it themselves, although the risk is not zero; but unvaccinated children pose a different set of issues. It appears that, according to most public health experts, you can travel safely with some precautions.

I would suggest in general before a trip that you check out the transmission picture in your starting place and your destination, as well as stopping points along the way. High rates in any of these places make travel more problematic—doesn't mean you can't, but it may mean you shouldn't. If I lived in or was fixing to stop in or visit one of the states in the red zone, I would seriously reconsider those plans until things settle down. There is also the possibility of travel restrictions if things get further out of hand, so you'll want to keep up with that too. Unvaccinated children should have a Covid-19 test one to three days before you leave and three to five days after your return and also quarantine for a week after the trip no matter what their test results show. Children without risk factors are highly unlikely to become very ill from Covid-19, but they can spread it, and these precautions can help to limit spread.

While traveling, everyone in your party over the age of two—vaccinated and unvaccinated—should wear masks in public, social distance, practice good hand hygiene, and stay out of crowds. Crowds, especially ones dense enough to make distancing difficult, remain risky. Double-masking is better for those who can tolerate it, using a surgical mask under a cloth one.

Vaccinated people may dine indoors in restaurants. This is not a zero-risk proposition: Sitting around indoors for protracted periods with a bunch of folks whose vaccination status you do not know in a situation where none of you can reasonably mask carries risk, no way around that. If you go out to eat, there is a slim possibility you might bring virus home to your unvaccinated children, but the risk is not high. I would continue to avoid these situations when they're crowded, and I would wear a mask and distance as much as possible if I were coming home to unvaccinated children. With these caveats, eating out isn't out of the question. Unvaccinated people, on the other hand, should not be dining indoors in a restaurant. At all.

Then there's air travel. We've had many conversations about this over the past several weeks. The CDC says fully-vaccinated people may safely travel by air, but experts advise against eating and drinking on planes. We know why, right? You can't eat or drink with a mask on, and once you take your mask off, especially at the time of food and beverage service on the plane when everyone else takes theirs off too, you're sharing a close-quarters indoor dining experience with every single other person on that plane. No matter how good the airplane's ventilation system—and many of them are very good, indeed—packing in like sardines with a bunch of folks not wearing masks isn't a great situation.

Even if the ventilation system and filtering is fabulous, you run a risk of infection by more direct contact before a virus has a chance to get sucked up into the ventilation system. The closer you are to that infected person, the greater the chance for transmission, and no way you know the vaccination status for the folks around you. Wear a mask, practice good hand hygiene, consider a face shield or glasses, and wait to eat or drink until food and beverage service is over and most folks have their masks back on. Eat and drink quickly, and put the mask back on.

I would not take unvaccinated persons on an airplane with me under any circumstances at the moment. If you would be traveling with children who have not been vaccinated, it is wise to travel by ground or put the trip off to another day.

Carefully consider risks and your tolerance for those risks. Some folks will be very conservative in their choices, and that's legitimate. We should respect those choices. Others will be more flexible in their choices, and that may be legitimate too. We should respect those choices too. And those of us living in the gray

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area need to make our decisions based on the fact that we know many in each of the foregoing groups are out there inhabiting the same spaces we visit.

We talked months ago about something called challenge trials. They would typically be used to test vaccines, often in an environment where there were insufficient natural cases of infection to test the vaccine in the usual way. What happens in a challenge trial is the participants are deliberately infected with the pathogen in question so that we can see how effective a vaccine or other treatment is in these infections. As you can imagine, there are plenty of ethical considerations here, especially when the pathogen in question can kill people and there are no effective therapeutics available. We had discussed this with reference to vaccine trials, but it happens at the time we were ready to test vaccines, we had plenty of natural infections, and the question didn't arise. Now we're looking at something else.

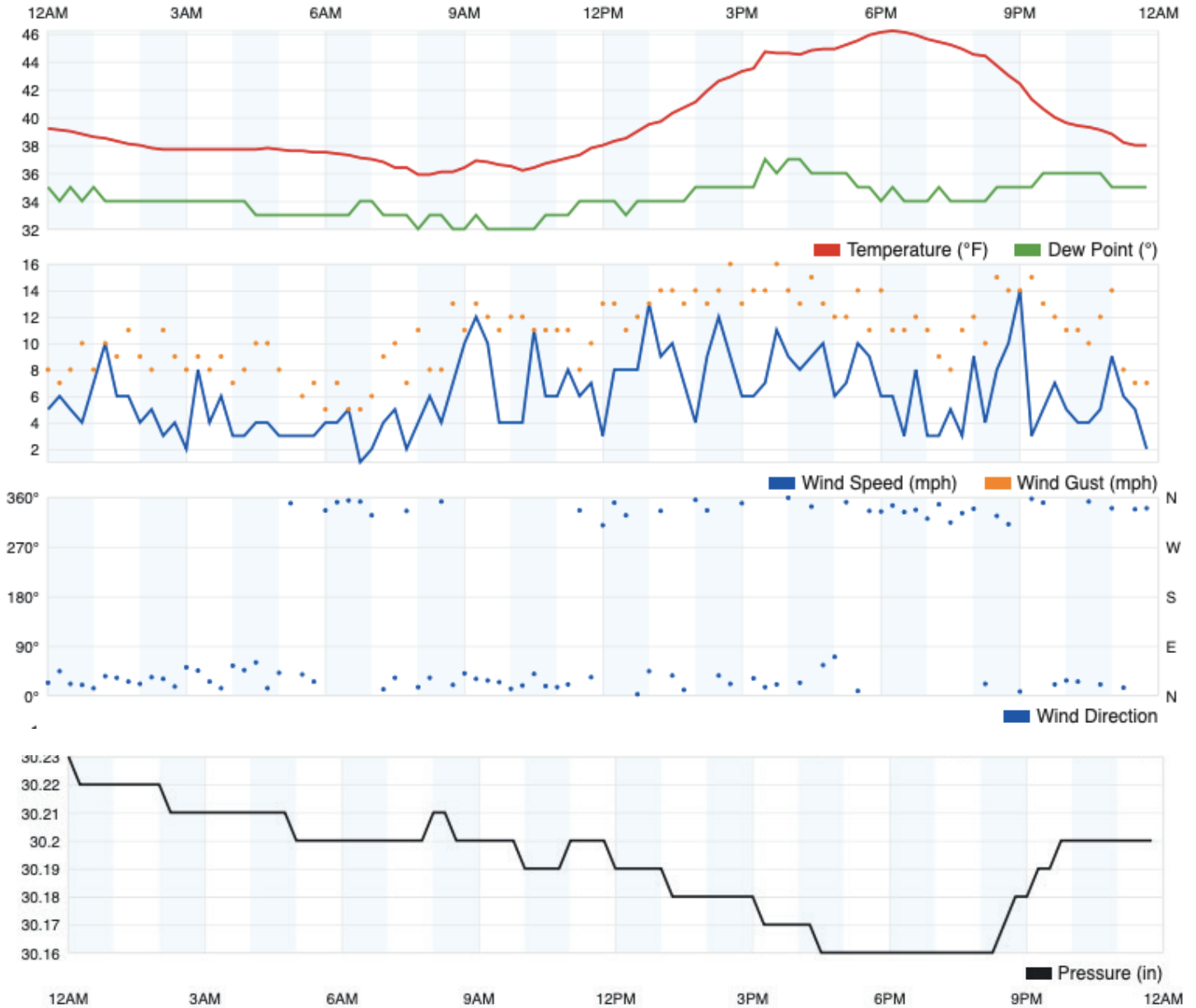
Researchers at the University of Oxford are starting a year-long study of reinfections. They plan to deliberately infect people who have already recovered from Covid-19. The study design calls for a phase 1 where they will test various doses of virus to determine the lowest dose needed to infect 50 percent of participants without causing any symptoms. Then they'll infect their volunteers with that dose and study their immune responses. There is a plan to identify, treat, and quarantine those who develop symptoms. Every institution of higher education has something called an Institutional Review Board (IRB) that reviews all research that will be conducted under the university's umbrella for ethical considerations. I have to admit I'd love to have been a mouse in the corner at this IRB meeting. I'm going to guess there was a spirited discussion.

That's it for tonight. Stay safe. We'll talk again.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny

High: 55 °F

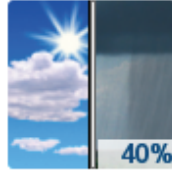
Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 31 °F

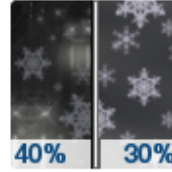
Sunday



Mostly Sunny
then Chance
Showers

High: 59 °F

Sunday
Night



Blustery.
Chance
Rain/Snow
then Chance
Snow

Low: 25 °F

Monday






Partly Sunny

High: 40 °F

Today
*Rain Ending in Morning
Partly Cloudy
Highs 49-59°*

Sunday
*Chance Rain Toward
Evening, Partly Cloudy
Highs 52-65°*

Tonight
*Mostly Clear
Lows 28-37°*

 National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD   Updated: 4/17/2021 3:52 AM Central

Light rain will end this morning over the region, with clearing to follow. Tonight should be mostly clear, and then for Sunday clouds will be on the increase again as a front moves into the region. Temperatures will be relatively close to seasonal norms through Sunday. #sdwx #mnwx

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Today in Weather History

April 17, 2006: A strong spring storm moved across the Northern and Central Plains, bringing precipitation and stiff northwest winds. Sustained winds of 30 to 50 mph, with gusts around 70 mph, were felt across a good portion of western South Dakota for more than 24 hours as the storm slowly crossed the region.

1922: Southern Illinois and Western Indiana saw two rounds of severe weather, including tornadoes. The first significant tornado occurred just before midnight on the 16 near Oakdale, Illinois. This tornado killed 4 and injured 22 others. Five additional tornadoes took place between midnight and 3 AM on the 17. During the mid-morning and early afternoon hours, two estimated F4 tornadoes caused devastation in Hedrick and near Orestes in Indiana. A postcard from one farm near Orestes was dropped near Mt. Cory, Ohio, 124 miles away.

1942: West Palm Beach, FL was soaked by 8.35 inches of rain in just two hours.

2002: The heat wave continued across the east as high pressure off the Carolina blocked a frontal boundary across the Plains. Records for the date included:

Newark, New Jersey: 97

NYC Central Park: 96

Hartford, Connecticut: 95

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: 95

Reagan National Airport, DC: 95 (Tied monthly high)

Lynchburg, Virginia: 94

Atlantic City, New Jersey: 94

Norfolk, Virginia: 93

Providence, Rhode Island: 93

Boston, Massachusetts: 93

Portland, Maine: 80

1922 - A family of at least six tornadoes caused death and destruction along parts of a 210 mile path from north of Ogden IL to Allen County OH, killing sixteen persons. A post card, picked up in Madison County IN, was found 124 miles away near Mount Cory OH. (The Weather Channel)

1953 - One of the few severe hailstorms accompanied by snow, sleet, glaze, and rain, pelted parts of Kay, Osage, Creek, Tulsa, Washington, and Rogers Counties in northeastern Oklahoma late in the day. Nearly 10,000 insurance claims were filed. (The Weather Channel)

1965 - The Mississippi River reached a flood crest at Saint Paul MN four feet higher than any previous mark. During the next two weeks record levels were reached along the Mississippi between Saint Paul and Hannibal MO. Flooding caused more than 100 million dollars damage, but timely warnings kept the death toll down to just twelve persons. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Twenty-two cities in the central U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. Temperatures warmed into the 70s and 80s from the High Plains Region to the Mississippi Valley, with readings in the low 90s reported in the Southern Plains Region. Tulsa OK hit 92 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Heavy snow blanketed northern Arizona. Snowfall totals ranged up to 16 inches at Pinetop, with 10 inches reported at Flagstaff. Afternoon thunderstorms spawned a couple of tornadoes in Idaho. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Arctic cold invaded the north central U.S. Missoula MT was blanketed with four inches of snow, and Glasgow MT reported a record cold morning low of 14 degrees above zero. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - High winds in northern Utah, gusting to 90 mph in Weber County, blew a trampoline through a living room window, and strong winds associated with a cold front crossing the Middle Atlantic Coast Region gusted to 75 mph in the Chesapeake Bay area of Virginia. Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the north central U.S. Valentine NE was the cold spot in the nation with a record low of 10 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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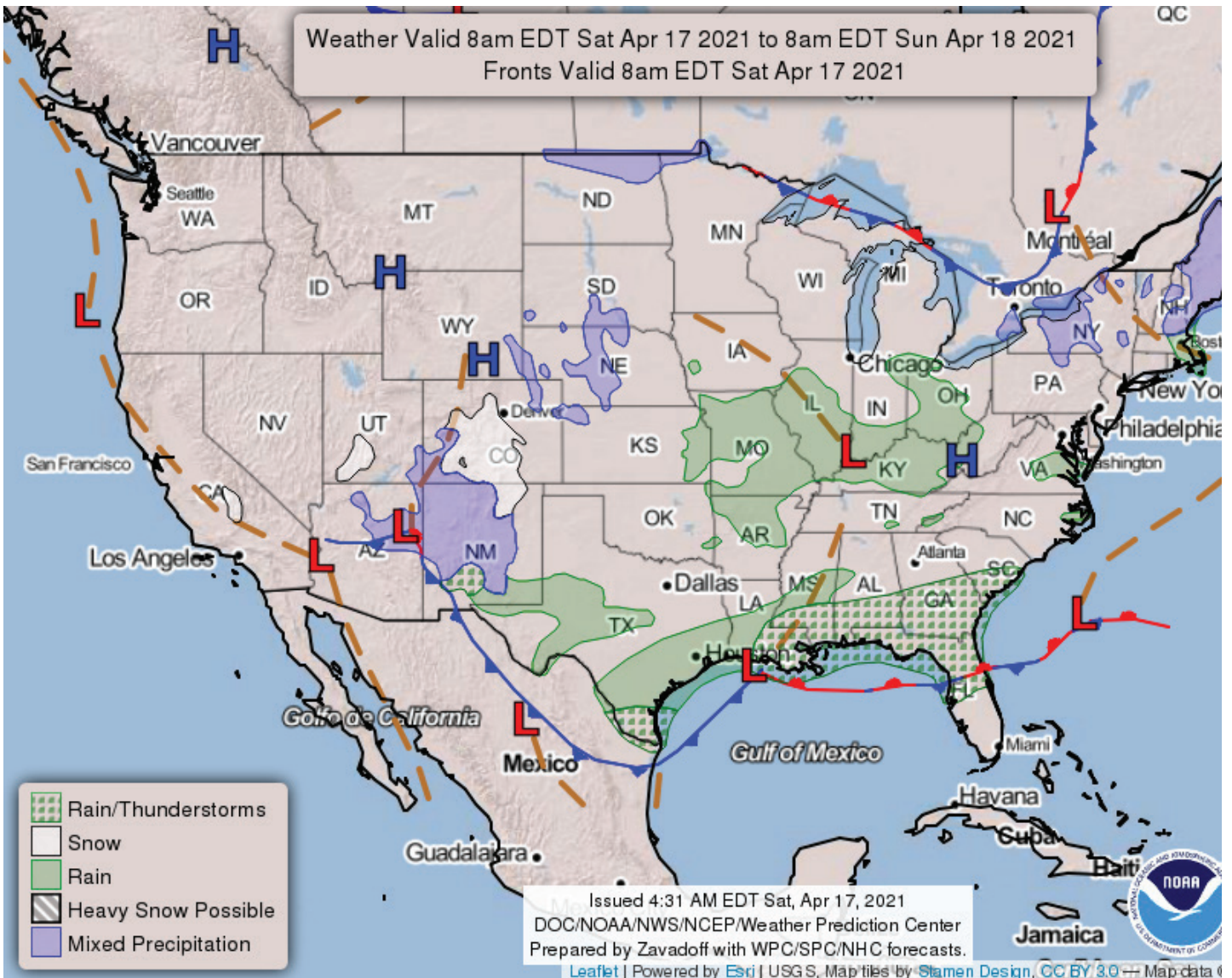
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 46 °F at 6:08 PM
Low Temp: 36 °F at 8:05 AM
Wind: 17 mph at 3:16 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 92° in 1913
Record Low: 10° in 1953
Average High: 58°F
Average Low: 32°F
Average Precip in Apr.: 0.80
Precip to date in Apr.: 2.29
Average Precip to date: 2.98
Precip Year to Date: 2.47
Sunset Tonight: 8:23 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:43 a.m.



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WAITING FOR RESULTS

Fast food restaurants and high-speed internet access have conditioned us to rush our way through life. We resent deeply having to stand in a grocery line, wait for someone to answer a phone call, or return a message. If it isn't instant, it isn't worth "my" time.

But there is value in waiting on some things. Especially waiting for God to work His ways and His will in our lives. It was true for David. It certainly is true for us as well.

"I waited patiently for the Lord," he said. We do not know what David was waiting for or the problems he was facing. It may be that this time of waiting for a response from God was different from the other times he looked to God for help. But it does not matter. There are many instances in the Psalms when David called on God and He responded immediately and rescued him. But this time, however, was different. He not only waited – but he waited patiently. His anxiety did not overpower him. His needs or wants were not driving him to distraction or irrational behavior. No, his mind was focused on God's love, grace, mercy, and wisdom. From events in his past, he knew God would respond.

And the results of his patience were, as we would say today, unreal. "He turned to me...He heard me...He lifted me...He set my feet on a rock...He gave me a firm place to stand!" From adversity to abundance!

In humility and submissiveness, he waited for God. He knew that God had the answer that was in his best interests: God wanted to "make him a man after My own heart."

Prayer: May we learn from David, Lord, to wait on You patiently, knowing that You are at work in us, for us. May we believe, always, in Your goodness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry. Psalm 40:1

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
- 03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/25/2021 Princess Prom (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
- 06/19/2021 Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
- 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
- 09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 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
- 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

A year into COVID, Smithfield workers still have questions

By MAKENZIE HUBER and ALFONZO GALVAN Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Sandra Silbert wasn't taking any chances.

She asked for a mask in March 2020 at the Smithfield Foods meatpacking plant in Sioux Falls. When she didn't get one, she made them herself out of an extra set of curtains at home.

She asked her manager how the plant would enforce social distancing before the deadly coronavirus made its way to her department. Her concerns fell on deaf ears, she said.

She wrote letters to Gov. Kristi Noem and Sioux Falls Mayor Paul TenHaken, asking for them to help keep Smithfield Foods workers safe. By the time she got a response, it was too late.

She talked to national media outlets about her work in the last year, outraged the plant still hasn't paid its employees hazard pay. Instead, they were offered a \$500 "responsibility bonus" at the beginning of the pandemic if they reported to work for a month without an unexcused absence.

Silbert had done everything she could think of to make authorities care about the thousands of workers at Smithfield Foods — a majority of whom are refugees and immigrants.

It's been a year since the outbreak now, but she's still trying to make people listen, the Argus Leader reported.

The Sioux Falls meatpacking plant quickly became one of the largest outbreaks in the country, with at least 1,294 employees contracting the coronavirus and four employees dying, according to a report from OSHA.

Smithfield officials announced the plant would close indefinitely only 17 days after its first COVID-19 case. More than 235 Smithfield employees contracted COVID-19 in two weeks. Several employees refused to work anyway because they were scared of contracting the virus, workers told the Argus Leader at the time.

While progress has been made — the plant shut down temporarily, precautions have been installed and on-site vaccinations are taking place — Silbert still wonders:

Why didn't anyone listen to them when they needed it most?

Why did her coworkers have to pay for others' negligence?

"I prayed, 'Please, God, let me return home.'"

By the time Smithfield implemented temperature checkpoints and sanitizer stations at the beginning of April, it was too late, Delfidia Jaen said.

Jaen, 65, is Silbert's cousin. She works in the packaging department at Smithfield. She was already hospitalized with the virus by the time Smithfield closed.

Jaen stayed in the hospital for two weeks. She didn't know if she'd make it through.

"They had it hidden there, so people wouldn't find out there were sick people," she said of Smithfield in Spanish. "I haven't recovered yet. I have a lot of pain in my lungs, headaches and bone aches."

Silbert, 48, also contracted COVID-19 in early April after reporting chills and a fever. The cancer survivor was the 39th person to be sent home that day by lunch break.

"When I got to my locker, I prayed, 'Please, God, let me return home,'" she said.

Silbert returned to work May 8, after Smithfield reopened.

Jaen, though, didn't return to work for seven months, since she was given paid leave from Smithfield because she was older than 65. A 21-year employee, Jaen never considered quitting until the pandemic. She wasn't the only one.

Some coworkers returned to Mexico to wait out the virus, Silbert said. Others who stayed justified their essential status because their work was critical to the food supply.

Achut Deng, who quickly became the national face for the outbreak after interviewing with national media, felt the same.

Deng was promoted from a lead at Smithfield to a manager role in July 2020. While there was plenty

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of negative attention on the meatpacking industry and treatment of essential workers, Deng didn't pay much mind.

"Nurses were forced to go to work too," Deng said. "The difference for me is that I'm working to provide food instead of medicine. I didn't feel proud when the pandemic came out in the beginning. But if I'm told to work to save the world by providing food, then OK, I do that. I have to be positive. I don't have time for negativity."

When Jaen and Silbert returned to work, there were Plexiglass barriers installed, social distancing was easier and facemasks were required.

But there was still work to do, they said.

"Survivor of domestic violence, survivor of breast cancer and now a COVID-19 survivor," Silbert said. "These are situations in life that have made me stronger and kept me going."

Tolcha Mesele can pinpoint what he believes led to the Smithfield Foods outbreak.

It was a cocktail of miscommunication:

- A lack of guidelines from Smithfield, the state and the city in employees' native languages;
- A flurry of online rumors that ignited a panic;
- And a lack of guidance from federal agencies on how Smithfield should handle the coronavirus pandemic while still keeping the meat industry running at a healthy pace.

Smithfield wasn't providing masks because they weren't available — they were needed for hospital workers more, said Mesele, senior manager for community development at Smithfield.

Things moved too quickly, and Smithfield couldn't react fast enough, he said.

But at that same time in late March and early April, meatpacking plants around the country temporarily closed or shifted operations after COVID-19 cases spiked there.

Tyson Foods, Inc. closed some plants the first week of April after dozens of workers tested positive. JBS Beef in Pennsylvania scaled back hours of production after employees began spreading the disease among one another.

"We wish we would have had more cooperation from agencies like the CDC or OSHA," Mesele said. "We made lots of attempts for direction. Do we shut down or not? And we did what we thought was the right thing, legal thing, logical thing — but there was a lot of lag time to create solutions to problems."

Chris Deutsch, a historian of meat politics and policy in the 20th Century and teaching postdoctoral at the University of Missouri, wasn't surprised when he heard about the COVID-19 outbreak at Smithfield and other meatpacking plants.

It was only a matter of time for the coronavirus to hit meatpacking plants, and everyone — from regulators to industry professionals to government leaders to healthcare professionals to the general public — should have known the industry was going to be hit hard.

"The working quarters are close. There's a lack of access to sanitary products. There are abysmal working conditions," Deutsch said. "There's less pay, which leads to less access to proper medical care, and workers are typically of a culture of nuclear family and single-family housing units."

At first, meatpacking plants attempted to obscure what they were doing across the country, Deutsch said. Then, industry leaders started to call out its own leadership and address the crisis.

Mesele, a refugee from Kenya who grew up in Sioux Falls and graduated from Washington High School, was promoted to his new role in September 2020. At the time of the outbreak, he was a superintendent of a department and leading a team of nearly 60 people.

While Mesele felt confident in Smithfield's response to the pandemic, he recognized other workers felt scared. He received plenty of messages from his employees during the shutdown, asking for reassurance they wouldn't be laid off and the plant would reopen.

"People didn't believe it," Mesele said. "A lot of people started looking for other jobs. I personally called my employees when we found out that the plant was reopening."

That lack of clear communication led to the panic and confusion, most likely, Mesele said. There are about 140 languages spoken inside Smithfield, and many workers are not fluent in English.

Taneeza Islam, executive director of South Dakota Voices for Peace, led a small team to translate pan-

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demic information for refugees and immigrants in the Sioux Falls area.

"We had to do something big, otherwise our communities were forgotten. They're not part of the equation here when people are talking about resources," Islam said. "I believe very strongly that COVID in Sioux Falls and in the state in general has really exposed the institutional racism we have against limited English proficient communities here."

Non-English speakers needed food and clothing and information on how to apply for unemployment assistance. But the information about those resources, whether it was Feeding South Dakota or the One Sioux Falls Fund, were in English.

The news, the public safety announcements from the city and the state — everything the general public had access to — was only available in English.

Smithfield's inability to inform their workers was only one small issue in how leadership throughout Sioux Falls and South Dakota failed refugee and immigrant populations, Islam said.

"We know our communities, and that's why we can serve them quickly and efficiently," Islam said. "People become paralyzed when they don't have access to the right information. If you don't know what's out there, you can't access it."

Since Jaen's return to Smithfield, she's seen a relaxation of precautions inside Smithfield, she said. Her biggest concern is a change in protocol during the shift change, when as many as 300 employees come and go from the site, change in crowded locker rooms and don't socially distance themselves from each other.

"Everyone wants to punch out at the same time," Jaen said.

No one wants to be late for work.

"When it comes to getting paid, it's the same old pile of people," she said. "There's no more 6 feet of separation — there's nothing."

Smithfield worker Luis Angulo Marty, 22, noticed the same thing. But he thinks Smithfield is maintaining COVID-19 precautions well enough. Marty worked at Smithfield nearly three years ago, quit and returned to the plant in early 2021.

He was "a little scared" about returning to the plant with such an outbreak history, but said his decision came down to finances.

"I never went by obligation, I went out of necessity," said Marty, who also supports his wife.

Marty is one of several Smithfield employees who refused to get an on-site Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine the company offered its employees March 26.

Now, Silbert's mission is to educate her diverse set of coworkers about the vaccine. It's been an ongoing issue at Smithfield, properly educating the diverse workforce on the pandemic and the vaccine.

Nearly a year after the first case was reported at Smithfield, the company hosted on-site vaccinations for 500 people in late March. It's a step forward, but Smithfield's response hasn't been enough, Silbert said.

She wants an incentive for Smithfield workers to get vaccinated, and Smithfield workers still haven't received hazard pay. Instead, they gave a \$500 "responsibility bonus" at the beginning of the pandemic for workers who came to work. Employees who called in sick or had PTO during that time still got the \$500 bonus, according to a spokesperson with Smithfield.

"We still feel alone, to be honest," Silbert said, even despite the changes that have been made at the plant. "It's a pity people keep working even though they're afraid. We're simply not important."

While any changes or added regulations or oversight to the meatpacking industry would likely require years of hearings about what it's like inside meatpacking plants, Deutsch said he's yet to hear of any lawmaker who has requested or successfully put together any hearings.

"This shows in real-time consumers' and workers' voices have become less important," Deutsch said. "The pressure to not make changes — because it's more cost-effective — is greater than the pressure to improve the quality of life for meatpacking plant workers."

That includes line speeds, distance between workers on the lines, regular breaks and personal protective equipment.

"The conditions inside meatpacking plants in February 2020 were intentional, and they were done on

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purpose," Deutsch said. "Since they are the result of human choice, to put them back is very possible because it was a choice that drove the issue in the first place."

While Mesele said that Smithfield has invested hundreds of millions of dollars for thermal screening, barriers, masks and cleaning – and he doesn't imagine the company simply getting rid of it all in a year – Keira Lombardo, chief administrative officer for Smithfield Foods, did not say whether the company will continue to keep precautions post-pandemic.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

17-27-28-50-55, Mega Ball: 25, Megaplier: 4

(seventeen, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, fifty, fifty-five; Mega Ball: twenty-five; Megaplier: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$240 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$79 million

Partnership will train school staff in crisis response

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A new partnership between the University of South Dakota and the state Department of Social Services will train more personnel in elementary and secondary schools on crisis prevention and response.

The training will help mental health providers in schools to identify children who are in need of services and how to meet those needs.

"We know the impact of the pandemic and natural disasters in South Dakota has been hard on all of us," said Kari Oyen, program director and assistant professor of school psychology at USD. "We want to focus on giving educators the tools to respond to a child who may be struggling."

It will also help personnel identify children who might be at high risk and in need of help outside the school setting, the Argus Leader reported.

"The mental and physical health and well-being of children is paramount," DSS Secretary Laurie Gill said. "This partnership will support the skills and resources our schools in South Dakota need to help protect children."

The program is part of the South Dakota Natural Disaster Response grant awarded last year to DSS by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. i

Second jury convicts Rapid City man of assaulting 3 girls

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A Rapid City man accused of sexually assaulting three young girls in Pennington County has been convicted after his first trial ended when the jury could not unanimously agree on his guilt or innocence.

Teddy Guzman, 38, was found guilty of three counts of first-degree rape and one count of having sexual contact with a minor. Prosecutors said the assaults happened between January 2015 and December 2017. The oldest girl was 12 when she was raped, another was between nine and 10, and the youngest girl was five or six.

"What these girls have been through in the pursuit of the truth has been hell, and I am so proud of them and so grateful to the jury for seeing that what happened to them was a horror and for putting an end to Teddy Guzman's reign of terror," prosecutor Lara Roetzel said outside the courtroom following the verdict Thursday afternoon.

Witnesses testified at the trial that the girls have struggled since they were assaulted. The parents of

the oldest child said their daughter used to be happy all the time and is not now, and that she lacks the ambition she once had, the Rapid City Journal reported.

One of the girls testified she stopped caring about things and stopped being good and nice to people. Roetzel said the youngest victim no longer trusts men.

Guzman faces at least 15 years in prison and up to life without parole on each of the rape counts when he is sentenced on June 8.

The Latest: Queens sits alone in chapel at Philip's funeral

By The Associated Press undefined

Events and reaction marking Prince Philip's funeral:

WINDSOR, England — Queen Elizabeth II is sitting alone in the quire of St. George's Chapel during the funeral of Prince Philip, the man who had been by her side for 73 years.

Following strict social distancing rules during the pandemic, the queen set an example even in grief, sitting apart from family members arrayed around the church. Just 30 mourners are allowed to attend the service at St. George's on the grounds of Windsor Castle, where the queen has shielded from COVID-19.

Other royals who are in family bubbles are sitting together.

The service began with Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby entering the chapel ahead of the coffin, followed by Philip's children and three of his eight grandchildren, as a four-member choir sang "I am the resurrection and the life."

Prince Philip will be remembered as a man of "courage, fortitude and faith" on Saturday, at a funeral that salutes both his service in the Royal Navy and his support for Queen Elizabeth II over three quarters of a century.

More coverage:

- Philip will be laid to rest at Windsor Castle
- From Russia to Britain, Philip's royal ties spanned Europe
- AP's obituary of the Duke of Edinburgh
- Follow AP's full coverage of Prince Philip's death at <https://apnews.com/hub/prince-philip>

LONDON — Prince Harry's wife Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, will be watching Prince Philip's funeral from the couple's home in California because she is pregnant with their second child and not cleared for travel by her doctor, their spokesperson confirmed.

Meghan also handwrote a card accompanying the couple's wreath for Philip. The wreath features flowers including Bear's breeches, the national flower of Greece to represent Philip's heritage, and Sea Holly, to represent the Royal Marines.

The wreath also features campanula for gratitude and everlasting love, rosemary to signify remembrance, lavender for devotion, and roses in honor of June, Philip's birth month.

While none of the senior royals wore military uniforms for the funeral, Harry's spokesperson says he is wearing a number of honorary medals including an Afghanistan Campaign medal and one signifying the Royal Victorian Order.

Harry's spokesperson pointed to the royal's shared military connection with his grandfather. Both men shared active service as part of the British armed forces. Harry served a decade in the army, including two tours of duty on the frontlines of Afghanistan. Philip was a decorated naval officer whose military career spanned World War II.

LONDON — People across Britain have observed one minute of silence in honor of the late Prince Philip just before his royal ceremonial funeral got underway inside St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.

Philip, who was consort to Queen Elizabeth II for 73 years, died April 9, just two months shy of his 100th birthday.

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His coffin, draped in his personal standard and topped with a wreath of flowers and his naval cap and sword have, arrived at St. George's Chapel inside Windsor Castle. The queen and senior royals accompanied the coffin as it was carried on a specially adapted Land Rover.

Only 30 close family members and friends will attend the service, amid nationwide restrictions designed to slow the spread of COVID-19. While the proceedings are being broadcast live around the world, members of the public won't be able to watch any part of the procession or service in person because of the pandemic.

WINDSOR, England — Princes William and Harry didn't line up shoulder to shoulder Saturday as they took their places for the procession that will follow Prince Philip's coffin to the church for his funeral.

William and Harry's cousin Peter Phillips stood between the princes as they prepared to escort the coffin to St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.

The arrangement minimized the chances of any awkward moments between the brothers, who have faced strains in their relationship since Harry's decision to step away from royal duties last year.

William, 38, is second in line to the throne. Harry, 36, and his wife, Meghan, last month gave an interview to U.S. television host Oprah Winfrey in which they said royal staffers were insensitive toward Meghan and that an unidentified member of the royal family made racist comments.

WINDSOR, England — Queen Elizabeth II has left the Sovereign's Entrance of Windsor Castle as members of the royal family prepare for the procession that will precede the funeral of Prince Philip.

The queen, accompanied by a lady-in waiting, wore a mask as she was driven in a Bentley that will carry her to St. George's Chapel for the funeral of her husband of 73 years.

Elizabeth has always sought to set an example for the nation during her long reign, and face coverings are required in England under rules designed to slow the spread of COVID-19. The rules also mean that only 30 family members and close friends will be allowed to attend the funeral.

WINDSOR, England — All of the family members taking part in the funeral procession for Prince Philip are wearing civilian clothes, not military uniforms, in accordance with the wishes of Queen Elizabeth II.

Ten members of the royal family, led by Prince Charles and his sister, Princess Anne, are walking behind the specially designed Land Rover carrying the coffin on the eight-minute journey from the State Entrance of Windsor Castle to St. George's Chapel.

The decision to wear civilian clothes came amid concerns that Prince Harry might have been the only member of the family not in uniform during the funeral of his grandfather, who died last week at the age of 99.

Members of the royal family often wear uniforms to public events by virtue of their honorary roles with the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, but Harry lost his military titles when he decided to give up frontline royal duties last year.

The decision also sidestepped another potential controversy after reports that Prince Andrew considered wearing an admiral's uniform to his father's funeral. Andrew retains his military titles even though he fell from grace after a disastrous BBC interview about his acquaintance with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

WINDSOR, England — Prince Philip's coffin has emerged from the State Entrance of Windsor Castle as those taking part in the ceremonial procession for his funeral take their places.

The coffin is being loaded on a specially adapted Land Rover, designed by Philip himself, for the eight-minute journey to St. George's Chapel. Senior military commanders are lined up in front of the vehicle, with members of the royal family following behind.

Queen Elizabeth II will ride in a state Bentley at the rear of the procession.

WINDSOR, England — Hundreds of troops are marching into the grounds of Windsor Castle for the

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funeral of Prince Philip.

More than 700 servicemen and servicewomen from the army, navy, air force and marines are to perform ceremonial roles in the funeral procession, reflecting Philip's Royal Navy service and ties with the military.

They include soldiers of the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery, who will fire a gun salute, Guards regiments in scarlet tunics and bearskin hats, Highlanders in kilts and sailors in white naval hats.

Regiments and units with links to Philip will line the route as his coffin is carried to St. George's Chapel for the funeral service, while military bands will play hymns and classical tunes.

WINDSOR, England — Prince Philip's coffin has been moved from the royal family's private chapel at Windsor Castle to the castle's Inner Hall ahead of his funeral this afternoon.

Royal officials say the coffin is draped in Philip's personal standard, and topped with his Royal Navy cap and sword and a wreath of flowers.

It was moved by a party of bearers from the Grenadier Guards army regiment and will lie in the hall until the funeral procession begins just before 3 p.m.

The coffin will be transported on a specially designed Land Rover to St. George's Chapel, where Philip will be laid to rest in the Royal Vault.

Because of coronavirus restrictions only 30 mourners will attend the funeral service, including Queen Elizabeth II, her four children and her eight grandchildren. Philip died on April 9 at age 99.

WINDSOR, England — Britain's royal family has released a montage of images in memory of Prince Philip, set to a poem by Poet Laureate Simon Armitage.

"Patriarchs -- An Elegy" remembers Philip as a member of a generation who "fought ingenious wars, finagled triumphs at sea with flaming decoy boats, and side-stepped torpedoes" -- references to his war-time naval service.

Armitage, whose job is to write poems for significant national occasions, salutes those "husbands to duty ... Great-grandfathers from birth, in time they became both inner core and outer case in a family heirloom of nesting dolls."

The royal family released a recording of Armitage reading the poem, accompanied by pictures of Prince Philip through the decades, from infancy to old age, ahead of his funeral at Windsor Castle on Saturday.

Philip died on April 9 at age 99.

TATOI, Greece — Prince Philip's life spanned a century of European history. His family ties were just as broad, with Britain's longest-serving consort linked by blood and marriage to most of the continent's royal houses.

"If Queen Victoria is considered the grandmother of Europe, Prince Philip is the uncle of Europe," said Vassilis Koutsavlis, president of the Tatoi Royal Estate Friends Association.

It's in that densely wooded estate at the foot of a mountain north of Athens that Philip's father, Prince Andrew of Greece and Denmark, lies buried. The Tatoi estate housed the royal summer residence and the royal cemetery, dotted with the tombs of Philip's relatives: kings and queens of Greece, princes and princesses of Denmark, grand duchesses of Russia and even a distant relative of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Philip died on April 9 at age 99 and his funeral is on Saturday at Windsor Castle.

PORT STANLEY, Falkland Islands — A memorial service was held in the capital of the Falkland Islands on Friday to mark the passing of Prince Philip following his death last week at the age of 99.

Members of the local government, military officials and residents attended the event which took place in Christ Church cathedral in the center of Port Stanley.

Many present held their own personal memories of the Duke of Edinburgh who visited the British overseas territory in the South Atlantic in 1957 and again in 1991.

Various photographs of the two visits were on display in the church, one showing a smiling Philip along-

side locals set beside a single-lit candle.

Islanders in attendance paid testament to his irascible nature, recounting stories of his visit, which included winning a horse race and a fishing trip with residents.

The Duke of Edinburgh's funeral will take place at Windsor Castle in London on Saturday.

Iran names suspect in Natanz attack, says he fled country

By NASSER KARIMI Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran named a suspect Saturday in the attack on its Natanz nuclear facility that damaged centrifuges there, saying he had fled the country "hours before" the sabotage happened.

While the extent of the damage from the April 11 sabotage remains unclear, it comes as Iran tries to negotiate with world powers over allowing the U.S. to re-enter its tattered nuclear deal and lift the economic sanctions it faces.

Already, Iran has begun enriching uranium up to 60% purity in response — three times higher than ever before, though in small quantities. The sabotage and Iran's response to it also have further inflamed tensions across the Mideast, where a shadow war between Tehran and Israel, the prime suspect in the sabotage, still rages.

State television named the suspect as 43-year-old Reza Karimi. It showed a passport-style photograph of a man it identified as Karimi, saying he was born in the nearby city of Kashan, Iran.

The report also aired what appeared to be an Interpol "red notice" seeking his arrest. The arrest notice was not immediately accessible on Interpol's public-facing database. Interpol, based in Lyon, France, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The TV report said "necessary actions" are underway to bring Karimi back to Iran through legal channels, without elaborating. The supposed Interpol "red notice" listed his foreign travel history as including Ethiopia, Kenya, the Netherlands, Qatar, Romania, Turkey, Uganda and the United Arab Emirates.

The report did not elaborate how Karimi would have gotten access to one of the most secure facilities in the Islamic Republic. However, it did for the first time show authorities acknowledging an explosion struck the Natanz facility.

There was a "limited explosion of a small part of the electricity-feeding path to the centrifuges' hall," the TV report said. "The explosion happened because of the function of explosive materials and there was no cyberattack."

Initial reports in Israeli media, which maintain close relations to its military and intelligence services, blamed a cyberattack for the damage.

The Iranian state TV report also said there were images that corroborated the account of an explosion rather than cyberattack offered by security services, but it did not broadcast those pictures.

The report also showed centrifuges in a hall, as well as what appeared to be caution tape at the Natanz facility. In one shot, a TV reporter interviewed an unnamed technician, who was shown from behind — likely a safety measure as Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated in suspected Israeli-orchestrated attacks in the past.

"The sound that you are hearing is the sound of operating machines that are fortunately undamaged," he said, the high-pitched whine of the centrifuges heard in the background. "Many of the centrifuge chains that faced defects are now under control. Part of the work that had been disrupted will be back on track with the round-the-clock efforts of my colleagues."

In Vienna, negotiations continued over the deal Saturday with another meeting of diplomats from Iran and the five powers that remain in the deal, with expert-level working groups on sanctions-lifting and nuclear issues set to continue activities through to next week.

Iran's negotiator told state TV that the talks had entered a new phase, adding that Iran had proposed draft agreements that could be a basis for negotiation.

"We think that the talks have reached a stage where parties are able to begin to work on a joint draft," Abbas Araghchi said. "It seems that a new understanding is taking shape, and now there is agreement

over final goals.”

Enrique Mora, the European Union official who chaired the talks, tweeted that “progress has been made in a far from easy task. We need now more detailed work.”

The 2015 accord, which former President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from in 2018, prevented Iran from stockpiling enough high-enriched uranium to be able to pursue a nuclear weapon if it chose in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful, though the West and the IAEA say Tehran had an organized military nuclear program up until the end of 2003. An annual U.S. intelligence report released Tuesday maintained the longtime American assessment that Iran isn’t currently trying to build a nuclear bomb.

Iran previously had said it could use uranium enriched up to 60% for nuclear-powered ships. However, the Islamic Republic currently has no such ships in its navy.

The attack at Natanz was initially described only as a blackout in its electrical grid — but later Iranian officials began calling it an attack.

One Iranian official referred to “several thousand centrifuges damaged and destroyed” in a state TV interview. However, no other official has offered that figure and no images of the aftermath have been released.

Cuomo retreats from open news briefings that made him a star

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York’s governor gained national attention last spring, and won an International Emmy, for daily, televised news briefings at which he answered barrages of questions from journalists about the COVID-19 pandemic.

But lately, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has shied away from coming face to face with reporters as he faces sexual harassment allegations.

The Democrat hasn’t had an in-person news conference since December, when he switched to interacting with the media only via telephone and Zoom conference calls, saying it was a needed pandemic safety precaution.

To be clear, Cuomo hasn’t been ducking questions entirely. On Friday he took questions, via Zoom, from six reporters for about 25 minutes at an event in Buffalo that reporters from had been barred from attending in person.

But his conference calls with reporters have grown less frequent this spring, with six held in March, down from 10 in February and 17 in January.

And with reporters forced to dial in remotely, his office can control which reporters get to ask questions. The few who are picked often don’t get follow-up questions.

That’s a huge change from last spring, when Cuomo met daily with reporters who shouted questions from seats in the State Capitol’s Red Room.

Since February, when women began coming forward with stories about inappropriate comments or touching by Cuomo, the governor has attended numerous events featuring him speaking in front of small groups — but with no journalists allowed.

Asked on a recent conference call why he couldn’t have journalists in the room, Cuomo said that it was safer to speak to reporters remotely, and that doing it by conference call didn’t stop reporters from asking tough questions.

“We try to keep the number of people down, and we try to keep social distancing mandates,” Cuomo said of his in-person events. “Answering questions with the press, I can do through other means, like this.”

It’s in part a return to practice for Cuomo, who, before the coronavirus pandemic, rarely held regular news conferences.

But after months of easy access, the governor’s sudden refusal to allow reporters to freely question him has rankled media outlets.

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His withdrawal from view comes as the state attorney general's office, federal prosecutors and the state Assembly's judiciary committee investigate allegations that Cuomo abused his power to sexually harass women and withhold data about COVID-19 deaths among nursing home residents.

Leaders of the judiciary committee have said its investigation will include a review of a recent book deal and whether Cuomo's family got access to quicker test results than other New Yorkers. The probe is reviewing whether there are grounds to impeach the governor.

The leaders of the Journalists Association of New York is demanding that Cuomo reopen his news conferences to journalists and this week called his avoidance of the media "an affront to the public."

"These restricted-access events are a blatant misuse of taxpayer dollars in an attempt to bolster the governor's image while at the same time attacking the public's right to know about the activities of government, a right that is exercised by the news media when covering the governor's public events in person," Jeremy Boyer, executive editor of the The Citizen and Auburnpub.com, wrote in a letter on the association's behalf. "No governor should refuse to provide this basic level of access and transparency."

Cuomo's sudden reversal is striking because he seemed to have prided himself on taking on reporters' questions last spring, said Skidmore College political science professor Christopher Mann said. At one June briefing, Cuomo praised journalists for asking "the really probative, pointed, direct questions that got information that people needed."

Now, Mann said, "he's entirely pulled back, which has implications for how the state is governed."

Governors of many other states have been allowing journalists to attend indoors and outdoors news conferences.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, allows journalists to attend as many as three in-person news conferences a week and often devotes 15 to 20 minutes to questions. New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, also a Democrat, holds twice-a-week in-person news conferences with 20 to 40 minutes of time devoted to questions from reporters.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Florida Gov. Ron Desantis, both Republicans, have spent around 10 minutes on average taking questions from reporters at recent news conferences. Abbott speaks once a week, while Desantis has been holding in-person briefings open to the media at least twice a week.

DeSantis, however, at times walks away from news conferences without taking questions from reporters, particularly when he faces the Capitol press corps in Tallahassee.

A few governors are still holding virtual-only news conferences. Democrat Gretchen Whitmer has been holding once-a-week conferences this spring as cases surge in Michigan.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio hasn't been allowing journalists into his news briefings for months, either, for safety reasons, but has been allowing reporters to ask questions four times a week during question-and-answer sessions that can go for an hour or more.

Black soldier mistreatment common even before Virginia case

By BEN FINLEY and TOM FOREMAN Jr. Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — The police officers' guns were trained on the uniformed U.S. Army lieutenant, his arms raised and palms outstretched as he sat in his SUV under a brightly lit gas station awning.

Lt. Caron Nazario had been pulled over in rural Virginia by the two officers, who repeatedly demanded that he step out of the vehicle. Nazario, who is Black and Latino, didn't move and continually asked, "What's going on?"

"I'm serving this country, and this is how I'm treated?" he said at one point.

"Yeah well, guess what? I'm a veteran, too," police officer Joe Gutierrez responded. "And I know how to obey." Nazario said he was afraid to get out, to which Gutierrez replied: "You should be."

Within minutes, Nazario was pepper-sprayed, struck in the knees to force him to the ground and handcuffed. No charges were ever filed.

Videos of the December incident taken by the officers' body cameras and Nazario's cellphone became public last week, sparking outrage and accumulating millions of views. Nazario has sued the two officers,

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alleging his constitutional rights were violated during the traffic stop in the small Virginia town of Windsor. Officer Gutierrez has also been fired.

The episode was a grim reminder to many Black Americans that even being in military uniform doesn't necessarily protect them from mistreatment by police. Further, there's a long history of violence against veterans and service members of color, whose military status was seen by some as a provocation.

"I don't think the uniform provokes in the same way that it once did, but it absolutely doesn't shield," said Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Alabama-based Equal Justice Initiative. "And there will be people who will be provoked by Black achievement. ... It can create a kind of a desire to humiliate and demand obedience."

Thousands of Black men who served in the Civil War, World War I, and World War II were targeted because of their service and threatened, assaulted or lynched, according to a 2017 Equal Justice Initiative report.

One was Sgt. Isaac Woodard, a uniformed World War II veteran who was headed home on a bus in 1946. He was removed and beaten by a white South Carolina police chief, leaving Woodard permanently blind.

In 1962, Cpl. Roman Ducksworth was killed by police while riding a bus from Maryland to his home in Mississippi. The bus driver called a white police officer to awaken Ducksworth, who had fallen asleep, according to Jerry Mitchell, founder of the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting. The two struggled, and the officer shot and killed Ducksworth.

"His skin color trumped his status as a military officer," Mitchell said. "It goes throughout history."

Rossano Gerald, a Black Army sergeant who sued the Oklahoma Highway Patrol after he was pulled over with his young son and subjected to a protracted search in 1998, said Nazario's traffic stop shows that nothing has changed.

"We have to keep reminding people that this is not gone," said Gerald, who won a \$75,000 legal settlement three years after the incident. "We've got to fight for our rights."

In his own case, Gerald said he believes his active-duty military status only fueled the trooper's desire to show his power.

"From my perspective, he wanted to prove a point that he was in control," Gerald, a decorated veteran, said in an interview.

Gerald, who was not wearing his uniform, handed over his military ID along with his driver's license and told the trooper to call his commanding officer, per military protocol.

Instead, Gerald and his son were placed in a hot patrol car while troopers repeatedly searched his car. At one point, a trooper asked the 12-year-old if he had any weapons and conducted a pat search of the child, the lawsuit claimed.

The search turned up no evidence of drugs, and Gerald was given a warning ticket for failure to signal a lane change.

Since the videos of Nazario's traffic stop became public, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam has called for an investigation by state police. And state Attorney General Mark Herring has requested the two officers' personnel records and use-of-force records from the department, among other documents.

"Even if Nazario drapes his body in the highest symbolic capital, that being United States military attire, it doesn't gain him anything," said K. Nyerere Turè, an assistant professor of criminal justice at Quinnipiac University.

Turè, a former police officer, said he was once pulled over by police in Georgia while wearing his full uniform in his personal vehicle. He got cited for driving 5 miles (8 kilometers) over the speed limit.

"And I understood this is not about policing," Turè said. "Race itself in America trumps our professional titles, our honorifics."

Richard Brookshire, co-founder and executive director of the Black Veterans Project, said it's important to remember that racism exists not only in the civilian world but also the military.

In February, Lloyd Austin, the nation's first Black defense secretary, ordered military leaders to talk to troops about extremism in the ranks, after a number of former and current military members took part

in the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol riot. And last year, the Air Force released a report concluding the branch's Black members are far more likely to be investigated, arrested, face disciplinary actions and be discharged for misconduct.

"The same kind of racial bias in policing that shows up in our communities exists within the military," Brookshire said. "That is just as important a conversation as whether they're harassed by a civilian cop when they leave the base."

SolarWinds hacking campaign puts Microsoft in hot seat

By FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writer

BOSTON (AP) — The sprawling, monthslong hacking campaign deemed a grave threat to U.S. national security came to be known as SolarWinds for the company whose software update Russian intelligence agents stealthily seeded with malware to penetrate sensitive government and private networks.

Yet it was Microsoft whose code the cyber spies persistently abused in the campaign's second stage, rifling through emails and other files of such high-value targets as then-acting Homeland Security chief Chad Wolf — and hopping undetected among victim networks.

This has put the world's third-most valuable company in the hot seat. Because its products are a de facto monoculture in government and industry — with more than 85% market share — federal lawmakers are insisting that Microsoft swiftly upgrade security to what they say it should have provided in the first place, and without fleecing taxpayers.

Seeking to assuage concerns, Microsoft this past week offered all federal agencies a year of "advanced" security features at no extra charge. But it also seeks to deflect blame, saying it is customers who do not always make security a priority.

Risks in Microsoft's foreign dealings also came into relief when the Biden administration imposed sanctions Thursday on a half-dozen Russian IT companies it said support Kremlin hacking. Most prominent was Positive Technologies, which was among more than 80 companies that Microsoft has supplied with early access to data on vulnerabilities detected in its products. Following the sanctions announcement, Microsoft said Positive Tech was no longer in the program and removed its name from a list of participants on its website.

The SolarWinds hackers took full advantage of what George Kurtz, CEO of top cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike, called "systematic weaknesses" in key elements of Microsoft code to mine at least nine U.S. government agencies — the departments of Justice and Treasury, among them — and more than 100 private companies and think tanks, including software and telecommunications providers.

The SolarWinds hackers' abuse of Microsoft's identity and access architecture — which validates users' identities and grants them access to email, documents and other data — did the most dramatic harm, the nonpartisan Atlantic Council think tank said in a report. That set the hack apart as "a widespread intelligence coup." In nearly every case of post-intrusion mischief, the intruders "silently moved through Microsoft products "vacuuming up emails and files from dozens of organizations."

Thanks in part to the carte blanche that victim networks granted the infected Solarwinds network management software in the form of administrative privileges, the intruders could move laterally across them, even jump among organizations. They used it to sneak into the cybersecurity firm Malwarebytes and to target customers of Mimecast, an email security company.

The campaign's "hallmark" was the intruders' ability to impersonate legitimate users and create counterfeit credentials that let them grab data stored remotely by Microsoft Office, the acting director of the Cybersecurity Infrastructure and Security Agency, Brandon Wales, told a mid-March congressional hearing. "It was all because they compromised those systems that manage trust and identity on networks," he said.

Microsoft President Brad Smith told a February congressional hearing that just 15% of victims were compromised through an authentication vulnerability first identified in 2017 — allowing the intruders to impersonate authorized users by minting the rough equivalent of counterfeit passports.

Microsoft officials stress that the SolarWinds update was not always the entry point; intruders sometimes

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took advantage of vulnerabilities such as weak passwords and victims' lack of multi-factor authentication. But critics say the company took security too lightly. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., verbally pummeled Microsoft for not supplying federal agencies with a level of "event logging" that, if it had not detected the SolarWinds hacking in progress, would at least have provided responders with a record of where the intruders were and what they saw and removed.

"Microsoft chooses the default settings in the software it sells, and even though the company knew for years about the hacking technique used against U.S. government agencies, the company did not set default logging settings to capture information necessary to spot hacks in progress," Wyden said. He was not the only federal lawmaker who complained.

When Microsoft on Wednesday announced a year of free security logging for federal agencies, for which it normally charges a premium, Wyden was not appeased.

"This move is far short of what's needed to make up for Microsoft's recent failures," he said in a statement. "The government still won't have access to important security features without handing over even more money to the same company that created this cybersecurity sinkhole."

Rep. Jim Langevin, D-R.I., had pressed Smith in February on the security logging upsell, comparing it to making seat belts and air bags options in cars when they should be standard. He commended Microsoft for the one-year reprieve, but said a longer-term conversation is due about it "not being a profit center." He said "this buys us a year."

Even the highest level of logging doesn't prevent break-ins, though. It only makes it easier to detect them.

And remember, many security professionals note, Microsoft was itself compromised by the SolarWinds intruders, who got access to some of its source code — its crown jewels. Microsoft's full suite of security products — and some of the industry's most skilled cyber-defense practitioners — had failed to detect the ghost in the network. It was alerted to its own breach by FireEye, the cybersecurity firm that first detected the hacking campaign in mid-December.

The intruders in the unrelated hack of Microsoft Exchange email servers disclosed in March — blamed on Chinese spies — used wholly different infection methods. But they gained immediate high-level access to users' email and other info.

Across the industry, Microsoft's investments in security are widely acknowledged. It is often first to identify major cybersecurity threats, its visibility into networks is so great. But many argue that as the chief supplier of security solutions for its products, it needs to be more mindful about how much it should profit off defense.

"The crux of it is that Microsoft is selling you the disease and the cure," said Marc Maiffret, a cybersecurity veteran who built a career finding vulnerabilities in Microsoft products and has a new startup in the works called BinMave.

Last month, Reuters reported that a \$150 million payment to Microsoft for a "secure cloud platform" was included in a draft outline for spending the \$650 million appropriated for the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency in last month's \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief act.

A Microsoft spokesperson would not say how much, if any, of that money it would be getting, referring the question to the cybersecurity agency. An agency spokesman, Scott McConnell, would not say either. Langevin said he didn't think a final decision has been made.

In the budget year ending in September, the federal government spent more than half a billion dollars on Microsoft software and services.

Many security experts believe Microsoft's single sign-on model, emphasizing user convenience over security, is ripe for retooling to reflect a world where state-backed hackers now routinely run roughshod over U.S. networks.

Alex Weinert, Microsoft's director of identity security, said it offers various ways for customers to strictly limit users' access to what they need to do their jobs. But getting customers to go along can be difficult because it often means abandoning three decades of IT habit and disrupting business. Customers tend to configure too many accounts with the broad global administrative privileges that allowed the SolarWinds

campaign abuses, he said. "It's not the only way they can do it, that's for sure."

In 2014-2015, lax restrictions on access helped Chinese spies steal sensitive personal data on more than 21 million current, former and prospective federal employees from the Office of Personnel Management.

Curtis Dukes was the National Security Agency's head of information assurance at the time.

The OPM shared data across multiple agencies using Microsoft's authentication architecture, granting access to more users than it safely should have, said Dukes, now the managing director for the nonprofit Center for Internet Security.

"People took their eye off the ball."

Riot declared after windows smashed in Portland protests

By SARA CLINE and GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Police in Portland, Oregon, declared a riot Friday night after authorities said protesters smashed windows and burglarized businesses during demonstrations that started earlier in the day after police fatally shot a man while responding to reports of a person with a gun.

The vandalism downtown came after the Friday morning police shooting but also was part of vigils and demonstrations already planned for the night in the name of people killed in other police shootings nationwide. They include 13-year-old Adam Toledo of Chicago and Daunte Wright, a Black man in a Minneapolis suburb.

Deputy Police Chief Chris Davis told reporters earlier in the day that a white man in his 30s was shot and killed by police, who opened fire with a gun and weapons that fire non-lethal projectiles.

The man was pronounced dead at the scene in Lents Park, which is in a leafy, residential neighborhood of the city.

Two officers fired a 40mm device that shoots non-lethal projectiles, and one officer — an eight-year veteran — fired a gun, police said in a statement. The officer is on paid administrative leave, and his or her name will be released Saturday, authorities said.

Davis did not know if the man who died had pointed a weapon at the officers and did not say how many shots were fired. A witness who spoke to reporters at the scene said the man, who had removed his shirt and was blocking an intersection, appeared to be in a mental health crisis, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

The police investigation into the shooting was being hampered by a "decent-sized crowd of fairly aggressive people" who showed up at the park within two hours of the shooting.

As investigators scoured the scene and documented evidence, nearly 100 yards (91 meters) away, a crowd of more than 150 people — many dressed in all black and some carrying helmets, goggles and gas masks — gathered behind crime scene tape, chanting and yelling at the officers standing in front of them.

As police began to finish on-scene investigation around 3 p.m. the crowd marched through the park, ripped down police tape and stood face to face with officers dressed in riot gear. Police left the park around 3:30 p.m., and the crowd remained and eventually stood in a nearby intersection, blocking traffic and chanting.

Police said later Friday they had used pepper spray on protesters in order to disengage. Some people hit officers with sticks and chased officers as they were leaving, police said in a news release. Officers deployed smoke canisters and then used a rubber ball distraction device, police said.

Portland has been the site of frequent protests, many involving violent clashes between officers and demonstrators, ever since the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May.

Over the summer, there were demonstrations for more than 100 straight days. Earlier this week, a crowd set a fire outside the city's police union headquarters following recent fatal police shootings in Chicago and Minneapolis.

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler has decried what he described as a segment of violent agitators who detract from the message of police accountability and should be subject to more severe punishment.

Videos on social media Friday showed protesters skirmishing with police, who used mace to keep them away from the crime scene. Detectives huddled over a covered body still at the scene as dozens of protesters

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chanted, banged drums and waved signs condemning the police from about 100 yards (91 meters) away. "We've had to summon just about every police officer in Multnomah County to keep this group far enough away ... to preserve what we refer to in our business as the integrity of the scene, so that nobody who shouldn't be in there goes in there," Davis said, adding that deputies with county sheriff's office were also helping.

Wheeler visited the shooting scene and issued a statement urging Portland residents to "proceed with empathy and peace" while the investigation unfolds.

These shootings always are traumatic for everyone involved and for our community, regardless of the circumstances," Wheeler said. "I want to offer my sympathy to the individual involved and to their family. My thoughts also are with the officers who were involved."

Todd Littlefield, who lives near where the shooting happened, told The Oregonian/OregonLive that he went to the park after he heard gunfire.

"I was just getting in my truck, and I heard a loud shot," he said.

Littlefield drove to the park and saw several officers standing behind trees and their cars, ordering a man to show his hands, he said.

Juan Chavez, an attendant at a nearby gas station, said he saw a man standing in the middle of the intersection, blocking traffic, with his shirt off. He appeared to be unstable and disoriented, Chavez told the newspaper.

Police then showed up, and the man entered the park before Chavez said he heard two gunshots.

The area where the shooting happened is within the boundaries of operation for a new city pilot project called Portland Street Response in which a team without police officers responds to reports of homelessness or people in mental health crisis.

The pilot project team was not called out Friday and would not respond to a call involving reports of a person with a gun, Davis said.

Lawyers: DOJ defense in Trump defamation suit is 'dangerous'

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

The U.S. Justice Department made a "wrong and dangerous" argument in seeking to defend former President Donald Trump against a former advice columnist's claim that he defamed her when he denied her allegation of rape, her lawyers have told a court.

During Trump's presidency, the Justice Department sought to make the United States, not him personally, the defendant in E. Jean Carroll's lawsuit — a move that would put U.S. taxpayers on the hook if she got a payout in the case.

The Justice Department has argued that the statements he made about Carroll, including that she was "totally lying" to sell a memoir and that "she's not my type," fell within the scope of his job as president. The federal lawyers said he had to respond to her claims because they essentially questioned his fitness to hold public office.

In court papers filed late Friday, Carroll's lawyers said Trump's comments were "personal, not presidential" — and that accepting the Justice Department's view would essentially create a rule allowing federal officials to slur their detractors at will.

"That rule is both wrong and dangerous," Carroll's lawyers, led by Roberta Kaplan, wrote in asking a federal appeals court to reject the Justice Department's argument. "It reflects a disturbing belief that federal officials should have free rein to destroy the reputations and livelihoods of any perceived critic — no matter how unrelated to the business of governance."

Messages were sent Saturday morning to Justice Department attorneys on the case and to the law firm that has represented Trump's personally in the suit.

Carroll alleged in 2019 that Trump raped her in a New York luxury department store dressing room in the mid-1990s after they bumped into each other and started joking around about buying lingerie. She has been trying to get a DNA sample from him to test against male genetic material on a dress she says

she was wearing during the encounter.

Carroll's lawsuit said his comments sullied her character and damaged her career. She was a longtime Elle magazine columnist until late 2019.

This past October, a federal judge in Manhattan turned down the government's bid to make the U.S. the defendant. In the final days of Trump's presidency, the Justice Department appealed.

Government lawyers wrote that Trump was expected to respond to questions from the media — such as queries about Carroll's allegations — and acted within the parameters of the presidency when "he seeks to defuse personal issues that threaten to impair his ability to achieve his agenda."

"Likewise, the President ... acts within the scope of his office when he responds to public critics," the lawyers said.

Carroll's lawyers are asking the appeals court to uphold the judge's decision.

Carroll said in a statement Friday that portraying Trump's remarks about her as part of his presidential work was offensive to her.

"I hope that it is offensive to the Justice Department under President (Joe) Biden," she added.

The Associated Press does not identify people who say they have been sexually assaulted unless they come forward publicly, as Carroll has done.

Fires, damage at Oakland protest against police brutality

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — A protest that began peacefully in California ended with multiple fires set, several cars damaged and numerous windows shattered.

The protest against police brutality in Oakland began calmly Friday night, news outlets reported. A subsequent march drew around 300 people with some setting fires and breaking windows.

A car dealership was among the buildings damaged. At least one car was set on fire. A fire was also set outside a bank. Demonstrators were seen walking past the scene of a car crash.

Photos and videos posted online showed marchers with signs and flags. Many chanted the names of Daunte Wright, a 20-year-old who was shot and killed by an officer in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, and Adam Toledo, a 13-year-old fatally shot by an officer in Chicago.

People in the crowd threw bottles and other objects at officers during the march, Oakland police said in a statement. One officer suffered an injury from being struck in the head. A community member was also assaulted, police said.

The statement said protesters dragged barriers into the road to block and delay responding officers.

Authorities declared an unlawful assembly and instructed demonstrators to leave. Police said the protesters dispersed peacefully. There were no arrests, or citations issued.

Some businesses had boarded up their storefronts earlier Friday in anticipation of the unrest, according to news outlets.

Worldwide COVID-19 death toll tops a staggering 3 million

By DAVID BILLER, MARIA CHENG and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press Writers

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — The global death toll from the coronavirus topped a staggering 3 million people Saturday amid repeated setbacks in the worldwide vaccination campaign and a deepening crisis in places such as Brazil, India and France.

The number of lives lost, as compiled by Johns Hopkins University, is about equal to the population of Kyiv, Ukraine; Caracas, Venezuela; or metropolitan Lisbon, Portugal. It is bigger than Chicago (2.7 million) and equivalent to Philadelphia and Dallas combined.

And the true number is believed to be significantly higher because of possible government concealment and the many cases overlooked in the early stages of the outbreak that began in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019.

When the world back in January passed the bleak threshold of 2 million deaths, immunization drives

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had just started in Europe and the United States. Today, they are underway in more than 190 countries, though progress in bringing the virus under control varies widely.

While the campaigns in the U.S. and Britain have hit their stride and people and businesses there are beginning to contemplate life after the pandemic, other places, mostly poorer countries but some rich ones as well, are lagging behind in putting shots in arms and have imposed new lockdowns and other restrictions as virus cases soar.

Worldwide, deaths are on the rise again, running at around 12,000 per day on average, and new cases are climbing too, eclipsing 700,000 a day.

"This is not the situation we want to be in 16 months into a pandemic, where we have proven control measures," said Maria Van Kerkhove, one of the World Health Organization's leaders on COVID-19.

In Brazil, where deaths are running at about 3,000 per day, accounting for one-quarter of the lives lost worldwide in recent weeks, the crisis has been likened to a "raging inferno" by one WHO official. A more contagious variant of the virus has been rampaging across the country.

As cases surge, hospitals are running out of critical sedatives. As a result, there have been reports of some doctors diluting what supplies remain and even tying patients to their beds while breathing tubes are pushed down their throats.

The slow vaccine rollout has crushed Brazilians' pride in their own history of carrying out huge immunization campaigns that were the envy of the developing world.

Taking cues from President Jair Bolsonaro, who has likened the virus to little more than a flu, his Health Ministry for months bet big on a single vaccine, ignoring other producers. When bottlenecks emerged, it was too late to get large quantities in time.

Watching so many patients suffer and die alone at her Rio de Janeiro hospital impelled nurse Lidiane Melo to take desperate measures.

In the early days of the pandemic, as sufferers were calling out for comfort that she was too busy to provide, Melo filled two rubber gloves with warm water, knotted them shut, and sandwiched them around a patient's hand to simulate a loving touch.

Some have christened the practice the "hand of God," and it is now the searing image of a nation roiled by a medical emergency with no end in sight.

"Patients can't receive visitors. Sadly, there's no way. So it's a way to provide psychological support, to be there together with the patient holding their hand," Melo said. She added: "And this year it's worse, the seriousness of patients is 1,000 times greater."

This situation is similarly dire in India, where cases spiked in February after weeks of steady decline, taking authorities by surprise. In a surge driven by variants of the virus, India saw over 180,000 new infections in one 24-hour span during the past week, bringing the total number of cases to over 13.9 million.

Problems that India had overcome last year are coming back to haunt health officials. Only 178 ventilators were free Wednesday afternoon in New Delhi, a city of 29 million, where 13,000 new infections were reported the previous day.

The challenges facing India reverberate beyond its borders since the country is the biggest supplier of shots to COVAX, the U.N.-sponsored program to distribute vaccines to poorer parts of the world. Last month, India said it would suspend vaccine exports until the virus's spread inside the country slows.

The WHO recently described the supply situation as precarious. Up to 60 countries might not receive any more shots until June, by one estimate. To date, COVAX has delivered about 40 million doses to more than 100 countries, enough to cover barely 0.25% of the world's population.

Globally, about 87% of the 700 million doses dispensed have been given out in rich countries. While 1 in 4 people in wealthy nations have received a vaccine, in poor countries the figure is 1 in more than 500.

In recent days, the U.S. and some European countries put the use of Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine on hold while authorities investigate extremely rare but dangerous blood clots. AstraZeneca's vaccine has likewise been hit with delays and restrictions because of a clotting scare.

Another concern: Poorer countries are relying on vaccines made by China and Russia, which some scientists believe provide less protection than those by Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca.

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Last week, the director of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledged the country's vaccines offer low protection and said officials are considering mixing them with other shots to improve their effectiveness.

In the U.S., where over 560,000 lives have been lost, accounting for more than 1 in 6 of the world's COVID-19 deaths, hospitalizations and deaths have dropped, businesses are reopening, and life is beginning to return to something approaching normalcy in several states. The number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits tumbled last week to 576,000, a post-COVID-19 low.

But progress has been patchy, and new hot spots — most notably Michigan — have flared up in recent weeks. Still, deaths in the U.S. are down to about 700 per day on average, plummeting from a mid-January peak of about 3,400.

In Europe, countries are feeling the brunt of a more contagious variant that first ravaged Britain and has pushed the continent's COVID-19-related death toll beyond 1 million.

Close to 6,000 gravely ill patients are being treated in French critical care units, numbers not seen since the first wave a year ago.

Dr. Marc Leone, head of intensive care at the North Hospital in Marseille, said exhausted front-line staff members who were feted as heroes at the start of the pandemic now feel alone and are clinging to hope that renewed school closings and other restrictions will help curb the virus in the coming weeks.

"There's exhaustion, more bad tempers. You have to tread carefully because there are a lot of conflicts," he said. "We'll give everything we have to get through these 15 days as best we can."

Seager's homer in 12th sends Dodgers to 11-6 win over Padres

By BERNIE WILSON AP Sports Writer

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Whew! And still 18 more to go.

Corey Seager hit a tiebreaking, two-run homer on Tim Hill's first pitch of the 12th inning and the Los Angeles Dodgers beat the San Diego Padres 11-6 Friday night in a tense, entertaining first matchup this season between NL West rivals who have visions of deep playoff runs.

It took 4 hours, 57 minutes to decide this one, which ended early Saturday morning. The benches emptied after Dodgers reliever Dennis Santana hit Jorge Mateo with a pitch to put runners on the corners with one out in the 10th. Trent Grisham walked to load the bases, but Santana struck out Fernando Tatis Jr. to escape.

"I'm very hesitant to get ahead of things, but it was like a playoff game," said Dodgers manager Dave Roberts, a multisport high school star in northern San Diego County. "They played a lot of guys, we played a lot of guys — the intensity was there. Man, I can look up and down my lineup card and everyone contributed."

The teams met for the first time since the Dodgers swept San Diego in their Division Series last year en route to winning the World Series. The Padres responded by beefing up their rotation, trading for Yu Darvish, Blake Snell and Joe Musgrove.

Darvish and Snell are scheduled to pitch in the final two games of the three-game series.

"Yeah, it felt like a rivalry tonight," said Roberts, who downplayed that notion during spring training.

Seager homered to center field, his second, with Mookie Betts on second base after making the last out of the 11th. The Dodgers added three more runs in the inning, including a sacrifice fly by reliever David Price (1-0) that was caught by Musgrove, who took over in left field after the Padres ran out of relievers.

Left fielder Jurickson Profar moved to second base as infielder Jake Cronenworth came in to pitch. He got the final two outs, including striking out Betts to end the inning.

"It's always there, something I kind of have in my back pocket," said Cronenworth, a college closer at Michigan. "I wanted maybe to throw a little harder, but they told me not to."

Hill (0-2) allowed five runs, three earned, and four hits in 1 1/3 innings.

Price, who got his first save since Game 7 of the 2008 AL Championship Series on Thursday night against Colorado, said it was "a fun rivalry to be part of."

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"Once you get to that first bench-clearing whatever happens, that's when it kind of goes to the next level," he added.

After the Dodgers went ahead 6-5 in the ninth when Justin Turner singled in Betts, the Padres tied it with two outs in the bottom half when Eric Hosmer singled home Manny Machado.

San Diego had tied the game at 5 on Profar's opposite-field, two-run double to left in the eighth inning off Corey Knebel.

"I'm just spent emotionally, just proud of everybody," Roberts said after the first of 19 scheduled meetings between the teams this year. "We responded, they answered back, they kept fighting, we kept fighting."

Tatis returned from the 10-day injured list in a big way when he homered to center field off Walker Buehler for a 2-1 lead in the fifth.

But Tatis' throwing error from shortstop contributed to the Dodgers scoring three runs in the sixth on two singles, a walk and a wild pitch. With runners on first and third and two outs, Tatis made a nice diving stop of Chris Taylor's RBI infield single and his throw to second went past Cronenworth, who was late covering the bag. Max Muncy scored on the error and Taylor scored on Keone Kela's wild pitch for a 4-2 lead.

Zach McKinstry hit an RBI double in the eighth for a 5-3 advantage.

Padres rookie Luis Campusano hit an RBI single off Buehler in the second and Dodgers rookie Luke Raley tied it with one out in the fifth when he hit his first homer, off Dan Altavilla. Raley made his big league debut a week earlier and got his first hit Wednesday night, a double against Colorado.

Buehler allowed two runs and seven hits in six innings while striking out four and walking one.

Padres rookie Ryan Weathers, the son of former big league pitcher David Weathers, made his first career start and held the Dodgers to one hit in 3 2/3 scoreless innings while striking out three and walking two.

Weathers made his major league debut with 1 1/3 scoreless innings in Game 1 of the NLDS when the Padres had to turn to their bullpen after Mike Clevinger left with an elbow injury.

NO-NO CEREMONY

Before the game, Musgrove, who grew up in suburban El Cajon, was honored for throwing the first no-hitter in Padres history, at Texas on April 9.

"After 8,206 games, the Padres have a no-hitter, brought to us by a native son," Padres owner Peter Seidler said during a ceremony at home plate that included Musgrove's family and girlfriend.

Musgrove was presented with a framed No. 44 jersey signed by his teammates and a check for \$8,206 for his favorite charity, the Challenged Athletes Foundation.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Dodgers: CF Cody Bellinger has a hairline fracture in his left fibula. Roberts offered no timetable for his return. Bellinger was injured when he was spiked on a close play at first base at Oakland on April 5.

Padres: Tatis was activated from the 10-day injured list. He had been sidelined with a partially dislocated left shoulder sustained while striking out on a violent swing April 6. To make room, utility man Tucupita Marcano was optioned to the alternate training site.

UP NEXT

Dodgers: LHP Clayton Kershaw (2-1, 2.89 ERA) is scheduled to start Saturday night. He is 21-7 with a 2.03 ERA in 40 career starts against the Padres, including 9-3 with a 1.83 ERA in 17 starts at Petco Park.

Padres: RHP Yu Darvish (1-0, 3.06) starts against one of his former teams.

From Russia to Britain, Philip's royal ties spanned Europe

By THEODORA TONGAS Associated Press

TATOI, Greece (AP) — Prince Philip's life spanned a century of European history. His family ties were just as broad, with Britain's longest-serving consort linked by blood and marriage to most of the continent's royal houses.

"If Queen Victoria is considered the grandmother of Europe, Prince Philip is the uncle of Europe," said Vassilis Koutsavlis, president of the Tatoi Royal Estate Friends Association.

It's in that densely wooded estate at the foot of a mountain north of Athens that Philip's father, Prince

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Andrew of Greece and Denmark, lies buried. The Tatoí estate housed the royal summer residence and the royal cemetery, dotted with the tombs of Philip's relatives: kings and queens of Greece, princes and princesses of Denmark, grand duchesses of Russia and even a distant relative of Napoleon Bonaparte.

"At that time, it was very common to marry others in royal families. And (Denmark's King) Christian IX was very good at it," royalty expert Lars Hovbakke Soerensen said. "He was instrumental in getting his children married into other royal houses in Europe."

Christian also sent one of his sons to become the monarch of Greece. The relatively new state had won its independence a few decades earlier from the Ottoman Empire, with the help of the Great Powers at the time: Britain, France and Russia.

Philip's grandfather was just 17 years old in 1863 when the Greek National Assembly elected him king, becoming George I to take the place of the equally foreign-born but unpopular King Otto, who had been deposed.

George I married Olga Constantinova of Russia, a member of the Romanov dynasty, and together they had eight children, of which Andrew, Philip's father, was the seventh.

Apart from one child who died in infancy, all of George and Olga's offspring went on to marry European royals or nobles. For Andrew, that was Princess Alice, a great-granddaughter of Britain's Queen Victoria.

"What was then important was that the royal houses needed blue blood in their veins," Hovbakke Soerensen said.

Like the Danish king, Victoria was a well-known matchmaker, marrying her children into European monarchies. Several of her descendants still reign in Europe.

As a descendent of Christian IX and Victoria, Philip's blood ties extend far into European royal families.

Current monarchs Queen Margrethe II of Denmark and King Harald V of Norway, as well as Spain's King Felipe VI, are all also descendants of both Victoria and Christian.

Felipe's Greek-by-birth mother, Queen Emeritus Sophia, was a second niece to Philip. The uncle of Queen Elizabeth's late husband was King Constantine I of Greece — Sophia's grandfather.

Sophia is the wife of Juan Carlos I, who was Spain's king between 1975 and 2014 and also a distant relative of Queen Victoria.

In their telegram of condolences to Queen Elizabeth last week, Felipe and his wife Letizia of Spain started with an affectionate: "Dear Aunt Lilibet."

"We are deeply saddened to hear about the passing away of our dear uncle Philip," it continued.

In addition to being Philip's second nephew, the brother of Sophia is Constantine, who was deposed as Greece's king in the 1970s. He and Philip maintained strong friendly ties that included serving as godparents to members of each other's families.

Other sitting royals related to Philip include Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf and Philippe, king of the Belgians.

Philip's family fled Greece when he was still a baby, forced into exile to save the life of his father, who had been sentenced to death over actions taken during his involvement as an officer in the failed Greek military campaign against Turkey in Asia Minor. Philip's uncle, the king, was forced to abdicate.

Philip was married to Britain's Queen Elizabeth for more than 70 years. He will be interred on Saturday in the Royal Vault in St. George's Chapel in Windsor, far from the graves of his father and ancestors in the Greek woodland of Tatoí.

Chicago police critics call for charges in shooting of boy

By SARA BURNETT and MICHAEL TARM Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Newly released video that shows a Chicago police officer fatally shoot a 13-year-old will be key evidence when prosecutors consider a case against the officer and are confronted with both the emotions surrounding the chilling footage and legal precedent that makes it difficult to bring charges against law enforcement.

Video of last month's encounter was released Thursday and provoked an outpouring of grief and outrage.

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It shows Officer Eric Stillman shooting Adam Toledo less than a second after the boy drops a handgun, turns toward Stillman and begins raising his hands.

Some viewers have called for Stillman to be charged or fired. But for others, the video shows how difficult such decisions might be for prosecutors and police higher-ups, with an officer making a quick decision to shoot after chasing a suspect down a dark alley while responding to a report about gunshots.

Whether Stillman is charged will be up to the Cook County state's attorney's office, which will get the Civilian Office of Police Accountability's report after the independent board completes its investigation.

Several legal experts said Friday that they don't think Stillman could be charged under criteria established by a landmark 1989 Supreme Court ruling on the use of force by police, though another said prosecutors might see enough evidence to justify an involuntary manslaughter charge and let a jury decide guilt or innocence.

The killing of Toledo, who was Latino, by Stillman, who is white, adds to already-heightened tension over policing in Chicago and elsewhere in the U.S., particularly in Black and Latino communities. The videos and other investigative materials were released against the backdrop of the trial in Minneapolis of former Officer Derek Chauvin in the death of George Floyd and the recent police killing of another Black man, Daunte Wright, in one of that city's suburbs.

Around a thousand people gathered Friday evening in a park on Chicago's northwest side, some holding signs that read, "stop killing kids" and "CPD can't be re-formed." A brass band played music as the crowd chanted, "no justice, no peace".

Dulce Rodriguez, 34, held a sign that read, "We are Adam Toledo". Her 5-year-old daughter, Vida waved a large Mexican flag.

"That could've been anybody's kid," said Rodriguez, who lost a cousin to gun violence last June. She said police entice gun violence in under-resourced neighborhoods like where she lives.

"We do better when they're not there," she said.

Although Mayor Lori Lightfoot implored the public to keep the peace and allow the police review board to complete its investigation, some had already made up their minds about what happened to Toledo, whose mother described him as a curious and goofy seventh grader who loved animals, riding his bike and junk food.

Speaking Friday on the floor of the Illinois House, state Rep. Edgar Gonzalez, who lives four blocks from where Toledo died, called the killing a "murder" and expressed frustration at what he described as a too-familiar pattern of police abuse.

"So if you put your hands up, they shoot. If you put your hands down, they shoot. If you walk, you run, you hide, you sleep, you do exactly as they say, they still shoot," Gonzalez said. "So I ask the members of this chamber, what are we supposed to do?"

When asked about the video Friday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki called it "chilling" and a reminder that across the country, "law enforcement uses unnecessary force too often, resulting in the death of Black and brown Americans." She said she didn't know if President Joe Biden had watched it.

Stillman was responding with other officers to reports of shots fired in Little Village, a predominantly Hispanic, working class neighborhood of the city's southwest side, at around 3 a.m. on March 29. Nineteen seconds elapsed from when Stillman got out of his squad car to when he shot Toledo. His jumpy, night-time bodycam footage shows him chasing Toledo on foot down an alley for several seconds and yelling "Police! Stop! Stop right (expletive) now!"

As the teen slows down, Stillman yells "Hands! Hands! Show me your (expletive) hands!"

Toledo then turns toward the camera, Stillman yells "Drop it!" and midway through repeating that command, he opens fire and Toledo falls down. While approaching the wounded boy, Stillman radios in for an ambulance. He can be heard imploring Toledo to "stay awake," and as other officers arrive, an officer says he can't feel a heartbeat and begins administering CPR.

Other video footage released Thursday shows that Toledo had a gun in his right hand just before he was shot, and Stillman's bodycam footage shows him shining a light on a handgun on the ground near Toledo after he shot him.

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In its 1989 ruling, the Supreme Court said officers' use of force may be legal if they truly believed their lives were at risk in the moment — even though, in hindsight, it becomes clear they weren't actually in danger.

The legality of a deadly shooting, the high court said, "must be judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene, rather than with the 20/20 vision of hindsight." Similar wording is incorporated into Illinois law and the Chicago Police Department's use-of-force guidelines.

Stillman knew Toledo had a gun within a second or two of shooting him, and the officer knew shots had been fired in the area minutes earlier, said Phil Turner, a former federal prosecutor in Chicago.

"I don't think there is any question that any other reasonable officer would have acted in the same way that officer acted," Turner said. "It was such a split-second decision. I don't think the officer will be charged."

Stillman's attorney, Tim Grace, said the officer "was faced with a life-threatening and deadly force situation" and that "all prior attempts to deescalate and gain compliance with all of the officer's lawful orders had failed."

But Adeena Weiss-Ortiz, an attorney for Toledo's family, told reporters it's irrelevant whether Toledo was holding a gun before he turned toward the officer.

"If he had a gun, he tossed it," she said. "The officer said, 'Show me your hands.' He complied. He turned around."

Stillman, who served in Afghanistan with the Marines and is a staff sergeant in the Selected Marine Corps Reserve, joined the police department in 2015, according to an incident report from the shooting.

During his six years with the department, Stillman has been named in at least four use-of-force reports, according to data collected by the Invisible Institute, a Chicago-based group that tracks police misconduct. In each report, the subjects were listed as Black men in their late 20s or older. The reports include a takedown/emergency handcuffing in 2017, and wristlocks, takedowns/emergency handcuffings and strikes with an open hand in 2018 and 2019.

Alison Flowers, who heads the institute's investigations, called the number of reports "concerning," adding, "Usually, we see that level of activity more over the course of a long career, not in a matter of just six years."

In addition to posting Stillman's bodycam footage, the review board released footage from other bodycams, four third-party videos, two audio recordings of 911 calls, and six audio recordings from ShotSpotter, the technology that led police to respond to the sound of gunshots that morning.

Toledo and a 21-year-old man fled on foot when confronted by police. The man, Ruben Roman, was arrested on a misdemeanor charge of resisting arrest but was later charged with felonies including the reckless discharge of a firearm, illegal use of a weapon by a felon and child endangerment. He was ordered held on \$150,000 bond.

Right after the shooting, people in the community started calling on the review board to release any bodycam footage of it. The Chicago Police Department has a long history of brutality and racism that has fomented mistrust among the city's many Black and Latino residents. And the city has a history of suppressing damning police videos, including its efforts to prevent the release of footage of the 2014 killing of Laquan McDonald by a white officer who was eventually convicted of murder.

As Biden improves with vets, Afghanistan plan a plus to some

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

ELM GROVE, Wis. (AP) — Patrick Proctor Brown says the war in Afghanistan was lost within a year of its start. The suburban Milwaukee lawyer, who was an infantry captain in Iraq, said the trillions of dollars spent and the thousands of lives lost, including a lieutenant he trained with, make it "a tragedy."

"And the Taliban will be back in power in a year," said Brown, 35, who also studied diplomacy at Norwich, a military university in Vermont. "It's insane."

Brown supports President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, and by voting for the Democrat, he represents a subtle but potent shift in the voting behavior of some in the

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military.

Voters who served in the military have long leaned toward Republicans. But there are signs that Biden may have cut into that advantage last year. Biden carried several counties with large military communities — as well as the most concentrated military congressional district last year — that former President Donald Trump and previous Republican presidential nominees counted on for decades.

Veteran groups and pollsters attribute Biden's gains to a handful of factors, including an increase in female, Black, Latino and college-educated service members, all keys to the Democratic coalition.

But strategists also point to the stark contrast in Biden's and Trump's approaches to the military. Biden, the father of an Iraq War veteran, often closes his speeches with a short prayer for U.S. troops. Trump, meanwhile, was quick to praise veterans in public, but also made Islamophobic attacks on the parents of a U.S. soldier killed in Iraq — a Gold Star family — and made comments mocking American war dead.

The contrast raises the question of whether Democrats' fledgling momentum with military voters is more than a momentary anti-Trump blip. It also heaps pressure on Biden to fulfill policy promises and perfect the political outreach to veterans getting underway.

"This president has got to end these wars," said Jon Soltz, a former Army tank captain who formed the Democratic-leaning VoteVets.org in 2006. "He's got to fulfill some of these promises. There's a war-weariness in the military."

Results from around the country last year suggest Biden has an edge with some military voters unlike his recent predecessors.

Among several military-leaning spots on the national map, Biden carried Virginia's 2nd Congressional District, which contains the most active duty and veteran service members in the country. It includes the world's largest naval base, Naval Station Norfolk, and is home to more than 110,000 active and retired service members. Trump won the district in 2016, as did Republicans Mitt Romney in 2012 and John McCain in 2008.

Biden also flipped New Hampshire's Rockingham County, home of Portsmouth and the U.S. Navy's oldest continuously operating shipyard. He was also the first Democrat ever to carry Riley County, Kansas. It's the home of Kansas State University, but also Fort Riley Army base, where the National Bio Defense research has drawn an educated and racially and ethnically diverse military workforce.

"In all of the data we saw, Biden was doing better with veterans and active duty," than previous Democratic nominees going back decades, said Celinda Lake, one of the Biden campaign's two main pollsters. "And the campaign was very active in targeting veterans, including talking about his son being a veteran of the current engagements, and that resonated with active military and veterans."

Early in the 2020 campaign, aides recognized the former vice president's unique profile as a potential commander in chief. Having been to Iraq and Afghanistan dozens of times as vice president and, before that, a longtime member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he also is the father of an Iraq War veteran, his late son Beau.

"We ran commander in chief ads in Iowa because we thought the country needed it," said Greg Schultz, Biden's campaign manager through the early 2020 primaries and caucuses. "But it was also a signal to military veterans and their families that Biden gets it."

The Afghanistan decision is a priority for many on active duty and especially post-9/11 veterans like Brown, though there are others who served there who may think the U.S. is abandoning Afghans they worked with or who feel the sacrifices of the more than 3,500 U.S. troops who died there were in vain.

The move is a longtime promise of Biden, who advocated it as vice president, though it never happened during the eight years of the Obama administration.

"It is the responsibility of the Afghans to take care of their own security," Biden said during a 2012 vice presidential debate, pledging that the U.S. would be gone in two years. "We've been in this war for over a decade."

There's no sign that veterans' views on the war differ dramatically from other Americans'. A July 2019 Pew Research Poll found 58% of veterans said the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting, nearly identical

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to the general public's view at 59%.

VoteVets is taking actions to keep Biden's momentum from slowing. The group has hired Schultz, Biden's former campaign manager, as a consultant to help build a veteran voter database to improve outreach.

Beyond Trump's insensitive remarks about some troops and their families, his decisions to abruptly withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, which left Kurdish allies unprotected, angered some military leaders. In an extraordinary rebuke after the 2020 election, all 10 living former secretaries of defense cautioned against involving the military in pursuing Trump's false claims of election fraud, calling any such move "dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory."

Likewise, the Trump administration's Pentagon policy barred transgender people from joining the military, while Trump was seen as doing little to distance himself from far-right racist groups at a time when the military has become more diverse.

Unless Biden runs against Trump in 2024, Republicans could likely recoup some of those military voters, said Peter Feaver, a Duke University professor and former special adviser to President George W. Bush's National Security Council.

"From a military voter point of view, it is Trumpism more than Republicanism that is off-putting," Feaver said. "The more Trump recedes from view, the greater the attention on the problems within the Democratic coalition on national security and defense issues will be."

VoteVets' Soltz sees the Afghanistan decision as one that his group can cite as it promotes support for Biden in the years leading up to the next presidential election, especially as the administration moves to confront Russia and China, considered more direct threats to U.S. security.

"There is an intellectual conversation at the highest level of the military about meeting tomorrow's demands that aren't yesterday's," Soltz said. "And Afghanistan is a yesterday."

Gov. Kemp faces next test from Trump loyalists in Georgia

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia's new voting law overhaul kickstarted Gov. Brian Kemp's effort to reconnect with hardline conservatives angry that the Republican executive didn't help overturn former President Donald Trump's loss last November. But the new GOP-backed law hasn't mollified the most intense Trump loyalists.

The next measure of their ire — and Kemp's standing as he seeks re-election 2022 — comes Saturday as many local Republican committees across Georgia consider proposals to censure the governor for not reversing President Joe Biden's victory in Georgia. The county conventions come one day after Kemp drew his first 2022 primary challenger after weathering Trump's ire for months.

"It doesn't matter what Kemp does," said conservative activist Debbie Dooley, who is helping lead the censure effort. "The grassroots is angry."

For now, Kemp remains a clear favorite to win his party's nomination for a second term. His only announced opponent is a former Democratic state lawmaker, Vernon Jones, who sought the GOP spotlight by endorsing Trump's reelection bid and then embracing the former president's false claims that the 2020 election was rigged.

Kemp, meanwhile, has capitalized on Georgia becoming the first Republican-run state to adopt new voting procedures intended to tighten rules around absentee mail voting, among other changes. The governor doubled down on his position amid corporate criticism and Major League Baseball's decision to move its summer All-Star Game from Georgia.

Big business, Kemp said, was "scared" of "woke liberals" and "cancel culture."

That's been enough to draw plaudits from some Republicans, especially in suburban Cobb County, where the Atlanta Braves would have hosted the All-Star Game. Yet the censure push hasn't gone away.

Two north Georgia counties approved the condemnations last week. Dooley said she's had discussions with Republicans in a few dozen other counties where activists support censuring Kemp, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan. She said she'd consider it a victory if a half-dozen counties opt for censure.

That's a fraction of Georgia's 159 counties, but the potential fallout is enough that Kemp's allies have

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been working local Republican ranks to try to spike the resolutions.

Ryan Mahoney, Kemp's top campaign adviser, said the strategy is "to remind grassroots activists that he's been a champion for life, for economic growth and opportunity, expanding access to health and now leading the fight against cancel culture."

Jones offered a different assessment of the governor Friday as he launched his 2022 campaign.

"You've seen me stand right beside Donald Trump, just like you. I have done more as a conservative fighting side by side for you and for our elections, and for America first, than the governor and all those RINOs combined," Jones said. RINO is an acronym for "Republican in name only."

Trump has not indicated whether he will endorse Jones.

Jones went on to echo Trump's attacks that Kemp's refusal to help overturn the November election cost Republicans the White House, and Jones added that Kemp's inaction cost Republicans two U.S. Senate runoffs in January that gave Democrats outright control on Capitol Hill.

Those close to Kemp see Jones' candidacy as perhaps the best kind of primary challenge for an incumbent.

With Jones drawing attention, Kemp can raise money and make his case to conservatives who might not otherwise be interested. But Jones, they argue, doesn't come to the matchup with the same established, high-profile conservative identity as other figures Trump loyalists have urged to run, most notably former Rep. Doug Collins.

Kemp's allies, though, acknowledge frustrations within the GOP base, and they recognize the governor's reelection isn't just about winning the nomination. It also could depend on emerging from a primary with the GOP coalition intact enough to win a competitive general election.

The counties that already censured Kemp — Murray and Whitfield — demonstrate the risks.

Trump got 70% of the vote in Whitfield last November. Kemp got an even larger share at 72% in 2018. The censure resolutions nonetheless passed 34-2. In neighboring Murray County, Kemp's 84% vote share in 2018 exceeded Trump's 82% in November. Murray Republicans adopted the censures by acclamation, meaning no recorded vote.

Kemp's surge in small-town and rural turnout in 2018, exceeding Trump's vote shares in less populous counties, was necessary for him to defeat Democrat Stacey Abrams by just 55,000 votes out of 4 million votes cast. Trump, with just a slight drop, ended up losing Georgia to Biden by about 12,000 votes out of 5 million cast.

And in their January Senate losses, former Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler — both viewed as insufficiently loyal to Trump by a narrow slice of conservatives — fell short even of Trump's support. And their statewide shortfall was wider than Abrams' deficit to Kemp in 2018.

After outcry, WH says Biden will lift refugee cap in May

By ZEKE MILLER, AAMER MADHANI and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing swift blowback from allies and aid groups, the White House said President Joe Biden plans to lift his predecessor's historically low cap on refugees by next month, after initially moving only to expand the eligibility criteria for resettlements.

In an emergency determination signed by Biden earlier Friday, he stated the admission of up to 15,000 refugees set by former President Donald Trump this year "remains justified by humanitarian concerns and is otherwise in the national interest." But if the cap is reached before the end of the current budget year and the emergency refugee situation persists, then a presidential determination may be issued to raise the ceiling.

That set off a deluge of criticism from top allies on Capitol Hill such as the second-ranking Senate Democrat, Dick Durbin of Illinois, who called that initial limit "unacceptable."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said later that Biden is expected to increase the refugee cap by May 15, though she didn't say by how much.

Biden has been consulting with his advisers to determine what number of refugees could realistically be admitted to the United States between now and Oct. 1, the end of the fiscal year, Psaki said. "Given the decimated refugee admissions program we inherited," she said it's now "unlikely" Biden will be able

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to boost that number to 62,500, as he had proposed in his plan to Congress two months ago.

But Biden, she said, was urged by advisers to "take immediate action to reverse the Trump policy that banned refugees from many key regions, to enable flights from those regions to begin within days; today's order did that."

The new allocations provide more slots for refugees from Africa, the Middle East and Central America and lift Trump's restrictions on resettlements from Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

Critics from both sides of the political spectrum had accused the president of bowing to political pressure that has been mounting over the record pace of unaccompanied migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Stephen Miller, a key architect of Trump's immigration policies, tweeted that keeping Trump's cap "reflects Team Biden's awareness that the border flood will cause record midterm losses."

The White House indicated the border situation was partly why Biden had not acted before now, even though migrants at the border do not go through the same vetting process as refugees.

"It is a factor," said Psaki, noting that the Office of Refugee Resettlement "has personnel working on both issues and so we have to ensure that there is capacity and ability to manage both."

Connecticut Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal said he didn't buy that.

"This cruel policy is no more acceptable now than it was during the Trump Administration," Blumenthal said. "To be clear: the asylum process at the southern border and the refugee process are completely separate immigration systems. Conflating the two constitutes caving to the politics of fear."

Since the fiscal year began last Oct. 1, just over 2,000 refugees have been resettled in the U.S.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken notified Congress on Feb. 12 of a plan to raise the ceiling on admissions to 62,500, but no presidential determination followed. The law does not require congressional approval and past presidents have issued such presidential determinations that set the cap on refugee admissions shortly after the notification to Congress.

New Jersey Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told Biden in a letter Friday that his inaction "undermines your declared purpose to reverse your predecessor's refugee policies."

Menendez said it also makes it unlikely that the program can hit its target next budget year of 125,000, which Biden has pledged to do.

Refugee resettlement agencies said it was important that admissions go higher even if it's not possible to meet the target to send a message that America will be a leader again in offering safe haven to the world's oppressed.

Some 35,000 refugees have been cleared to go to the United States, and 100,000 remain in the pipeline and their lives remain in limbo, said David Miliband, president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee.

"This leadership is sorely needed," he said.

Under Biden's new allocation, 7,000 slots are reserved for refugees from Africa, 1,000 from East Asia, 1,500 from Europe and Central Asia, 3,000 from Latin America and the Caribbean and 1,500 from the Near East and South Asia. A reserve of about 1,000 slots can be used as needed.

The State Department, which coordinates flights with resettlement agencies, booked 715 refugees to come to the United States with the anticipation that Biden would have acted by March, but those flights were canceled since the refugees were not eligible under Trump's rules, according to resettlement agencies.

Most of the refugees are from Africa and fleeing armed conflict or political persecution. Trump limited most spots to people fleeing religious persecution, Iraqis who have assisted U.S. forces there, and people from Central America's Northern Triangle.

Biden's appeals for action on guns, policing face reality

By ZEKE MILLER and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the nation struggles with yet another mass shooting and faces a reckoning over the deaths of Black men at the hands of police, President Joe Biden is calling for action. Going beyond

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that, however, is proving a lot more difficult.

Three months into his presidency, Biden's robust agenda is running up against the realities of his narrow Democratic majority on Capitol Hill and the Senate's limited ability to tackle multiple pieces of large-scale legislation at once. With the White House focusing first on a sweeping coronavirus relief package and now a sprawling infrastructure plan that is likely to dominate the congressional calendar for months, issues like gun control and police reform appear likely to take a back seat.

Biden on Friday insisted that wasn't the case, saying that on the issue of gun control in particular, "I've never not prioritized this." He spoke a day after a gunman killed eight people at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, the latest in a rash of mass shootings across the United States in recent weeks.

At issue for Biden are many of the central promises he made to Democratic voters — particularly Black voters who helped propel him to the White House — both about his priorities and his ability to maneuver in Washington, where issues like gun control have languished for years. The mass shootings, as well as renewed focus on police killings of Americans of color following incidents in Chicago and a Minneapolis suburb, have increased demands for action.

DeAnna Hoskins, president and CEO of Just LeadershipUSA, a police reform advocacy group, suggested activists are willing to be patient but not for long. She welcomed Biden's recent executive orders on gun control, which took modest steps toward tightening background checks, but said "those actions don't go far enough."

"They don't have the tentacles down in to really hit where rubber hits the road," Hoskins said.

The White House says it can multitask, pushing publicly on its infrastructure plan while working to build support among moderate Democrats and Republicans on gun control and policing reform behind the scenes.

"In this building, the legislative team, senior members of the White House staff, we are working on multiple fronts at the same time," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

Officials say Biden's less publicly prominent role in legislative discussions on guns and policing is by design, out of risk of further politicizing already complicated negotiations. They also assert that issuing executive orders on policing could undermine any momentum on the issue on Capitol Hill, and they're buoyed by burgeoning discussions in Congress, such as talks between Republican Sen. Tim Scott and Democratic Sen. Cory Booker.

Still, Biden himself has described his legislative strategy as a "one at a time" approach. He said last month that successful presidents make progress because "they know how to time what they're doing, order it, decide and prioritize what needs to be done."

Implicit in that statement was that some priorities would have to wait their turn.

Biden has taken some executive actions on guns, targeting homemade "ghost guns" and the stabilizing braces for handguns that allow them to be fired from a shoulder, like a rifle. He has not proposed new legislation to revoke gun manufacturers' liability protections or to toughen federal background checks, despite pledging to send such legislation to Congress on his first day in office. Instead he's supporting legislation proposed by House Democrats.

On police reform, on Friday, Attorney General Merrick Garland did rescind Trump-era limits on consent decrees, the court-ordered agreements used to enforce reforms within police departments. But Biden has yet to take any significant executive action, largely focusing instead on the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act on Capitol Hill.

That focus has been embraced by some major police reform groups, including the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, whose interim president and CEO, Wade Henderson, said legislation was the best approach to such an intractable problem.

"This matter is much too urgent for delay, and Congress is by far the more appropriate venue to consider changes in law regarding police accountability," he said in a statement.

But that bill, approved by the House, is sitting in the Senate — and that's where the the vote counting gets tricky for the Biden White House.

Legislation on guns and policing cannot be considered in Congress via the budget reconciliation process,

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the route that Democrats took to pass virus relief with just their party's 50 votes in the Senate. That's the same way they appear on track to tackle infrastructure. That means Democrats would need 10 Republicans to join them to pass the firearms or police legislation under current Senate procedures.

"I strongly, strongly urge my Republicans friends in the Congress who refuse to bring up the House-passed bill to bring it up now," Biden said Friday, referring to the gun control measure. "Who in God's name needs a weapon that can hold 100 rounds, or 40 rounds or 20 rounds. It's just wrong and I'm not going to give up until it's done.

Key lawmakers, including Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., have been trying to engineer a way around the stalemate by engaging colleagues in bipartisan talks. The House bill to extend background checks is similar to one that came closest to passing in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook school shootings, but senators are now tangled in differences over provisions, including firearms transfers between family members. No breakthrough appears in sight.

"In the end, Congress has to do its job," Rep. Steven Horsford, D-Nev., said, recalling the president's message to lawmakers during a two-hour private session with members of the Congressional Black Caucus this week.

The logjam in the Senate on such high-priority issues has increased pressure on Biden to embrace a growing movement within the Democratic Party to eliminate the 60-vote threshold needed to pass most legislation. But here he also faces opposition within his own party — Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona both oppose eliminating the filibuster. Manchin, too, opposes the House-passed gun control bills, making their passage in the Senate all the more difficult.

The White House is in frequent contact with gun control advocacy groups. Most say they are pleased with the first round of executive actions Biden took and cautiously optimistic about his promise to work to pass legislation on Capitol Hill.

Josh Horwitz, executive director of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, said that while "I always want the Biden administration to do more," he doesn't see a "lack of effort" from Democrats in Congress or in the White House.

"I think the key question is how much pressure we're going to be able to put on Senate Republicans. How many more daily gun violence episodes, how many more mass shootings, are we going to have to watch?" he said.

Said Horwitz: "The ship of state takes some time to turn — but we don't have time because people are dying every single day."

Melina Abdullah, a co-director of Black Lives Matter-Grassroots, which coordinates on-the-ground, chapter-based work for BLM, said Biden's focus on infrastructure is a distraction from policing crises playing out in communities of color.

"It's been 160 days since Biden said to Black people, 'You've always had my back, and I'll have yours,'" Abdullah said in a statement sent to the AP

Era ends as Raul Castro steps down as Communist Party chief

By ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Raul Castro said he is stepping down as Cuban Communist Party leader, leaving the island without a Castro guiding affairs for the first time in more than six decades and handing control of the party to a younger generation.

The 89-year-old Castro made the announcement in a speech Friday at the opening of the eighth congress of the ruling party, the only one allowed on the island.

"I concluded my task as first secretary ... with the satisfaction of having fulfilled (my duty) and confidence in the future of the fatherland," he said in a typically terse, to-the-point finale that contrasted with the impassioned verbal pyrotechnics of his brother Fidel, who died in 2016.

Castro didn't say who he would endorse as his successor as first secretary of the Communist Party. But he previously indicated he favors yielding control to 60-year-old Miguel Díaz-Canel, who succeeded him as

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president in 2018 and is the standard bearer of a younger generation of loyalists who have been pushing an economic opening without touching Cuba's one-party system.

"All processes have a continuity and I think Díaz-Canel should be there now," said 58-year-old driver Miguel Rodríguez.

Castro's retirement ends an era of formal leadership that began with his brother Fidel and country's 1959 revolution.

"One has to step aside for the young people," said 64-year-old retiree Juana Busutil, for whom Castro "is going to continue being the leader."

The transition comes at a difficult time for Cuba, with many on the island anxious about what lies ahead.

The coronavirus pandemic, painful financial reforms and restrictions imposed by the Trump administration have battered the economy, which shrank 11% last year as a result of a collapse in tourism and remittances. Long food lines and shortages have brought back echoes of the "special period" that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Discontent has been fueled by the spread of the internet and growing inequality.

Much of the debate inside Cuba is focused on the pace of reform, with many complaining that the so-called "historic generation" represented by Castro has been too slow to open the economy.

In January, Díaz-Canel finally pulled the trigger on a plan approved two congresses ago to unify the island's dual currency system, giving rise to fears of inflation. He also threw the doors open to a broader range of private enterprise — a category long banned or tightly restricted — permitting Cubans to legally operate many sorts of self-run businesses from their homes.

This year's congress is expected to focus on unfinished reforms to overhaul state-run enterprises, attract foreign investment and provide more legal protection to private business activities.

The Communist Party is made up of 700,000 activists and is tasked in Cuba's constitution with directing the affairs of the nation and society.

Fidel Castro, who led the revolution that drove dictator Fulgencio Batista from power in 1959, formally became head of the party in 1965, about four years after officially embracing socialism.

He quickly absorbed the old party under his control and was the country's unquestioned leader until falling ill in 2006 and in 2008 handing over the presidency to his younger brother Raul, who had fought alongside him during the revolution.

Raul succeeded him as head of the party in 2011. Fidel Castro died in 2016

For most of his life, Raul played second-string to his brother Fidel — first as a guerrilla commander, later as a senior figure in their socialist government. But for the past decade, it's Raul who has been the face of communist Cuba and its defiance of U.S. efforts to oust its socialist system.

The fourth of seven children of a Spanish immigrant in eastern Cuba, Raul had joined his charismatic older brother in a nearly suicidal attack on the Moncada military barracks in the eastern city of Santiago in 1953 and survived the crackdown that followed from the forces of dictator Fulgencio Batista.

He led a major front in the ensuing guerrilla war led by Fidel that toppled Batista. And he served for the following generation or two as head of the armed forces. For many years, he was considered a more orthodox communist than his brother.

But it was Raul who reached accords with U.S. President Barack Obama in 2014 that created the most extensive U.S. opening to Cuba since the early 1960s — creating a surge in contacts with the United States that was largely reversed under Obama's successor, Donald Trump.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing is forcing me to make this decision," said Castro, part of whose speech Friday to the closed Congress was aired on state television. "As long as I live I will be ready with my foot in the stirrup to defend the homeland, the revolution and socialism with more force than ever."

AP Interview: Beijing says US 'too negative' toward China

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A top Chinese diplomat said Friday that U.S. policy toward China is "too negative" and

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that cooperation could be critically important as the Biden administration focuses on combatting COVID-19 and promoting economic recovery.

The U.S. appears to be highlighting confrontation and playing down cooperation, Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng said in a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press.

"Such an approach, I must say, is too negative," he said, adding that it lacks "a forward-looking spirit." China could be a partner as Biden tackles the coronavirus and the economy, he said.

"To me it is hard to imagine the two priorities can be resolved without a cooperative and healthy China-U.S. relationship," he said.

Le also signaled that China is unlikely to make any new pledges at a climate change meeting called by President Joe Biden for next week. He spoke as Biden's climate envoy, John Kerry, was discussing the issue on the second day of closed-door meetings with Chinese counterparts in Shanghai.

Chinese President Xi Jinping announced last year that China would be carbon-neutral by 2060 and aim to reach a peak in its emissions by 2030.

"For a big country with 1.4 billion people, these goals are not easily delivered," Le said. "Some countries are asking China to achieve the goals earlier. I am afraid this is not very realistic."

Le said he had no details on the Kerry meetings in Shanghai.

Biden has invited 40 world leaders, including Xi, to an April 22-23 virtual climate summit. The U.S. and other countries are expected to announce more ambitious national targets for cutting emissions and pledge financial help for climate efforts by less wealthy nations.

Le said that China would convey a positive message at the meeting, but added that China is responding to climate change on its own initiative, not because others asked it to. On whether Xi would join the summit, Le said "the Chinese side is actively studying the matter."

The U.S. and China are increasingly at odds over a range of issues, including human rights in Tibet and the Xinjiang region, a crackdown on protest and political freedom in Hong Kong, China's assertion of its territorial claims to Taiwan and most of the South China Sea and accusations Beijing was slow to inform the world about the COVID-19 outbreak that became a devastating pandemic.

China hoped for an improvement in relations under Biden, who succeeded President Donald Trump in January, but the new administration has shown no sign of backing down on hardline policies toward China. The two sides traded sharp and unusually public barbs at the start of talks in Alaska last month.

Le said that after the opening of the Alaska talks, the dialogue was constructive and useful and that both sides are following up on the issues discussed.

The two countries could team up on coronavirus response, he said, but any cooperation must be on an equal basis, an apparent reference to the U.S. pressure on China on multiple fronts.

"It is not one side drawing up a laundry list of demands to the other side," Le said. "In cooperation, one should not be selfish and care only about one's own interests with no regard for the well-being of the other side."

On the same day that a number of Hong Kong pro-democracy activists were sentenced, Le defended China's crackdown on protest in the semi-autonomous territory. He described the convicted as rioters and said "they deserve what they got."

He added, "I don't think it is anything strange if Hong Kong somehow becomes more like a Chinese city because after all Hong Kong is part of China."

The U.K., U.S. and others have accused Beijing of reneging on a commitment to run the former British colony under a so-called "one country, two systems" framework for 50 years after its 1997 handover to Chinese rule.

Le brushed aside such critiques, saying, "Hong Kong is always China's Hong Kong and this is something that will not change."

The vice minister also condemned Western sanctions against companies accused of human rights and labor abuses in Xinjiang. The U.S. blocked imports from several companies operating in the region last year, and added a blanket ban on Xinjiang's cotton and tomato products in January.

Rather than protecting workers, Le said, "the sanctions have damaged human rights in Xinjiang, resulting in forced unemployment and forced poverty in Xinjiang."

He also repeated warnings against American government contact with Taiwan, after Biden sent a delegation of former U.S. officials to meet the island's president this week. China claims self-governing Taiwan as its territory and says, like Hong Kong, it should be under Beijing's control.

"The U.S. should never try to play the Taiwan card," Le said. "It is very dangerous. This is our red line. The U.S. should never try to cross it."

American military officials have warned that China may be accelerating its timeframe for capturing control of Taiwan. Asked if China had a deadline, Le said only that it was a "historical process."

FBI says it interviewed FedEx mass shooter last year

By CASEY SMITH and RICK CALLAHAN Associated Press/Report for America

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The former employee who shot and killed eight people at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis was interviewed by FBI agents last year, after his mother called police to say that her son might commit "suicide by cop," the bureau said Friday.

Coroners released the names of the victims late Friday, a little less than 24 hours after the latest mass shooting to rock the U.S. Four of them were members of Indianapolis' Sikh community. The attack was another blow to the Asian American community a month after six people of Asian descent were killed in a mass shooting in the Atlanta area and amid ongoing attacks against Asian Americans during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Marion County Coroner's office identified the dead as Matthew R. Alexander, 32; Samaria Blackwell, 19; Amarjeet Johal, 66; Jaswinder Kaur, 64; Jaswinder Singh, 68; Amarjit Sekhon, 48; Karli Smith, 19; and John Weisert, 74.

The shooter was identified as Brandon Scott Hole, 19, of Indianapolis, Deputy Police Chief Craig McCartt told a news conference. Investigators searched a home in Indianapolis associated with Hole and seized evidence, including desktop computers and other electronic media, McCartt said.

Hole began firing randomly at people in the parking lot of the FedEx facility late Thursday, killing four, before entering the building, fatally shooting four more people and then turning the gun on himself, McCartt said. He said he did not know if Hole owned the gun legally.

"There was no confrontation with anyone that was there," he said. "There was no disturbance, there was no argument. He just appeared to randomly start shooting."

McCartt said the slayings took place in a matter of minutes, and that there were at least 100 people in the facility at the time. Many were changing shifts or were on their dinner break, he said. Several people were wounded, including five who were taken to the hospital.

"You deserved so much better than this," a man who identified himself as the grandson of Johal tweeted Friday evening. Johal had planned to work a double shift Thursday so she could take Friday off, according to the grandson, who would not give his full name but identifies himself as "Komal" on his Twitter page. Johal later decided to grab her check and go home, and still had the check in her hand when police found her, Komal said.

"(What) a harsh and cruel world we live in," he added.

Smith, the youngest of the victims, was last in contact with her family shortly before 11 p.m. Thursday, family members said in social media posts late Friday. Dominique Troutman, Smith's sister, waited hours at the Holiday Inn for an update on her sister. "Words can't even explain how I feel. ... I'm so hurt," Troutman said in a Facebook post Friday night.

Weisert had been working as a bag handler at FedEx for four years, his wife, Carol, told WISH-TV. The couple was married nearly 50 years.

President Joe Biden said he had been briefed on the shooting and called gun violence "an epidemic" in the U.S.

"Too many Americans are dying every single day from gun violence. It stains our character and pierces

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the very soul of our nation," he said in a statement. Later, he tweeted, "We can, and must, do more to reduce gun violence and save lives."

A FedEx employee said he was working inside the building Thursday night when he heard several gunshots in rapid succession.

"I see a man come out with a rifle in his hand and he starts firing and he starts yelling stuff that I could not understand," Levi Miller told WTHR-TV. "What I ended up doing was ducking down to make sure he did not see me because I thought he would see me and he would shoot me."

Paul Keenan, special agent in charge of the FBI's Indianapolis field office, said Friday that agents questioned Hole last year after his mother called police to say that her son might commit "suicide by cop." He said the FBI was called after items were found in Hole's bedroom but he did not elaborate on what they were. He said agents found no evidence of a crime and that they did not identify Hole as espousing a racially motivated ideology. A police report obtained by The Associated Press shows that officers seized a pump-action shotgun from Hole's home after responding to the mother's call. Keenan said the gun was never returned.

McCartt said Hole was a former employee of FedEx and last worked for the company in 2020. The deputy police chief said he did not know why Hole left the job or if he had ties to the workers in the facility. He said police have not yet uncovered a motive for the shooting.

Police Chief Randal Taylor noted that a "significant" number of employees at the FedEx facility are members of the Sikh community, and the Sikh Coalition later issued a statement saying it was "sad to confirm" that at least four of those killed were community members.

The coalition, which identifies itself as the largest Sikh civil rights organization in the U.S., said in the statement that it expected authorities to "conduct a full investigation — including the possibility of bias as a factor."

Varun Nikore, executive director of the AAPI Victory Alliance, a national advocacy group for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, said in a statement that the shootings marked "yet another senseless massacre that has become a daily occurrence in this country."

Nikore remarked that gun violence in the U.S. "is reflective of all of the spineless politicians who are beholden to the gun lobby."

FedEx Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Frederick Smith called the shooting a "senseless act of violence."

"This is a devastating day, and words are hard to describe the emotions we all feel," he wrote in an email to employees.

The killings marked the latest in a string of recent mass shootings across the country and the third mass shooting this year in Indianapolis. Five people, including a pregnant woman, were shot and killed in the city in January, and a man was accused of killing three adults and a child before abducting his daughter during an argument at a home in March. In other states last month, eight people were fatally shot at massage businesses in the Atlanta area, and 10 died in gunfire at a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado.

Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett said the community must guard against resignation and "the assumption that this is simply how it must be and we might as well get used to it."

State's own expert told grand jury police didn't kill Prude

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

Prosecutors overseeing a grand jury investigation into the death of Daniel Prude last year in Rochester, New York, undercut the case for criminal charges with testimony from a medical expert who said three police officers who held Prude to the ground until he stopped breathing didn't do anything wrong.

Dr. Gary Vilke told the grand jury that Prude, a 41-year-old Black man, died of a heart attack caused by the medical phenomenon known as excited delirium. He said the officers' actions, which included placing a mesh hood over Prude's head, had no impact on his breathing, according to transcripts made public Friday.

A medical examiner ruled Prude's death a homicide due to asphyxiation from a physical restraint, with

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use of the drug PCP as a factor.

Vilke, a University of California, San Diego professor who routinely testifies on behalf of police, said restraining Prude during the encounter in the early hours of March 23, 2020 may have been best for his safety given his condition.

Asked by a grand juror if anything could have been done better, Vilke responded: "I wouldn't do anything differently."

The grand jury ultimately rejected criminally negligent homicide charges against the three officers by a 15-5 vote, the transcripts show.

Prosecutors from the state attorney general's office sought no other charges. They told grand jurors that they could choose not to indict if they believed the use of force was justified. Five jurors indicated they would have voted to indict at least one of the officers.

The grand jury's decision not to indict was announced at the time it was made in February, but the transcripts of nine days of testimony from witnesses — including Prude's brother, police officers and experts — offer a rare window into a process normally kept under wraps.

Prude family lawyer Elliot Shields said he believed prosecutors had undermined their own case by calling Vilke, whom he likened to a defense witness.

"It's obvious that they didn't even try," Shields told The Associated Press.

"They hired him so that he would come in and they could have cover and say, 'Well, we tried.' Well no you didn't," Shields said. "You tried to make sure these officers got off scot-free."

New York Attorney General Letitia James had said, in announcing the grand jury's decision, that the state had put on the best case it could.

Her office defended its use of Vilke as an expert Friday, saying it promised an independent investigation without a predetermined outcome.

The release of grand jury materials comes at a sensitive time for the issue of race in policing. Testimony is ending in the trial of former Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin in the killing of George Floyd. And on Thursday, body camera video was released that showed a Chicago police officer fatally shoot 13-year-old Adam Toledo last month after he appeared to drop a handgun and begin raising his hands.

Prude encountered police hours after he was released from a hospital following a mental health arrest. He ran naked from his brother's home and was seen bashing store windows. Prude's brother, Joe, testified that he warned an officer responding to his home, "Don't kill my brother."

Prude's death went largely unnoticed until September, when his family released body camera video of the encounter obtained through a public records request. Emails later made public by the city showed police commanders urged city officials to hold off on releasing the footage.

The video showed Prude handcuffed and naked with a spit hood over his head as one officer pushed his face against the ground and another officer pressed a knee to his back. The officers held Prude down for about two minutes until he stopped breathing. He was taken off life support a week later.

Vilke told the grand jury that drug use and mental illness contribute to excited delirium, which can make people vulnerable to cardiac arrest. There is no universally accepted definition of excited delirium and researchers have said it's not well understood.

Vilke said he didn't think the spit hood was a factor or that the officers obstructed Prude's breathing.

"So, all those things allow me to be able to be comfortable saying my opinion is that none of the officers, their impact, individually or collectively, would have caused or contributed to that cardiac arrest," Vilke said. "And, to go even one step further, if he had been allowed to get up and run around ... that would actually be more detrimental than being held down."

Shields, the lawyer for the Prude family, called Vilke's assertion that restraining Prude was safer "outrageous."

An officer testified that police used the hood because Prude was spitting and they were wary of being sickened in the early days of the pandemic.

"I don't know if you guys remember exactly about the coronavirus, how we felt, but it was almost hysteria

in the country," the unidentified officer said

The state also offered the grand jury testimony from Geoffrey Alpert, a criminology professor at the University of South Carolina who previously worked as a federal monitor for the police department in New Orleans.

Alpert also testified that spit hoods don't restrict breathing. He said it was reasonable for officers to pin Prude to the ground, calling it a generally safe method of restraint.

But he said officers probably held Prude on his stomach for an unreasonable amount of time, though he added he was not a medical doctor and couldn't say if that contributed to his death.

The footage of Prude's arrest and restraint sparked nightly protests in Rochester, a rust-belt city on the shore of Lake Ontario which was roiled recently by body camera footage of white officers using pepper spray on a 9-year-old Black girl.

James, whose office investigates police shootings, secured a judge's permission to make the usually secret grand jury material public, citing a desire for transparency in Prude's case. The transcripts were released with the names of witnesses blacked out.

Seven officers, including the three involved in Prude's restraint, remain suspended pending the outcome of an internal investigation.

Matthew Rich, a lawyer for four officers who responded but weren't involved in Prude's restraint, questioned the closed-door process that paved the way for the transcripts being released. Despite that, he wrote in a letter to the judge last month that he and his clients "have nothing to hide."

One Prude grand juror praised the prosecution team's "amazing work."

"If it wasn't for everything that you presented to us, I don't think anybody would have come up with a decision. You worked very hard and I'm sure nobody took it lightly," the juror said. "It was a very serious case. It's horrible what happened to him."

Raul Castro resigns as Communist chief, ending era in Cuba

By ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Raul Castro said Friday he is stepping down as head of Cuba's Communist Party, ending an era of formal leadership that began with his brother Fidel and country's 1959 revolution.

The 89-year-old Castro made the announcement in a speech at the opening of the eighth congress of the ruling party, the only one allowed on the island.

He said he was retiring with the sense of having "fulfilled his mission and confident in the future of the fatherland."

"Nothing, nothing, nothing is forcing me to make this decision," said Castro, part of whose speech to the closed Congress was aired on state television. "As long as I live I will be ready with my foot in the stirrup to defend the homeland, the revolution and socialism with more force than ever."

Castro didn't say who he would endorse as his successor as first secretary of the Communist Party. But he previously indicated he favors yielding control to 60-year-old Miguel Díaz-Canel, who succeeded him as president in 2018 and is the standard bearer of a younger generation of loyalists who have been pushing an economic opening without touching Cuba's one-party system.

Photographs released by the official Cuban News Agency showed Castro, dressed in an olive green uniform, entering the compound with Díaz-Canel by his side.

Castro's retirement means that for the first time in more than six decades Cubans won't have a Castro formally guiding their affairs and many had been expecting the change.

"One has to step aside for the young people," said 64-year-old retiree Juana Busutil, for whom Castro "is going to continue being the leader."

The transition comes at a difficult time for Cuba, with many on the island anxious about what lies ahead.

The coronavirus pandemic, painful financial reforms and restrictions imposed by the Trump administration have battered the economy, which shrank 11% last year as a result of a collapse in tourism and remittances. Long food lines and shortages have brought back echoes of the "special period" that followed the

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collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Discontent has been fueled by the spread of the internet and growing inequality.

Much of the debate inside Cuba is focused on the pace of reform, with many complaining that the so-called "historic generation" represented by Castro has been too slow to open the economy.

In January, Díaz-Canel finally pulled the trigger on a plan approved two congresses ago to unify the island's dual currency system, giving rise to fears of inflation. He also threw the doors open to a broader range of private enterprise — a category long banned or tightly restricted — permitting Cubans to legally operate many sorts of self-run businesses from their homes.

This year's congress is expected to focus on unfinished reforms to overhaul state-run enterprises, attract foreign investment and provide more legal protection to private business activities.

The Communist Party is made up of 700,000 activists and is tasked in Cuba's constitution with directing the affairs of the nation and society.

Fidel Castro, who led the revolution that drove dictator Fulgencio Batista from power in 1959, formally became head of the party in 1965, about four years after officially embracing socialism.

He quickly absorbed the old party under his control and was the country's unquestioned leader until falling ill in 2006 and in 2008 handing over the presidency to his younger brother Raul, who had fought alongside him during the revolution.

Raul succeeded him as head of the party in 2011. Fidel Castro died in 2016

For most of his life, Raul played second-string to his brother Fidel — first as a guerrilla commander, later as a senior figure in their socialist government. But for the past decade, it's Raul who has been the face of communist Cuba and its defiance of U.S. efforts to oust its socialist system.

The fourth of seven children of a Spanish immigrant in eastern Cuba, Raul had joined his charismatic older brother in a nearly suicidal attack on the Moncada military barracks in the eastern city of Santiago in 1953 and survived the crackdown that followed from the forces of dictator Fulgencio Batista.

He led a major front in the ensuing guerrilla war led by Fidel that toppled Batista. And he served for the following generation or two as head of the armed forces. For many years, he was considered a more orthodox communist than his brother.

But it was Raul who reached accords with U.S. President Barack Obama in 2014 that created the most extensive U.S. opening to Cuba since the early 1960s — creating a surge in contacts with the United States that was largely reversed under Obama's successor, Donald Trump.

Now, with Raul Castro stepping down as party leader amid change and challenges, some say the island needs continuity going forward.

"All process have a continuity and I think Díaz-Canel should be there now," said 58-year-old driver Miguel Rodríguez.

Raul Castro, long a sidekick, finally the face of his nation

By ANDREA RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — For most of his life, Raul Castro played second-string to his brother Fidel — first as a guerrilla commander, later as a senior figure in their socialist government. But for the past decade, it's Raul who has been the face of communist Cuba, its defiance of U.S. efforts to oust its socialist system — and its efforts to forge a rapprochement with its longtime foe.

The younger Castro, now 89, formally announced Friday that he would step down as first secretary of the island's Communist Party, leaving the Caribbean nation without a Castro in an official position of command for the first time since the earliest days of the revolution that took power more than six decades ago.

"I concluded by task as first secretary ... with the satisfaction of having fulfilled (my duty) and confidence in the future of the fatherland," he said at the eighth party congress — a typically terse, to-the-point finale that contrasted with the impassioned verbal pyrotechnics of his brother, who died in 2016.

The fourth of seven children of a Spanish immigrant in eastern Cuba, Raul had joined his charismatic older brother in a nearly suicidal attack on the Moncada military barracks in the eastern city of Santiago

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in 1953 and survived the crackdown that followed from the forces of dictator Fulgencio Batista.

He led a major front in the ensuing guerrilla war led by Fidel that toppled Batista. And he served for the following generation or two as head of the armed forces and eventually as Fidel's designated successor. For many years, he was considered a more orthodox communist than his brother.

When Fidel fell ill in 2006, Raul took over as president in 2006 — and formally in 2008 — becoming head of the ruling Communist Party in 2011. He continued along the path of single party rule while softening a few of the restrictions on private enterprise that had stifled the state-dominated economy.

It was Raul who reached accords with U.S. President Barack Obama in 2014 that created the most extensive U.S. opening to Cuba since the early 1960s — creating a surge in contacts with the United States that was largely reversed under Obama's successor, Donald Trump.

As the bearded young insurgents who led the revolution entered their 70s and 80s, a change of command became inevitable. In 2018, Raul Castro passed the presidency to Miguel Díaz-Canel, 60, who was widely expected to succeed him as head of the all-powerful party as well.

But Castro promised to remain involved.

"As long as I live, I will be ready with a food in the stirrup to defend the fatherland, the revolution and socialism," he said Friday.

Biden's appeals for action on guns, policing face reality

By ZEKE MILLER and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the nation struggles with yet another mass shooting and faces a reckoning over the deaths of Black men at the hands of police, President Joe Biden is calling for action. Going beyond that, however, is proving a lot more difficult.

Three months into his presidency, Biden's robust agenda is running up against the realities of his narrow Democratic majority on Capitol Hill and the Senate's limited ability to tackle multiple pieces of large-scale legislation at once. With the White House focusing first on a sweeping coronavirus relief package and now a sprawling infrastructure plan that is likely to dominate the congressional calendar for months, issues like gun control and police reform appear likely to take a back seat.

Biden on Friday insisted that wasn't the case, saying that on the issue of gun control in particular, "I've never not prioritized this." He spoke a day after a gunman killed eight people at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, the latest in a rash of mass shootings across the United States in recent weeks.

At issue for Biden are many of the central promises he made to Democratic voters — particularly Black voters who helped propel him to the White House — both about his priorities and his ability to maneuver in Washington, where issues like gun control have languished for years. The mass shootings, as well as renewed focus on police killings of Americans of color following incidents in Chicago and a Minneapolis suburb, have increased demands for action.

DeAnna Hoskins, president and CEO of Just LeadershipUSA, a police reform advocacy group, suggested activists are willing to be patient but not for long. She welcomed Biden's recent executive orders on gun control, which took modest steps toward tightening background checks, but said "those actions don't go far enough."

"They don't have the tentacles down in to really hit where rubber hits the road," Hoskins said.

The White House says it can multitask, pushing publicly on its infrastructure plan while working to build support among moderate Democrats and Republicans on gun control and policing reform behind the scenes.

"In this building, the legislative team, senior members of the White House staff, we are working on multiple fronts at the same time," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

Officials say Biden's less publicly prominent role in legislative discussions on guns and policing is by design, out of risk of further politicizing already complicated negotiations. They also assert that issuing executive orders on policing could undermine any momentum on the issue on Capitol Hill, and they're buoyed by burgeoning discussions in Congress, such as talks between Republican Sen. Tim Scott and Democratic Sen. Cory Booker.

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Still, Biden himself has described his legislative strategy as a "one at a time" approach. He said last month that successful presidents make progress because "they know how to time what they're doing, order it, decide and prioritize what needs to be done."

Implicit in that statement was that some priorities would have to wait their turn.

Biden has taken some executive actions on guns, targeting homemade "ghost guns" and the stabilizing braces for handguns that allow them to be fired from a shoulder, like a rifle. He has not proposed new legislation to revoke gun manufacturers' liability protections or to toughen federal background checks, despite pledging to send such legislation to Congress on his first day in office. Instead he's supporting legislation proposed by House Democrats.

On police reform, on Friday, Attorney General Merrick Garland did rescind Trump-era limits on consent decrees, the court-ordered agreements used to enforce reforms within police departments. But Biden has yet to take any significant executive action, largely focusing instead on the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act on Capitol Hill.

That focus has been embraced by some major police reform groups, including the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, whose interim president and CEO, Wade Henderson, said legislation was the best approach to such an intractable problem.

"This matter is much too urgent for delay, and Congress is by far the more appropriate venue to consider changes in law regarding police accountability," he said in a statement.

But that bill, approved by the House, is sitting in the Senate — and that's where the the vote counting gets tricky for the Biden White House.

Legislation on guns and policing cannot be considered in Congress via the budget reconciliation process, the route that Democrats took to pass virus relief with just their party's 50 votes in the Senate. That's the same way they appear on track to tackle infrastructure. That means Democrats would need 10 Republicans to join them to pass the firearms or police legislation under current Senate procedures.

"I strongly, strongly urge my Republicans friends in the Congress who refuse to bring up the House-passed bill to bring it up now," Biden said Friday, referring to the gun control measure. "Who in God's name needs a weapon that can hold 100 rounds, or 40 rounds or 20 rounds. It's just wrong and I'm not going to give up until it's done.

Key lawmakers, including Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., have been trying to engineer a way around the stalemate by engaging colleagues in bipartisan talks. The House bill to extend background checks is similar to one that came closest to passing in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook school shootings, but senators are now tangled in differences over provisions, including firearms transfers between family members. No breakthrough appears in sight.

"In the end, Congress has to do its job," Rep. Steven Horsford, D-Nev., said, recalling the president's message to lawmakers during a two-hour private session with members of the Congressional Black Caucus this week.

The logjam in the Senate on such high-priority issues has increased pressure on Biden to embrace a growing movement within the Democratic Party to eliminate the 60-vote threshold needed to pass most legislation. But here he also faces opposition within his own party — Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona both oppose eliminating the filibuster. Manchin, too, opposes the House-passed gun control bills, making their passage in the Senate all the more difficult.

The White House is in frequent contact with gun control advocacy groups. Most say they are pleased with the first round of executive actions Biden took and cautiously optimistic about his promise to work to pass legislation on Capitol Hill.

Josh Horwitz, executive director of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, said that while "I always want the Biden administration to do more," he doesn't see a "lack of effort" from Democrats in Congress or in the White House.

"I think the key question is how much pressure we're going to be able to put on Senate Republicans. How many more daily gun violence episodes, how many more mass shootings, are we going to have to watch?" he said.

Said Horwitz: "The ship of state takes some time to turn — but we don't have time because people are

dying every single day.”

Melina Abdullah, a co-director of Black Lives Matter-Grassroots, which coordinates on-the-ground, chapter-based work for BLM, said Biden’s focus on infrastructure is a distraction from policing crises playing out in communities of color.

“It’s been 160 days since Biden said to Black people, ‘You’ve always had my back, and I’ll have yours,’” Abdullah said in a statement sent to the AP

SpaceX picked for moonwalkers, on verge of 3rd crew launch

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA chose SpaceX on Friday to build the lunar lander that will eventually put the first woman and person of color on the moon.

The announcement came a few hours after SpaceX’s most international crew of astronauts yet arrived in Florida for a liftoff next week.

Elon Musk’s Starship — the futuristic, shiny steel rocketship that’s been launching and exploding in Texas — beat out landers proposed by Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin and Dynetics, a subsidiary of Leidos. The contract is worth \$2.89 billion.

“We won’t stop at the moon,” said NASA’s acting administrator Steve Jurczyk. Mars is the ultimate goal, he told reporters.

NASA declined to provide a target launch date for the moon-landing Artemis mission, saying a review is underway. The Trump administration had set a 2024 deadline, but on Friday, NASA officials called it a goal.

“We’ll do it when it’s safe,” said Kathy Lueders, who leads NASA’s human space exploration office.

She indicated NASA and SpaceX are shooting for later this decade. The astronauts will fly to the moon on the NASA-launched Orion capsule, then transfer to Starship in lunar orbit for the ride down to the surface and back.

NASA has said at least one of the first moonwalkers since 1972 would be the first woman on the moon. Another goal of the program, according to the space agency, is to send a person of color to the lunar surface.

On Friday, Jurczyk greeted the four astronauts arriving at Kennedy Space Center for SpaceX’s third crew launch in less than a year. By coincidence, their flight to the International Space Station is set for next Thursday — Earth Day. It’s a reminder of NASA’s core mission of studying the home planet, Jurczyk said.

The three men and one woman represent the U.S., France and Japan: NASA’s Shane Kimbrough and Megan McArthur, Thomas Pesquet and Akihiko Hoshide, all experienced space fliers.

“It’s definitely getting real,” Kimbrough, the spacecraft commander, said after arriving by plane from Houston.

This will be SpaceX’s first crew flight to use a recycled Falcon rocket and Dragon crew capsule. NASA turned to U.S. private companies for crew transport after the space shuttle program ended in 2011.

“Certainly, I think all of them, until we get several years under our belt, should be considered test flights,” Kimbrough told reporters.

SpaceX uses the same kind of rocket and similar capsules for supply deliveries, and recycles those as well.

McArthur is the only member of the crew who has yet to visit the space station. She flew the shuttle to the Hubble Space Telescope in 2009. And launching out of Kennedy is new to Pesquet after more than 11 years as an astronaut.

“We’re living in the golden age of human spaceflight,” said Pesquet, a former Air France pilot. “Looks like everybody, every country, has a project or a spacecraft.”

The astronauts left the runway in a pair of white gull-winged Teslas; SpaceX founder Musk also runs the electric car company. They had an early bedtime to sync up with what will be pretty much an all-nighter Thursday. Liftoff time is 6:11 a.m.

The four will replace the SpaceX crew that launched last November. Those four will return to Earth at the end of April. A fresh three-person Soyuz crew, meanwhile, arrived at the space station last week from

Kazakhstan, replacing two Russians and one American due back on Earth this weekend.

Oath Keeper is 1st suspect to plead guilty in Capitol riot

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A member of the far-right Oath Keepers militia group and heavy metal guitarist on Friday became the first defendant to plead guilty to federal charges in connection with the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Jon Ryan Schaffer, the frontman of the band Iced Earth, has agreed to cooperate with investigators in hopes of getting a lighter sentence, and the Justice Department will consider putting Schaffer in the federal witness security program, U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta said.

This signals that federal prosecutors see him as a valuable cooperator as they continue to investigate militia groups and other extremists involved in the insurrection on Jan. 6 as Congress was meeting to certify President Joe Biden's electoral win.

Schaffer, a supporter of former President Donald Trump, was accused of storming the Capitol and spraying police officers with bear spray. He pleaded guilty in a deal with prosecutors in federal court in Washington to two counts: obstruction of an official proceeding, and entering and remaining in a restricted building with a dangerous or deadly weapon.

An email seeking comment was sent to an attorney for Schaffer.

Schaffer, of Columbus, Indiana, was wearing a tactical vest and baseball hat that read "Oath Keepers Lifetime Member" on Jan. 6, and acknowledged in his plea agreement that he is a "founding lifetime member" of the extremist group, prosecutors said.

The 53-year-old was not charged in the case involving Oath Keepers members and associates, who are accused of conspiring with one another to block the certification of the vote. The case is the largest and most serious brought by prosecutors so far in the attack.

Authorities say those defendants came to Washington ready for violence and intent on stopping the certification. Many came dressed for battle on Jan. 6 in tactical vests and helmets and some discussed stationing a "quick reaction force" outside the city in the event they needed weapons, prosecutors have said.

In his deal with prosecutors, Schaffer admitted to being one of the first people to force their way into the Capitol after the mob broke open a set of doors guarded by Capitol Police. Schaffer was sprayed in the face with a chemical irritant that overwhelmed officers deployed and left the Capitol while holding bear spray, authorities said.

Schaffer has voiced various conspiracy theories, once telling a German news station that a shadowy criminal enterprise is trying to run the world under a communist agenda and that he and others are prepared to fight, with violence.

In court documents, the FBI said Schaffer "has long held far-right extremist views" and that he had previously "referred to the federal government as a 'criminal enterprise.'"

He turned himself in to the FBI a few weeks after the riot, after his photograph was featured on an FBI poster seeking the public's help in identifying rioters.

More than 370 people are facing federal charges in the deadly insurrection, which sent lawmakers into hiding and delayed the certification of Biden's win. The Justice Department has indicated it is in separate plea negotiations with other defendants.

Also Friday, an indictment was unsealed against three men accused of assaulting a police officer during the siege. Albuquerque Cospers Head of Kingsport, Tennessee, and Kyle James Young of Redfield, Iowa, were arrested this week, authorities said. The third man indicted, Thomas Sibick of Buffalo, New York, was arrested last month and accused of ripping away the officer's badge.

After outcry, WH says Biden will lift refugee cap in May

By ZEKE MILLER, AAMER MADHANI and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing swift blowback from allies and aid groups, the White House on Friday said President Joe Biden plans to lift his predecessor's historically low cap on refugees by next month, after initially moving only to expand the eligibility criteria for resettlements.

In an emergency determination signed by Biden earlier in the day, he stated the admission of up to 15,000 refugees set by former President Donald Trump this year "remains justified by humanitarian concerns and is otherwise in the national interest." But if the cap is reached before the end of the current budget year and the emergency refugee situation persists, then a presidential determination may be issued to raise the ceiling.

That set off a deluge of criticism from top allies on Capitol Hill such as the second-ranking Senate Democrat, Dick Durbin of Illinois, who called that initial limit "unacceptable."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said later that Biden is expected to increase the refugee cap by May 15, though she didn't say by how much.

Biden has been consulting with his advisers to determine what number of refugees could realistically be admitted to the United States between now and Oct. 1, the end of the fiscal year, Psaki said. "Given the decimated refugee admissions program we inherited," she said it's now "unlikely" Biden will be able to boost that number to 62,500, as he had proposed in his plan to Congress two months ago.

But Biden, she said, was urged by advisers to "take immediate action to reverse the Trump policy that banned refugees from many key regions, to enable flights from those regions to begin within days; today's order did that."

The new allocations provide more slots for refugees from Africa, the Middle East and Central America and lift Trump's restrictions on resettlements from Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

Critics from both sides of the political spectrum had accused the president of bowing to political pressure that has been mounting over the record pace of unaccompanied migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Stephen Miller, a key architect of Trump's immigration policies, tweeted that keeping Trump's cap "reflects Team Biden's awareness that the border flood will cause record midterm losses."

The White House indicated the border situation was partly why Biden had not acted before now, even though migrants at the border do not go through the same vetting process as refugees.

"It is a factor," said Psaki, noting that the Office of Refugee Resettlement "has personnel working on both issues and so we have to ensure that there is capacity and ability to manage both."

Connecticut Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal said he didn't buy that.

"This cruel policy is no more acceptable now than it was during the Trump Administration," Blumenthal said. "To be clear: the asylum process at the southern border and the refugee process are completely separate immigration systems. Conflating the two constitutes caving to the politics of fear."

Since the fiscal year began last Oct. 1, just over 2,000 refugees have been resettled in the U.S.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken notified Congress on Feb. 12 of a plan to raise the ceiling on admissions to 62,500, but no presidential determination followed. The law does not require congressional approval and past presidents have issued such presidential determinations that set the cap on refugee admissions shortly after the notification to Congress.

New Jersey Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told Biden in a letter Friday that his inaction "undermines your declared purpose to reverse your predecessor's refugee policies."

Menendez said it also makes it unlikely that the program can hit its target next budget year of 125,000, which Biden has pledged to do.

Refugee resettlement agencies said it was important that admissions go higher even if it's not possible to meet the target to send a message that America will be a leader again in offering safe haven to the world's oppressed.

Some 35,000 refugees have been cleared to go to the United States, and 100,000 remain in the pipeline and their lives remain in limbo, said David Miliband, president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee.

"This leadership is sorely needed," he said.

Under Biden's new allocation, 7,000 slots are reserved for refugees from Africa, 1,000 from East Asia, 1,500 from Europe and Central Asia, 3,000 from Latin America and the Caribbean and 1,500 from the Near East and South Asia. A reserve of about 1,000 slots can be used as needed.

The State Department, which coordinates flights with resettlement agencies, booked 715 refugees to come to the United States with the anticipation that Biden would have acted by March, but those flights were canceled since the refugees were not eligible under Trump's rules, according to resettlement agencies.

Most of the refugees are from Africa and fleeing armed conflict or political persecution. Trump limited most spots to people fleeing religious persecution, Iraqis who have assisted U.S. forces there, and people from Central America's Northern Triangle.

What to expect in closings for ex-cop's trial in Floyd death

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and DOUG GLASS Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — For three weeks, prosecutors at the trial of a former Minneapolis police officer charged with killing George Floyd played and replayed video, supplementing the bystander video that shocked the world with multiple other angles of Floyd's arrest. And over and over, Derek Chauvin's attorney argued that the visual evidence is deceptive, and that Floyd was killed by his drug use and a bad heart.

On Monday, attorneys on both sides will seek to drive home their cases in closing arguments that cover much of the same ground, seeking to tie their evidence into neat packages for jurors.

Prosecutors will draw on expert testimony, videos and other evidence to explain how the white officer's actions on May 25, when he pinned the Black man's neck to the pavement with his knee for nearly 9 1/2 minutes, were "a substantial cause" of Floyd's death. And they'll highlight testimony from top Minneapolis police officials and outside use-of-force experts that an "objectively reasonable" officer would not have used that kind of force.

Meanwhile, defense attorney Eric Nelson will try to persuade jurors that elements of testimony he elicited from prosecution witnesses and his own witnesses add up to reasonable doubt over what caused Floyd's death, whether Chauvin is responsible, or whether Floyd deserves a substantial amount of the blame.

"If I was Nelson, I'd do a lot of things, because a lot of things need to be done," Joe Friedberg, a local defense attorney not involved in the case, said. "He's in desperate trouble here."

Both sides gave some insight this week after Nelson asked Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill to acquit Chauvin. It was a routine motion that was quickly rejected, but both sides covered the main points they will probably make in closing arguments.

Nelson argued that the state's use-of-force witnesses gave contradictory evidence on the point at which Chauvin's use of force became unreasonable. That could be a tough sell, and even Nelson acknowledged that they all agreed it was objectively unreasonable.

Nelson might have more success with another argument that he will surely make again Monday. That's to hammer at the difference between the four prosecution experts who concluded Floyd died of asphyxiation and the county medical examiner, Dr. Andrew Baker, who did not.

Baker did, though, classify Floyd's death as a homicide and said his heart stopped as a result of police "subdual, restraint and neck compression."

Friedberg said he expected Nelson to highlight the lack of forensic evidence of neck injury, as well as studies that raised doubts about "positional asphyxia" — that is, the dangers of a person suffocating while being restrained as Floyd was.

He also said he expects Nelson to emphasize Floyd's drug use and resistance.

"He has to begin with the fact that the way George Floyd lived, taking these drugs, you hold yourself open to being arrested, and when you're arrested the law requires that you do not resist," Friedberg said. "When you resist ... it's a crime. It accelerates the abilities of police to take further action."

Mary Moriarty, the former longtime chief public defender in Hennepin County, said she expected Nelson to use a familiar defense for police officers: the difficult nature of their jobs.

"I'm sure he'll say it's not fair for people in the comfort of their offices or the courtroom, who have the

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opportunity to look at video over and over again, to second-guess the actions of a police officer," Moriarty said.

Chauvin invoked his right not to testify, but former U.S. Attorney Tom Heffelfinger said Nelson might try to convince the jury that Chauvin meant no harm by pointing to body camera video in which the officer is heard telling a bystander: "We gotta control this guy 'cause he's a sizable guy ... and it looks like he's probably on something."

Prosecutors will present their closing first, followed by the defense, and then prosecution rebuttal. There are no time limits, but legal experts said attorneys have to weigh whether going too long risks losing the jury's attention or even hurting their case.

Tom Heffelfinger, a former U.S. attorney in Minnesota, said he expects arguments to take all day, with prosecutors spending a lot of time explaining how the evidence the jury heard fits the legal specifics of the charges of second-degree murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter.

Friedberg said prosecutors would likely begin by personalizing Floyd, conceding that he had used drugs but still "had a right to live, as everyone in this country has a right to live."

Both Friedberg and Moriarty expect prosecutors to again play parts of the devastating video that dominated the first week of the trial, much of which caused bystander witnesses to break down in court as they recalled their frustration at not being able to stop Floyd's death.

Moriarty said she also expected still photos to be highlighted, including one that showed Floyd's hand on a police SUV's wheel in what a medical expert testified was his desperate attempt to raise his right side off the ground to breathe.

She also expected prosecutors to try to score points against Nelson's frequent portrayal of the 15 or so bystanders as an angry crowd that may have made officers feel threatened and distracted them from Floyd's care.

"It's a chance for the state to show some righteous indignation," she said.

A deep prosecution team presented the state's case, and two of the most prominent attorneys — Steve Schleicher and Jerry Blackwell — were scheduled to share in the closing argument. Moriarty said Blackwell was likely to be an effective last word to the jury.

"I think he has come across as the most dynamic lawyer they have," Moriarty said. "And this is also about race, despite the defense saying it isn't about race. There's something compelling about a Black man doing the closing arguments."

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

Liberty sues Jerry Falwell Jr., seeking millions in damages

By SARAH RANKIN Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Liberty University has filed a civil lawsuit against its former leader, Jerry Falwell Jr., seeking tens of millions in damages after the two parted ways acrimoniously last year.

The complaint, filed Thursday in Lynchburg Circuit Court, alleges Falwell crafted a "well-resourced exit strategy" from his role as president and chancellor in the form of a lucrative 2019 employment agreement while withholding damaging information from the evangelical school about a personal scandal that would explode into public view the following year.

"Despite his clear duties as an executive and officer at Liberty, Falwell Jr. chose personal protection," the lawsuit says.

It also alleges that Falwell failed to disclose and address "the issue of his personal impairment by alcohol" and has refused to fully return confidential information and other personal property belonging to Liberty.

In a statement, Falwell said the lawsuit was full of "lies and half truths" and called it an attempt to defame him and discredit his record.

"I assure you that I will defend myself against it with conviction," he said.

Falwell's departure from the Virginia university in August 2020 came soon after Giancarlo Granda, a

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younger business partner of the Falwell family, said he had a yearslong sexual relationship with Falwell's wife, Becki Falwell, and that Jerry Falwell participated in some of the liaisons as a voyeur.

Although the Falwells acknowledged that Granda and Becki Falwell had an affair, Jerry Falwell denied any participation. The couple alleged that Granda sought to extort them by threatening to reveal the relationship.

The lawsuit says that Falwell had a "fiduciary duty to disclose Granda's extortive actions, and to disclose the potential for serious harm to Liberty."

Instead, Falwell "furthered the conspiracy of silence and negotiated a 2019 Employment Agreement that contained a higher salary from Liberty," the suit says.

The lawsuit argues that Falwell and Granda's actions have injured Liberty's enrollment, hurt fundraising, disrupted faculty, resulted in the 2019 agreement that proved "detrimental to Liberty's interests" and damaged the school's reputation. Granda is not named as a defendant in the suit.

University spokesman Scott Lamb said Liberty's "only word on the subject is the lawsuit itself."

Before the Granda scandal exploded, Falwell had already been on leave after posting a photo on social media that sparked an uproar. It showed Falwell on a yacht with a drink in his hand and his arm around a young woman who was not his wife, their pants unzipped and his underwear exposed.

The complaint, written with a flourish, offers new details reflecting the university's perspective on its rift with Falwell both before and after the photo scandal.

"The time for Falwell Jr. to cash in on Liberty's prodigious success had arrived," it says of the contract negotiations. The lengthy treatise includes subsections with titles such as "Falwell's Auspicious Acts of August of 2020" and "Falwell Jr.'s Hard Fall," referencing a tumble down the stairs that prompted a 911 call.

According to the lawsuit, after Falwell gave a radio interview about the yacht photo in which he offered a "slurred" explanation, Becki Falwell "stepped in."

The lawsuit says Becki Falwell contacted three members of the executive committee of Liberty's board to alert them to what "she described as her husband's excessive use of alcohol."

"Becki's heartfelt appeal made an impact on Liberty's leaders and helped provide a context for understanding Falwell's questionable public comments, worrying behavior, and inappropriate social media posts," the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit also alleges there were concerns at Liberty that Falwell "smelled of alcohol during work interactions."

It was agreed that Falwell would go on leave and Liberty would pay for his "rehab," but a dispute later emerged between Falwell and school leaders over the type of treatment, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit alleges three counts: breach of contract, breach of fiduciary duty and statutory conspiracy.

On the second count, the lawsuit says it seeks damages in excess of \$10 million. On the conspiracy charge, it seeks \$10 million in compensatory damages and argues that sum should be tripled, as allowed by state law under limited circumstances, plus \$350,000 in punitive damages. Liberty is also seeking other costs and fees.

Falwell, an attorney and real estate developer, had led Liberty since the 2007 death of his televangelist father, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who also founded the Moral Majority, making evangelicals a key force in the Republican party.

In early 2016, Falwell became one of the first conservative Christians to endorse Donald Trump for the presidency. He went on to court controversy and stay in the news, vigorously criticizing Democrats online.

In late August, shortly after Falwell's resignation, Liberty announced that it was opening an independent investigation into Falwell's tenure as president. The inquiry remains ongoing, and the school has not released any preliminary information from it.

Falwell sued Liberty for defamation in October, alleging the school had damaged his reputation, but dropped the case in December without explanation.

Interior head Haaland revokes Trump-era orders on energy

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By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Interior Secretary Deb Haaland on Friday revoked a series of Trump administration orders that promoted fossil fuel development on public lands and waters, and issued a separate directive that prioritizes climate change in agency decisions.

The moves are part of a government-wide effort by the Biden administration to address climate change ahead of a virtual global summit on climate change that President Joe Biden is hosting next week.

"From day one, President Biden was clear that we must take a whole-of-government approach to tackle the climate crisis, strengthen the economy and address environmental justice," Haaland said in a statement. The new orders will "make our communities more resilient to climate change and ... help lead the transition to a clean energy economy," she added.

The orders revoke Trump-era directives that boosted coal, oil and gas leasing on federal lands and promoted what Trump called "energy dominance" in the United States. Haaland also rescinded a Trump administration order intended to increase oil drilling in Alaska's National Petroleum Reserve.

Haaland called the orders by her predecessors, Ryan Zinke and David Bernhardt, "inconsistent with the department's commitment to protect public health; conserve land, water, and wildlife; and elevate science."

Collectively, the previous orders "tilted the balance of public land and ocean management without regard for climate change, equity or community engagement," Haaland said.

The new orders do not affect Interior's ongoing review of proposals for oil, gas, coal and renewable energy development on public lands and waters, she said.

Environmental groups heralded the orders and pledged to work with Haaland to ensure Interior Department decisions are guided by science and respect for Indigenous communities, wildlife, outdoor recreation and other uses.

More than 25% of all U.S. greenhouse gas emissions originate on public lands, and Interior has "unrivaled opportunities to restore natural carbon sinks, responsibly deploy clean energy and reduce existing emissions," said Collin O'Mara, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation.

"Rescinding the previous administration's orders that encouraged unfettered drilling in ecologically and culturally sensitive areas and establishing a climate task force will help ensure wise management of our natural resources for people and wildlife alike," O'Mara said.

One of the orders issued by Haaland cancels a 2017 action that revoked a moratorium on federal coal reserve sales that had been imposed under President Barack Obama to deal with climate change.

Agency spokeswoman Melissa Schwartz said Friday's move does not automatically resurrect the coal moratorium. "Today's announcement does not take any action on coal development. We are continuing to review an appropriate path going forward," she said.

The coal moratorium brought a sharp backlash by Republicans, who said it was evidence of a "war on coal" by Obama and other Democrats. The moratorium had little practical effect, however, since interest among companies in leasing large tracts of federal land dried up when coal markets collapsed over the last decade amid competition with cheaper natural gas.

The American Petroleum Institute, the oil industry's top lobbying group, warned that policies aimed at slowing or stopping oil and natural gas production on federal lands and waters could harm national security, environmental progress and the economy.

"Banning or greatly hindering federal leasing ... would threaten decades of American energy and climate progress and return us to greater reliance on foreign energy with lower environmental standards," said Kevin O'Scannlain, an API vice president.

Russia to expel 10 US diplomats in response to Biden actions

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia on Friday responded to a barrage of new U.S. sanctions by saying it would expel 10 U.S. diplomats and take other retaliatory moves in a tense showdown with Washington.

The Russian Foreign Ministry also published a list of eight current or former U.S. officials barred from

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entering the country, including U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland, FBI Director Christopher Wray, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also said Moscow will move to shut down those U.S. nongovernment organizations that remain in Russia to end what he described as their meddling in Russia's politics.

The top Russian diplomat said the Kremlin suggested that U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan follow the example of his Russian counterpart and head home for consultations. Russia will also deny the U.S. Embassy the possibility of hiring personnel from Russia and third countries as support staff, limit visits by U.S. diplomats serving short-term stints at the embassy, and tighten requirements for U.S. diplomats' travel in the country.

The others banned from entering Russia are Susan Rice, a former U.N. ambassador and now head of the Domestic Policy Council; John Bolton, who was a national security adviser under former President Donald Trump; James Woolsey, a former CIA director; and Michael Carvajal, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

On Thursday, the Biden administration announced sanctions on Russia for interfering in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and involvement in the SolarWind hack of federal agencies — activities Moscow has denied. The U.S. ordered 10 Russian diplomats expelled, targeted dozens of companies and people, and imposed new curbs on Russia's ability to borrow money.

While the U.S. wields the power to cripple Russia's economy, Moscow lacks levers to respond in kind, although it could hurt American interests in other ways globally.

Lavrov called Washington's move "absolutely unfriendly and unprovoked," and he said that while Russia could take "painful measures" against American business interests in Russia, it wouldn't immediately move to do that and "save them for future use."

He warned that if Washington further raises the pressure, Russia might ask the U.S. to reduce the number of its embassy and consular staff from about 450 to 300. He said both countries host about 450 diplomats, but that includes some 150 Russians at the U.N. in New York that he argued shouldn't be included.

Russia's economic potential and its global reach are limited compared with the Soviet Union that competed with the U.S. for international influence during the Cold War. Still, Russia's nuclear arsenal and its leverage in many parts of the world make it a power that Washington needs to reckon with.

Aware of that, President Joe Biden called for de-escalating tensions and held the door open for cooperation with Russia in certain areas. Biden said he told Putin in Tuesday's call that he chose not to impose tougher sanctions for now and proposed to meet in a third country in the summer.

Lavrov said Russia had a "positive attitude" to the summit offer and was analyzing it, but a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry shortly after noted that it "was being studied in the context of the evolving situation."

The ministry charged that Russia would like to avoid further escalation and engage in a "calm and professional dialogue," but has other means to retaliate if Washington tries to crank up the pressure.

While the new U.S. sanctions further limited Russia's ability to borrow money by banning U.S. financial institutions from buying Russian government bonds directly from state institutions, they didn't target the secondary market.

"It's very important that there're no sanctions on secondary debt because that means that non-U.S. persons can buy the debt and sell it to the U.S. persons," said Tom Adshead, director of research at Macro-Advisory Ltd, an analytics and advisory company.

Timothy Frye, a Columbia University political scientist, noted that Biden chose not to target the prospective Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to Germany or go after large Russian state-controlled companies.

"That's part of the broader strategy of using sanctions but also reaching out to the Kremlin to propose talks on strategic stability and eventually on a summit," he said.

Tougher restrictions would also hurt Western businesses, inflict significant economic pain on ordinary Russians and allow Putin to rally anti-U.S. sentiments to shore up his rule.

Ramping up sanctions could eventually drive Russia into a corner and provoke even more reckless Kremlin action, leading to a potential escalation in Ukraine, which has seen a surge in clashes with Russia-backed

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separatists in the east and a massive Russian troop buildup across the border.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was in Paris on Friday to discuss the tensions with French President Emmanuel Macron. After a joint call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the three urged Russia to pull back its troops to de-escalate the situation.

Fyodor Lukyanov, a top foreign policy expert who leads the Moscow-based Council for Foreign and Defense Policies, predicted Putin would likely accept Biden's invitation to join next week's call on climate change but could drag his feet on the summit offer.

"There is no way to make any deals," Lukyanov said. "There is a mutual antipathy and a total lack of trust."

He said the only practical outcome of the summit could be an agreement to launch long and difficult talks on a replacement to the New START nuclear reduction agreement that Russia and the U.S. extended in February for another five years.

Lukyanov noted that the growing U.S. pressure will push Russia and China closer in the long run.

"Closer cooperation with China on coordinating actions to contain the United States will develop more quickly now as the Chinese are interested in that," he said. While Russia lacks tools for a symmetrical answer to the U.S. sanctions, "it has ample capabilities to stimulate changes in the world order," he added.

Konstantin Kosachev, the Kremlin-connected deputy speaker of the upper house of parliament, said that by imposing sanctions and proposing a summit at the same time, the U.S. sought to take a commanding stance.

"Russia's consent would be interpreted as a reflection of its desire to soften the sanctions, allowing the U.S. to secure a dominant position at the meeting, while our refusal to meet would be a convenient pretext for more punitive measures," Kosachev wrote on Facebook.

He argued that Russia should not rush to accept Biden's summit offer.

"Revenge is a dish best served cold," Kosachev wrote. "I believe the saying is quite adaptable to a situation when we talk not about revenge but a due answer to aggressive action by an opponent."

Some predicted the U.S. sanctions could discourage Russia from cooperating with the U.S. on international crises.

"The Russian position will grow tougher on Syria, the Iranian nuclear deal and other issues," Ivan Timofeev, program director at Russian International Affairs Council, said in a commentary. Instead of acting as a deterrent, he warned, the sanctions would "only anger Russia and make its policy even tougher."

But despite the soaring tensions, Russia and the U.S. have shared interests in many global hot spots. For example, Moscow fears that instability could spread from Afghanistan to former Soviet republics in Central Asia, and it is interested in a political settlement there.

As for Iran, Moscow also doesn't want to see it with nuclear weapons, despite its friendly ties with Tehran.

Lukyanov said Russia wouldn't try to use global hot spots to hurt the U.S. and would wait patiently to see them erode U.S. domination.

"It's not a matter of playing the spoiler here or there," he said. "The ongoing developments will help accelerate the process of consolidation of leading powers against the U.S. domination."

US setting up \$1.7B national network to track virus variants

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. is setting up a \$1.7 billion national network to identify and track worrisome coronavirus mutations whose spread could trigger another pandemic wave, the Biden administration announced Friday.

White House officials unveiled a strategy that features three components: a major funding boost for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state health departments to ramp up coronavirus gene-mapping; the creation of six "centers of excellence" partnerships with universities to conduct research and develop technologies for gene-based surveillance of pathogens, and building a data system to better share and analyze information on emerging disease threats, so knowledge can be turned into action.

"Even as we accelerate our efforts to get shots into arms, more dangerous variants are growing, caus-

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ing increases in cases in people without immunity," White House coronavirus adviser Andy Slavitt told reporters. That "requires us to intensify our efforts to quickly test for and find the genetic sequence of the virus as it spreads."

The new effort relies on money approved by Congress as part of President Joe Biden's coronavirus relief package to break what experts say is a feast-or-famine cycle in U.S. preparedness for disease threats. The coronavirus is only one example. Others pathogens have included Ebola and Zika, and respiratory viruses like SARS in 2002 and MERS in 2012, which did not become major problems in the United States. Typically, the government scrambles to counter a potential threat, but funding dries up when it recedes. The new genomic surveillance initiative aims to create a permanent infrastructure.

"It's a transformative amount of money," Mary Lee Watts, federal affairs director at the American Society for Microbiology, said in a recent interview. "It has the potential not only to get ahead of the current crisis, but it is going to help us in the future. This is a program that has been underfunded for years."

The Biden administration's move comes as a variant known as B117, which first emerged in the United Kingdom, has become the predominant strain in the U.S. In hard-hit Michigan, the more transmissible mutation accounts for more than half the cases, according to CDC data. That's also the case in Minnesota. Vaccines are effective against the so-called U.K. variant, but other mutations circulating around the globe have shown resistance to currently available vaccines.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Friday the U.S. is now averaging nearly 70,000 new coronavirus cases daily, up from about 53,000 just four weeks ago. Hospitalizations have been trending higher, too, and deaths were up for the third day in a row. Along with relaxed restrictions on gatherings and indoor dining, the emergence of variants that spread more easily is part of the reason for the worsening trend.

Of particular concern are two variants that for now only have a toe-hold in the U.S. They are P1, first detected in travelers from Brazil, and B1351, identified in South Africa. The reason scientists are watching those variants is that they have shown some level of resistance to antibodies, defensive proteins produced by the human body in response to vaccines or a previous infection.

"In order for us to even have the possibility of getting back to normal by the fall we need to massively scale up our genomic surveillance," said Esther Krofah, who directs the Faster Cures initiative of the Milken Institute. "It's the insurance program that you need to have in place not just now, not just for COVID, but going forward for other pathogens of concern."

Genomic sequencing essentially involves mapping the DNA of an organism, the key to its unique features. It's done by high-tech machines that can cost from several hundred thousand dollars to \$1 million or more. Technicians trained to run the machines and the necessary computing capacity add to costs.

Another hurdle is getting local, state and federal labs all working together. "There are lots of cats that need to be herded," said University of Wisconsin virologist Thomas Friedrich.

At the end of last year, the CDC and collaborating labs were completing only 116 coronavirus gene sequences a week, according to the CDC's website. "We started in a hole," said Slavitt.

The White House says the weekly count is now about 29,000, but experts say in a large, diverse country like the U.S. those numbers need to be much higher to keep pace with potential changes to the virus. Viruses are highly efficient at spreading, developing mutations that enable them to keep reproducing.

White House officials said the government is releasing to states and territories an initial \$240 million out of \$1 billion allocated to expand genomic sequencing. Another \$400 million will go to launch the six research partnerships with academic institutions, dubbed Centers of Excellence in Genomic Epidemiology. Finally, \$300 million will go to set up the data sharing system, which is being called the National Bioinformatics Infrastructure.

'Peaky Blinders' actor Helen McCrory dies of cancer at 52

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

British actor Helen McCrory, who starred in the television show "Peaky Blinders" and the "Harry Potter" movies, has died, her husband said Friday. She was 52 and had been suffering from cancer.

Her husband, fellow actor Damian Lewis, said McCrory died "peacefully at home" after a "heroic battle

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with cancer."

"She died as she lived. Fearlessly," Lewis wrote on Twitter. "God we love her and know how lucky we are to have had her in our lives. She blazed so brightly. Go now, Little One, into the air, and thank you."

McCrory was one of Britain's most respected actors, making her mark by playing a succession of formidable and sometimes fearsome women.

She played the matriarch of a crime family on "Peaky Blinders" and the scheming Voldemort ally Narcissa Malfoy in the "Harry Potter" movies.

Cillian Murphy, who plays the central role of gangland boss Tommy Shelby in "Peaky Blinders," set in the early 20th-century English underworld, said he was "broken-hearted to lose such a dear friend."

"Helen was a beautiful, caring, funny, compassionate human being," he said in a statement. "She was also a gifted actor — fearless and magnificent."

"She elevated and made humane every scene, every character she played," Murphy said. "It was a privilege to have worked with this brilliant woman, to have shared so many laughs over the years. I will dearly miss my pal. My love and thoughts are with Damian and her family."

McCrory also starred as a human rights lawyer dragged into international intrigue in the TV thriller "Fearless," played lawyer Cherie Blair, wife of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in the 2006 movie "The Queen," and had roles in Martin Scorsese's film "Hugo" and the James Bond thriller "Skyfall."

Actor Michael Sheen, who played Tony Blair in "The Queen," said McCrory was "so funny, so passionate, so smart and one of the greatest actors of our time."

"Harry Potter" author J.K. Rowling tweeted that she was "devastated to learn of the death of Helen McCrory, an extraordinary actress and a wonderful woman who's left us far too soon."

Onstage, McCrory's roles included the vengeful Greek heroine "Medea" at the National Theatre in 2014. At the same theater, she excelled as a woman caught between a dull husband and a feckless lover in Terence Rattigan's "The Deep Blue Sea" in 2016.

While many performers struggle to find meaty female roles in film and television, McCrory played a string of them.

"Having said that, there are a lot of things I turn down," she told The Associated Press in 2016, describing the sort of roles where "all your lines are 'But what did you do at work?' 'That's so clever, darling.' 'How did you do that?' 'And then what did you do?'"

"Of course, there's so much sexism within the profession," McCrory said. "But I think you approach it in different ways, and my approach is just to forge forward."

Others remembered McCrory for her charity work, including on FeedNHS, a campaign to provide meals for frontline health care workers during the coronavirus pandemic.

"Helen McCrory will be remembered not just for her remarkable stage and screen performances, but also for her selflessness and generosity," comedian Matt Lucas tweeted. "She and Damian were the motor driving FeedNHS, working tirelessly during the pandemic to raise millions for others. What a tremendous loss."

McCrory and Lewis, star of the TV series "Homeland" and "Billions," married in 2007 and had two children.

'Hillbilly' to Capitol Hill? Author eyes Senate bid in Ohio

By DAN SEWELL Associated Press

MIDDLETOWN, Ohio (AP) — Rodney Muterspaw figures J.D. Vance has already shown he's got what it takes to be a U.S. senator.

Vance, the "Hillbilly Elegy" author and a fellow Middletown native, broke out of poverty and family chaos and never forgot his Appalachian roots on his way to success.

"I think he can talk in a way that the average person can understand," said the retired police chief, who, like Vance, has eastern Kentucky roots. "I'm a hillbilly, and I understand him 100%."

Muterspaw's view is at the heart of the fiercest political debate in Ohio. With his 2016 book, Vance helped explain to the nation Donald Trump's popularity among the white Appalachian working class of his upbringing. Now at 36, the bestselling author is considering whether he can win the votes of the people

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he claims to know so well.

Vance says he's "thinking seriously" about running for the Senate seat that Republican Rob Portman is vacating in 2022. Now a venture capitalist, he already has a billionaire backer supporting him and, despite previous criticism of Trump, has met with the former president. But other Republicans are hardly clearing the field, and Vance's success is likely to hinge on whether the state's white working-class voters embrace him as a home-state hero or an opportunist.

Muterspaw, 52, splashed some almond milk into his dark-roast coffee at Java Johnny's, among the trendy restaurants and retail shops that have been popping up along Central Avenue — where there still are some of the "We Buy Gold" storefronts that sprang up during the Great Recession. Middletown is about 30 miles (48 kilometers) northeast of Cincinnati.

A Republican with mixed feelings about Trump, Muterspaw thinks Vance has the Trump-like ability to connect with GOP voters and a relatable life story.

Vance rose out of a family beset by chaos from his mother's addictions; from a mill town that was in steep decline and ravaged by opioids as its major employers faltered amid globalization. He joined the Marines, served in Iraq, worked his way through The Ohio State University and graduated from Yale Law School before heading to Silicon Valley in 2014, then returning to Ohio in 2017.

His bestselling book told not only his own story but also highlighted the people of Appalachia and cities like his hometown that feel left behind, and it was embraced by small-government conservatives for depicting poverty as a cultural problem not easily fixed by government programs and aid.

He became a popular TV political commentator, dubbed "the Trump whisperer" for his ability to explain the Republican's rise to the presidency, and his book became a Ron Howard-directed movie.

Vance didn't respond to an interview request from The Associated Press. But in interviews and tweets, he's signaled his interest in the culture war issues popular in the GOP.

At a forum on "Desegregating Poverty," hosted by veteran civil rights activist Robert Woodford, he argued that addressing the problem of fatherless families, regardless of race, and focusing on the kind of stable home life he lacked are crucial to socioeconomic progress.

"I just wish that we could actually look at people as people, and if we did that, I think we'd have a much better sense of what their real problems are," said Vance, who lives in Cincinnati with his wife, Usha, and their two sons.

Just before Easter, Vance posted a lengthy essay on his spiritual journey from Christian evangelical roots into atheism and then to becoming Catholic. Among others, he quoted Saint Augustine and Jules, the "Pulp Fiction" hit man played by Samuel L. Jackson. He expects his Christian faith to help guide his policies for those who are struggling in life.

Vance has been active on Twitter, criticizing "the ruling class," immigration policy and Big Tech censorship. He stirred up Twitter last week with a defense of Fox News' Tucker Carlson, accused of using white supremacist rhetoric about immigrants.

"Tucker Carlson is the only powerful figure who consistently challenges elite dogma — on both cultural and economic questions. That is why they try to destroy him," Vance wrote.

This week he resigned from the board of a Kentucky company, AppHarvest, that uses green technology to produce food in Appalachia, but on Friday he denied it was because of fallout from the controversial tweets. He said his decision predated them.

"The basic thinking was: I'm going to keep speaking my mind, and I'd rather do that unconstrained by the demands of a public board. And I thought the company would be better off too," Vance said via Twitter.

Part of the Appalachian code warns against getting "too big for your britches." Some think Vance has, perpetuating backward regional stereotypes while making his millions in Silicon Valley.

In December, Appalachian authors presented a program titled "Don't Cry For Us, J.D. Vance."

Meanwhile, political foes are skeptical about his motives.

Vance is "someone that, I feel, has purposely used poor people and the people of Appalachia and even his own family to promote his own image. It's just shameful," Ted Strickland, a Democratic native of southern Ohio who served as governor and congressman, said in a recent radio interview.

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Strickland supports Democratic U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan, who represents the northeastern part of Appalachian Ohio and is readying a Senate run.

Thirty-two of Ohio's 88 counties are classified as Appalachian, with roughly 2 million residents in a state of 11.7 million. However, hundreds of thousands of more people in cities such as Columbus, Dayton and Middletown have Appalachian roots from parents and grandparents who migrated north for once-plentiful factory jobs available to workers without college degrees.

Trump rode their support in two sweeping victories in Ohio, and you can still find Trump flags, banners and yard signs left in place by diehards around the region. Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 was the last Democratic presidential candidate to carry Butler County, home of Middletown.

Life in Middletown, with nearly 49,000 people, long revolved around the Armco Steel company that became AK Steel during Vance's youth. A yearlong lockout of 2,700 workers that began in 2006 underscored that the company's patriarchal days of having a park, sports teams and a golf course for workers and their families here were long past.

It was once known nationally for Jerry Lucas, a 1950s "Middie" high school standout who went on to college and NBA stardom. Vance has helped "put Middletown back on the map," Muterspaw said.

Staffers at Middletown High School had trouble finding Vance in the 2003 yearbook, his senior year. They looked under Vance, which was his "Papaw's" family name he took for himself in adulthood, and also under Bowman, his biological father's last name. They finally found James Hamel, the last name of a stepfather who adopted J.D. early in his mother's series of husbands and boyfriends.

A woman answering the door at the two-story home where he spent much of his childhood across from Miami Park had no idea Vance had ever lived there.

At Richie's Pawn Central — in business since the early 1950s, though Vance mistakenly wrote it had "long since closed" — sales employee Terry Stephens grumbled that the federal stimulus checks have slowed down the pawn business. He said he didn't expect to vote for Vance to be senator.

"He's smart and he's done a lot of things, but I'm a minority in this town," Stephens said. "I'm a Democrat."

The GOP field already includes two candidates with statewide networks — former state party chair Jane Timken and former Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel.

But Vance is not expected to have trouble raising money. Billionaire entrepreneur Peter Thiel, an early mentor and employer of Vance, gave \$10 million to a super PAC formed to encourage his Senate candidacy.

While Vance is making up his mind, the GOP primary field continues to grow.

Former investment banker Mike Gibbons of Cleveland joined the race April 13, after Cleveland businessman Bernie Moreno announced his candidacy April 6. Several U.S. House members are considering a run. Among them is 10-term Rep. Mike Turner of Dayton, who shares Breathitt County, Kentucky, family roots with Vance.

Looming over the race is Trump — and his coveted, but not yet secured, endorsement. The former president has met with several of the Ohio contenders, including Vance. Thiel arranged and attended the meet-and-greet at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, according to a person familiar with the meeting who spoke on condition of anonymity because it was private.

John Forren, a Miami University political scientist in Vance's native Butler County, said he thinks Vance has a potentially winning appeal.

"He's a different kind of conservative who understands the Trump base and identifies with the Trump base, and he's positioned very uniquely to do that," Forren said.

In the battle to win Trump's backing, GOP foes are likely to highlight Vance's past criticisms of Trump, such as in a 2016 NPR interview in which he said: "I can't stomach Trump. I think that he's noxious and is leading the white working class to a very dark place."

However, Anirudh Ruhil, who teaches government analytics at Ohio University, nestled in Appalachian southeast Ohio, thinks Vance can overcome that.

"Right now, J.D. Vance is going to be the Trump in 2022 for Portman's seat," he predicted. "I think he has a good chance if he decides to run. His 'hillbilly roots,' as he puts it, will certainly help him out."

Senate Democrats urge Biden to condition aid to Brazil

By DAVID BILLER and JOSHUA GOODMAN ASSOCIATED PRESS

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — More than a dozen Senate Democrats sent a letter to U.S. President Joe Biden on Friday complaining of a woeful environmental track record by his Brazilian counterpart, Jair Bolsonaro, and urging him to condition any support for Amazon preservation on significant progress reducing deforestation.

The letter was signed by senators including Patrick Leahy, chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and Bob Menendez, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. It comes just days before Biden is expected to meet with Bolsonaro and other foreign leaders at a U.S.-organized climate summit that was a major plank of his campaign pledge to more aggressively fight climate change.

The letter seems aimed at curtailing a fledgling bid by Bolsonaro, a far-right climate skeptic who was a staunch ally of former President Donald Trump, to refashion himself as a willing partner of Biden on the environment in the hopes of securing billions of dollars in foreign aid to promote sustainable development in the Amazon.

The senators warn that failure to slow deforestation will also affect their willingness to support Brazil's bid to join the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development — a long-sought goal of Bolsonaro.

The 15 senators, who also include former presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, said they support cooperation on the Amazon between the U.S. and Brazilian governments, but questioned Bolsonaro's credibility.

"President Bolsonaro's rhetoric and policies have effectively given a green light to the dangerous criminals operating in the Amazon, allowing them to dramatically expand their activities," the senators wrote in the letter obtained by The Associated Press, citing recent reporting on abuses by Human Rights Watch.

A U.S.-Brazil partnership "can only be possible if the Bolsonaro administration begins to take Brazil's climate commitments seriously — and only if it protects, supports, and engages meaningfully with the many Brazilians who can help the country fulfill them," the lawmakers add.

Bolsonaro has sided with powerful agribusiness interests, cast aspersions on environmental activists and snarled at European leaders who decried deforestation in the Amazon as destruction of the world's largest rainforest has surged toward its worst level since 2008.

On the campaign trail, Biden proposed countries provide Brazil with \$20 billion to fight deforestation and said the country should face repercussions if it fails. At the time, Bolsonaro labeled Biden's comments as "regrettable" and "disastrous."

Bilateral talks on the environment with Brazil began on Feb. 17, led by Biden's special climate envoy, John Kerry. The two sides have held regular technical meetings in the run-up to the April 22-23 climate summit, which is taking place online due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Brazil is striving to show its shift in rhetoric amounts to more than empty talk.

In a seven-page letter addressed to Biden on April 14, Bolsonaro recognized that his government needs to boost its performance curtailing illegal logging. He also said he supports sustainable development with economic alternatives for the region's impoverished residents and that he is committed to eliminating illegal deforestation by 2030.

To accomplish those goals, he said Brazil will require outside resources, adding that aid from the U.S. government would be "very welcome."

Rubens Barbosa, a former Brazilian ambassador to the U.S., said it remains to be seen whether the tone of Bolsonaro's letter will match his speech at the summit.

Brazil's Environment Minister Ricardo Salles recently told reporters he is seeking \$1 billion in foreign assistance to support efforts to reduce deforestation by 30% to 40% in 12 months and that, without that sum, he would be unable to set a target. Brazilian spending to protect the environment has been sliding for years, and under Bolsonaro the ministry's budget outlook plunged another 25% this year, the lowest level in two decades.

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The ministry didn't respond to an AP request for comment about its proposals.

The U.S. senators argue Biden must see success before writing a check. They argue Bolsonaro has derided the environmental regulator and sabotaged its enforcement capabilities, sought to weaken protections for Indigenous territories, exhibited contempt for environmentalists and been reluctant to curb lawlessness that fuels destruction and violence.

"Any U.S. assistance to Brazil related to the Amazon should be conditioned on the Brazilian government making significant and sustained progress in two critical areas: reducing deforestation and ending impunity for environmental crimes and acts of intimidation and violence against forest defenders," the senators wrote.

Climatologists have warned that continued deforestation will push the Amazon beyond a tipping point, and its subsequent decomposition would release hundreds of billions of tons of carbon dioxide, making the Paris Agreement's climate goals even harder to achieve.

However, Brazil has shown itself capable of driving down Amazon deforestation in the past, having reached all-time low in 2012. That started ticking upwards in the years thereafter, then exploded in the first year of Bolsonaro's administration and rose again last year.

Amid outcry from European governments and threats of divestment by institutional investors, Bolsonaro in 2019 placed the army in charge of tamping down deforestation, despite experts' criticism that soldiers are both costly and untrained for such missions.

Preliminary data indicates deforestation has started declining from its record level, though it remains well above the average of the preceding decade. Vice President Hamilton Mourão, a general who leads the program, announced earlier that the army-led program will end at the end of April, returning enforcement duties to environmental agencies.

"Brazilian officials have been scrambling to present Bolsonaro as a committed ally of the Biden administration on climate issues," said Daniel Wilkinson, who runs Human Rights Watch's environmental program. "His new climate-friendly rhetoric simply cannot — and should not — be taken seriously in the absence of actual results."

The senators' rebuke comes amid a flurry of domestic efforts in Brazil to cast Bolsonaro's administration as a bad-faith negotiator.

More than 200 nongovernment organizations and networks signed a letter that said climate negotiations with the U.S. and other foreign governments are taking place out of the public view and that no Amazon solutions can be expected from closed-door meetings. They said talks shouldn't advance until Brazil has cut deforestation rates.

A video produced by the Association of Brazil's Indigenous Peoples also warned Biden not to trust Bolsonaro to negotiate the Amazon's future.

Barbosa, who was Brazil's ambassador to the U.S. for both center-right and leftist governments from 1999 to 2004, said Bolsonaro will face difficulty overcoming the "credibility gap" created by his newfound discourse about fighting deforestation and the negative results of the last few years.

"Those two things must be reconciled," he said. "Until then, no one will enter into serious negotiations with Brazil to transfer resources."

Garland rescinds Trump-era memo curtailing consent decrees

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Merrick Garland on Friday rescinded a Trump-era memo that curtailed the use of consent decrees that federal prosecutors have used in sweeping investigations of police departments.

Garland issued a new memorandum to all U.S. attorneys and other Justice Department leaders spelling out the new policies on civil agreements and consent decrees with state and local governments.

The memo comes as the Justice Department shifts its priorities to focus more on civil rights issues, criminal justice overhauls and policing policies in the wake of nationwide protests over the death of Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement.

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In easing restrictions placed on the use of consent decrees, the Justice Department is making it easier for its prosecutors to use the tool to force changes at police departments and other government agencies with widespread abuse and misconduct.

The memo in particular rescinds a previous memo issued by then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions shortly before he resigned in November 2018.

Democrats have long argued the ability of the Justice Department's civil rights division to conduct sweeping probes of police departments had been curtailed under President Donald Trump. The so-called pattern or practice investigations examine whether systemic deficiencies contribute to misconduct or enable it to persist.

"This memorandum makes clear that the Department will use all appropriate legal authorities to safeguard civil rights and protect the environment, consistent with longstanding Departmental practice and informed by the expertise of the Department's career workforce," Garland said.

The Justice Department didn't totally ban pattern or practice investigations under Trump, but former Attorney General William Barr suggested they may have been previously overused.

As attorney general in the Obama administration, Eric Holder frequently criticized violent police confrontations and opened a series of civil rights investigations into local law enforcement practices. The civil rights investigations often ended with court-approved consent decrees that mandated reforms.

The consent decrees included those with the police in Ferguson, Missouri, after the killing of Michael Brown and in Baltimore following the police custody death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray.

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Photo shows Biden with young boy in Detroit, not George Floyd's son

CLAIM: A photo shows President Joe Biden kneeling in front of George Floyd's son.

THE FACTS: The young boy in the photo with Biden is not George Floyd's son. Social media users shared the falsely identified photo during the murder trial this week of the Minnesota police officer charged with killing Floyd last May. "U.S. President Joe Biden kneels down to beg George Floyd's son for forgiveness," a Facebook user who posted the photo falsely claimed. The false claims also circulated on Twitter. In fact, the photo was taken on Sept. 9, 2020, and shows Biden in Detroit with a boy named C.J. Brown. His father, Clement Brown Jr., owns Three Thirteen, a clothing store in the city. Photographer Chip Somodevilla took the photo for Getty Images. Associated Press photographer Patrick Semansky also took a photo of Biden and C.J. from a similar angle that day. That photo also shows the boy's grandfather, Clement Brown. Biden reportedly went to the store to shop for his grandchildren. He was campaigning in Michigan at the time. Chauvin, 45, a white officer, is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death on May 25.

— Arijeta Lajka

North Carolina murder suspect falsely tied to George Floyd

CLAIM: George Floyd's younger brother Dejiwan Floyd was arrested for murder in North Carolina.

THE FACTS: George Floyd, who died while being handcuffed and pinned to the ground by former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, does not have a younger brother named Dejiwan. As Philonise Floyd, 39, George Floyd's brother, testified on Monday in Chauvin's murder trial, erroneous claims circulated on social media saying Floyd's younger brother had been arrested for murder in North Carolina. "Why isn't this on the NEWS Channels? George Floyd's younger brother, Dejiwan Floyd, has been arrested in North Carolina for a 'road rage' shooting of a white couple, killing the mother of six sitting in the passenger seat," a Facebook post circulating on Monday falsely stated. The Associated Press reported April 1 that Dejiwan

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Floyd, 29, a North Carolina man, was charged with first-degree murder in the March 25 fatal shooting of Julie Eberly, 47, of Manheim, Pennsylvania. Eberly and her husband were driving to the beach when Floyd allegedly fired multiple shots from his car into Eberly's car on Interstate 95, just north of Lumberton. Ryan Eberly was not injured. Robeson County sheriff Burnis Wilkins told The Associated Press that he is not aware of any relation between Dejiwan Floyd and George Floyd. "We have no information at all to confirm this is true nor do we have reason to check into it as it's not related to our case," Wilkins said in an email. "We have seen the rumor ourselves. The last name Floyd is very common in our county and surrounding area." An obituary for George Floyd also makes no mention of a sibling named Dejiwan. According to the obituary, George Floyd is survived by sisters Zsa-Zsa Floyd, LaTonya Floyd, Bridgett Floyd; stepsisters Camisha Carter and Constance Carter; brothers Terrance Floyd, Philonise Floyd and Rodney Floyd; and stepbrothers Deldrick Carter and Adrian Carter. The AP also reached out to Ben Crump and Antonio Romanucci, civil rights attorneys representing the Floyd family, but did not receive a response from either. Testimony ended Thursday in Chauvin's trial. He did not take the stand. Chauvin, 45, who is white, is charged with murder and manslaughter. He is accused of pinning Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, to the pavement for what prosecutors said was 9 minutes, 29 seconds. Floyd was arrested after being accused of trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store.

— Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

COVID-19 vaccines are not called 'Luciferase'

CLAIM: COVID-19 vaccines are called Luciferase, have the patent number 060606 and come from a digital program called Inferno.

THE FACTS: A protein used in some COVID-19 vaccine research is stirring up bogus conspiracy theories on social media as widespread posts claim the harmless enzyme luciferase has satanic associations. "Are you going to get the shot called LUCIFERASE with a patent number 060606 and digital program called INFERNO?????" read a viral post on Facebook. "The CV-19 VAXX has LUCIFERASE (Lucifer Race) DNA in it," an Instagram user wrote. "You will loose your salvation forever!!!" The posts misrepresent the enzyme, which is responsible for bioluminescence in some organisms. Luciferase is not an ingredient in any of the COVID-19 vaccines. It is the generic term for a group of enzymes that trigger the oxidation of chemicals called luciferins, producing a visible glow. In fact, the enzymes interacting with luciferins in fireflies is what makes them light up. While luciferase is not found in COVID-19 vaccines, the enzyme has been used in some COVID-19 research, as its ability to release light can help scientists visually track how viruses and vaccines affect cells. At the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, luciferase has helped speed up diagnostic COVID-19 testing, because it allows researchers to see the presence of antibodies more quickly than they could using other methods. At the University of South Florida School of Public Health, luciferase helped researchers see how well a coronavirus proxy invaded cells, and which cells were most vulnerable. In their attempts to cast luciferase as diabolical and anti-Christian, social media users also referenced a patent with the number 060606 and a "digital program called Inferno." There's no chance any U.S. patent for a COVID-19 vaccine would exactly match the number 060606, because U.S. patent numbers have contained eight digits ever since the country issued its 10 millionth patent in 2018. Some of the social media posts attempted to link the COVID-19 vaccines to an international patent application filed with the World Intellectual Property Organization by Microsoft Technology Licensing, LLC. That patent has the number WO2020060606, which contains 060606. But the application includes no mention of vaccines or injection, instead dealing with a cryptocurrency system that uses body activity data. What's more, the patent application was filed in June 2019, long before COVID-19 began its global spread. As for a digital program called Inferno, an internet search revealed no program related to COVID-19 vaccines by that name. Some social media users spreading false claims about the coronavirus mentioned an operating system called Inferno created in the 1990s by Lucent Technologies. There's no basis for the claim that the operating system has anything to do with COVID-19 immunizations.

— Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in Seattle contributed this report.

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FBI did not reply to Sky News tweet about Prince Andrew

CLAIM: When the British news outlet Sky News tweeted a video interview with Prince Andrew, the FBI responded with its own tweet, saying, "Ooh, is he doing interviews now?"

THE FACTS: The FBI did not send this tweet. British composer Nick Harvey confirmed to The Associated Press that he created the fake tweet as a joke. An image containing the bogus tweet circulated after members of Britain's royal family reacted to the announcement that Prince Philip, husband to Queen Elizabeth II, had died at 99. On April 11, Sky News tweeted a video clip of an interview with Philip's son, Prince Andrew, in which he reflected on the queen's response to her husband's death. A fabricated image circulating widely on social media on Monday appeared to show a screenshot of that tweet, along with a wry reply tweet from the FBI. The apparent FBI tweet read, "Ooh, is he doing interviews now?" Twitter and Facebook users recognized it as a reference to Andrew's lack of cooperation with a probe into accused sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Several social media users shared the image of the false tweet with posts that read: "The FBI wins Twitter today." A search on Twitter revealed that the Sky News tweet was real, but the FBI response was not. It existed only as part of the manipulated image created by Harvey. Harvey tweeted to claim ownership of the image, saying, "Of course the FBI would never actually tweet a reply like this, so I thought I'd mock it up for them instead."

— Ali Swenson

'Senior photo' of Matt Gaetz is fabricated

CLAIM: A photo shows the Republican Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz as a senior in high school with a mullet hairstyle and a tuxedo.

THE FACTS: The image is not genuine. A reverse-image search revealed Gaetz's face was superimposed onto a different man's portrait, which has been circulating as a meme online for at least 11 years. The viral image resembling Gaetz shows a young man in an apparent school portrait. He wears a tuxedo and a mullet hairstyle, with blond locks that are short and curly on top but long and straight on the sides. Twitter and Facebook users shared the image this week with captions claiming it showed Gaetz as a high school senior. "Any time Matt Gaetz tweets just respond with his senior photo," several social media users wrote. The false image amassed thousands of likes and shares as Gaetz continued to face a House Ethics Committee probe and a federal investigation for sex trafficking allegations involving underage girls. The original image has been circulating in internet memes as far back as 2010, with captions such as, "Business on top, party on the sides." The version of the image featuring Gaetz's face has only circulated in recent days, as the accusations against Gaetz have appeared in media reports. A Gaetz representative with the PR firm Logan Circle Group sent The Associated Press a statement reiterating the lawmaker's denial of the allegations and confirming the image was fake.

Prince Philip designed his own hearse, a modified Land Rover

LONDON (AP) — Prince Philip, who liked Land Rovers and drove them for much of his life, will make his last journey in one — a no-nonsense vehicle customized at his direction, down to its military green color.

The modified Land Rover TD5 130 will carry Prince Philip's coffin in a procession at Windsor Castle on Saturday as the queen and other members of the royal family follow before the funeral and interment in St. George's Chapel.

Buckingham Palace said the prince's hearse was built at the Land Rover factory in Solihull in 2003, when Philip turned 82, and modified over the years with an open-top rear section to hold his coffin, with final changes being made up until 2019, the year he turned 98. Philip died April 9 at the age of 99.

Among other things, Philip asked that it be repainted in dark bronze green, a color used in military Land Rovers.

The plain vehicle and its military look reflect the man himself, a blunt-spoken former naval officer. Before he married the future Queen Elizabeth in 1947, Philip, then a prince of the Greek royal family, served as

an officer in Britain's Royal Navy during World War II and took part in the battles of Cape Matapan and Crete in 1941.

Land Rover has maintained the vehicle since it was built and kept it ready for the funeral in collaboration with the royal household.

Thierry Bollere, Land Rover's chief executive, said that the company was "deeply privileged" to have worked with the prince, who visited company sites over the years and met hundreds of the company's employees. The company was "honored" that one of its vehicles would be used at the funeral.

Princely letter: Philip apologized to Nixon for 'lame' toast

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Throughout his decades in public life, Prince Philip was known for putting his royal foot in his mouth with occasional off-the-cuff remarks that could be embarrassing. But his faux pas at a White House dinner with President Richard Nixon in 1969 was enough for Philip to actually lose sleep.

In a handwritten note to the president uncovered by archivists at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California, the Duke of Edinburgh wrote to "humbly apologize" for failing to toast the president's health as dictated by protocol during a "stag" dinner in his honor.

"After the brilliance of the other speakers and yourself, I am afraid my contribution was very lame," Philip wrote to Nixon from Greenland on Nov. 7 after his solo U.S. trip had concluded. He added: "That night I woke up in a cold sweat when I realized I had forgotten to propose your health!"

Philip died last week at age 99, and his funeral is Saturday. He was married to Queen Elizabeth for 73 years.

"I think the letter itself shows the character of Prince Philip that so much of the public in the U.K. and across the Commonwealth, and really across the world, have come to admire," said Jim Byron, executive vice president of the Nixon Foundation. He said the letter was discovered before the coronavirus pandemic but made public this week, as a way of marking Philip's death.

"It expresses some private feelings of a moment in time that the public really doesn't always get a chance to see," Byron added.

Known for his quick wit and willingness to be self-deprecating, Philip's brand of cheekiness didn't always go over well, and sometimes veered into racism. In 1995, he asked a Scottish driving instructor, "How do you keep the natives off the booze long enough to pass the test?" Seven years later in Australia, when visiting Aboriginal people with the queen, he asked: "Do you still throw spears at each other?"

While visiting a military barracks, Philip asked a sea cadet instructor if she worked in a strip club, and even said to a woman who had lost two sons in a fire that smoke detectors were "a damn nuisance. I've got one in my bathroom, and every time I run my bath, the steam sets it off."

During White House dinners, honored guests usually offer a toast to the president's health and success. Philip wrote to Nixon that he couldn't "begin to tell you how much I appreciated your very great kindness and hospitality at the White House. I was quite overwhelmed by the guests but delighted to meet such a distinguished company."

He mentioned having then traveled to New York, where he was interviewed by Barbara Walters for NBC's "Today" show.

"The weather in New York was horrible but otherwise all went well," Philip wrote, "and I found Miss Walters particularly charming and intelligent. I hope we did a good piece."

The long guest list for the dinner was all-male. It included Vice President Spiro Agnew, most of the members of Nixon's Cabinet and nongovernmental notables like business magnate Ross Perot and Britain-born comedian Bob Hope.

Byron said Nixon almost certainly replied to Philip's letter, but, with the library archives remaining closed because of the pandemic, what he might have said is unknown. What Philip said in his remarks — other than omitting wishing Nixon good health — is unknown for the same reason.

The dinner came a day after Nixon delivered his famous "silent majority" speech in which he implored

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a national audience to unite behind the continuing war in Vietnam until his administration could achieve "peace with honor." Byron said top aide H.R. Haldeman, who later went to prison for his involvement in the Watergate scandal, noted in his diary how absolutely joyful the president was that night, given that his address had been positively received.

Nixon, who died at age 81 in 1994, was a bit older than Philip, but the two had known each other for years by then. As vice president, Nixon and his wife met with Queen Elizabeth and Philip in London. The Nixons gave the royal couple a tour of Washington's sites when they made a state visit to the U.S. in 1959.

"Philip, by all measures, he was being kind," Byron said of the letter. "And really expressing so much of his character."

US says Russia was given Trump campaign polling data in 2016

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It was one of the more tantalizing, yet unresolved, questions of the investigation into possible connections between Russia and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign: Why was a business associate of campaign chairman Paul Manafort given internal polling data — and what did he do with it?

A Treasury Department statement Thursday offered a potentially significant clue, asserting that Konstantin Kilimnik, a Russian and Ukrainian political consultant, had shared sensitive campaign and polling information with Russian intelligence services.

Kilimnik has long been alleged by U.S. officials to have ties to Russian intelligence. But the statement in a broader Treasury Department sanctions announcement was perhaps the most direct link the U.S. government has ever drawn between the Trump campaign's inner workings and the Kremlin's intelligence services. The revelation was all the more startling because it went beyond any allegation made in either special counsel Robert Mueller's 2019 report or in an even more damning and detailed document released last year by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Both those investigations were unable to determine what Kilimnik did with the data and whether he shared it further.

The issue resurfaced Thursday because Kilimnik was one of 32 people and entities sanctioned by the U.S. government for attempting to influence the 2020 election. Officials said Kilimnik sought to promote the bogus narrative that Ukraine, not Russia, had interfered in the 2016 election.

Kilimnik was a key but mysterious figure in Mueller's investigation into potential coordination between Russia and the 2016 Trump campaign.

A business associate of Manafort's who worked closely with him, even managing his firm's office in Kyiv, Kilimnik is mentioned by name more than 150 times in the Mueller report. He was indicted alongside Manafort on obstruction of justice allegations, but has not appeared in the U.S. to face those charges. The FBI has offered a reward of up to \$250,000 for information leading to his arrest.

A key episode examined by Mueller involved Manafort's decision to share campaign polling data with Kilimnik — something prosecutors say Manafort lied about when questioned. Investigators scrutinized a series of secretive encounters between the men, including in August 2016 at the Grand Havana Room in New York City.

There, according to statements provided by Mueller, Manafort briefed Kilimnik on internal campaign data and messaging, and they discussed battleground states.

The sharing of polling data was an eye-catching data point, especially since it left open the possibility that Russia could have exploited such inside information to target influence campaigns aimed at boosting Trump's election bid in 2016.

But Mueller's team said it couldn't "reliably determine" Manafort's purpose in sharing it, nor assess what Kilimnik may have done with it — in part due to questions over Manafort's credibility. The Senate committee also could not resolve that question, though its report drew attention for its characterization of Kilimnik as a Russian intelligence officer. Kilimnik has denied that.

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It was not clear what new information, if any, led to the Treasury Department's assessment that Kilimnick had "provided the Russian Intelligence Services with sensitive information on polling and campaign strategy." A Treasury Department spokesman did not return an email seeking comment.

Philip's legacy lives in chef who traded prison for kitchen

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Jon Watts was 18 years old when he woke up in a prison cell and decided he had to change.

He enrolled in every course he could find, from mathematics to business. But he says it was a program founded by Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, that gave him a "passion for food" and a career as a chef when he got out of prison 3 1/2 years later.

"I was a young boy in prison," Watts, now 32, told The Associated Press. "It helped mold me to be what I like to think is a good person, and it set me up to believe in myself, to believe that I can achieve things."

After Philip's death last week at age 99, politicians and world leaders rushed to eulogize his lifetime of service to his wife, Queen Elizabeth II, and to the British nation. For many people across the country, though, his greatest contribution was the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, a program which seeks to give young people the skills and confidence they need to succeed.

Participants in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award must complete volunteer work, improve their physical fitness, learn new skills, and go on expeditions to earn each of three progressively more difficult levels of achievement — bronze, silver and gold. More than 6.7 million people between the ages of 14 and 24 have taken part in the U.K., and the program has expanded to 130 countries since Philip founded it in 1956.

The program has become such a part of British life that members of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Cabinet recently regaled each other with tales of how they earned gold awards. Johnson, however, joked that some may have exaggerated their achievements.

"I will leave it to the House to speculate as to who claimed to have got a gold award, and who got a bronze," Johnson told British lawmakers in the House of Commons this week. "But I believe those ministers spoke for millions of people — across this country and around the world — who felt that the duke had in some way touched their lives."

The award grew out of Philip's own experience at Gordonstoun school in Scotland, where he earned a similar prize called the Moray Badge before World War II. After the war, headmaster Kurt Hahn approached his former student with the idea of expanding the program to give young people around the U.K. a sense of achievement through out-of-classroom learning experiences.

While the program allows young people to pursue their own interests and design their own challenges, the unifying element is that it is intended to push them to test their limits, building confidence and developing independence along the way, said Luke Levine, 23, who earned a gold award before becoming a volunteer for the organization.

For his final expedition, Levine was part of a group that took a three-day trek through Snowdonia National Park in Wales, battling high winds and bad weather as they climbed a 3,000-foot mountain and assisted a team member struggling with asthma. That sense of self-reliance helped make it possible for Levine to come out as a transgender man.

"I just felt like I was in a place where I was learning to be confident, ..." he said. "I think that really helps me, kind of, in my coming out journey."

Watts had his own journey to complete.

He said that after leaving school at 16 with no qualifications, he got involved with gangs in his hometown of Oxford. After an incident in which another young man was stabbed, Watts was convicted of causing grievous bodily harm and sentenced to 6 1/2 years in prison.

He decided to pursue the Duke of Edinburgh's Award after hearing a talk by representatives of the Reading Football Club, which provided funding for the program at the prison.

Two prison officers helped him design a program that roughly followed a national vocational cooking

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course. He learned all the basics, from good kitchen hygiene to how to scale a fish. For the community service section, he volunteered for the Samaritans crisis line, answering calls from people struggling with suicidal thoughts.

Watts' first expedition was an overnight on the prison soccer field with guards keeping watch. After moving to the prison's resettlement unit in preparation for release, Watts and other prisoners were allowed to plan proper journeys through the Chiltern Hills near London and in the Brecon Beacons, a rugged Welsh mountain range where British soldiers do survival training.

Watts says that when he met Philip at a reception for young people receiving their awards, the duke unleashed one of his famously politically incorrect comments, asking whether he had to wear a "ball and chain" on his expedition. Watts didn't take offense.

"I thought that was quite funny, just because meeting Prince Philip is quite an overwhelming experience for anyone at any time," he said. "It made me laugh, and I think that was his aim."

As he prepared for release from prison, Watts went to work at one of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's restaurants while on daily furlough. He had to sidestep offers to go to the pub after closing time.

Once released, he spent five years with Oliver, then left to set up his own catering business, which won corporate and event contracts. With those jobs on hold because of the coronavirus pandemic, he now works as a chef for three private families and shows off recipes such as crispy chili beef with noodles, truffled chicken Milanese, and tear 'n' share garlic bread on social media.

Even though his years in prison are long behind him, and it would be possible for him to obscure his past, Watts keeps talking about those hard times so others who are struggling will know all is not lost.

After all, that's what being a gold award winner really means.

"I am a part of his legacy," Watts said of the late Duke of Edinburgh. "Every day when I'm working and when I'm cooking food and putting that food on to a plate, maybe it's a bit far-fetched, but that's a bit of Prince Philip's legacy as well."

Family asks feds to reopen case on Tamir Rice police killing

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — The family of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot and killed by Cleveland police in 2014, asked the Justice Department on Friday to reopen the case into his death after it was closed in the waning weeks of the Trump administration.

In late 2020, federal prosecutors said they would not bring charges against the two police officers involved, saying video of the shooting was of too poor a quality for them to conclusively establish what had happened. There were no other prosecutions in the case. In December 2015, a grand jury declined to bring criminal charges against the officers.

Rice's family said in a letter to the Justice Department that it believes Trump officials were uninterested in seeking justice for him because of political reasons and made the case needlessly complicated.

"The truth is this case is tragically simple. Tamir Rice was a boy. On November 22, 2014, he was doing something many boys enjoy: playing with a toy gun in a park near his house," attorneys for the family wrote in the letter.

Rice was Black, and the police officer who shot him was white. The shooting sparked community protests about the police treatment of Black people, especially after a grand jury decided not to indict the officer or his partner.

"I'm still in so much pain because no one has been held accountable for the criminal act that took his life," Rice's mother, Samaria Rice, said in a statement. "I'm asking DOJ to reopen the investigation into my son's case; we need an indictment and conviction for Tamir's death."

The family's request puts pressure on Attorney General Merrick Garland and the Biden administration to begin publicly delivering on a commitment to combat racial discrimination in policing. Garland has said America doesn't "yet have equal justice." But reopening the case could be complicated.

"The election of President Biden, your appointment, and your commitment to the rule of law, racial

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justice, and police reform give Tamir's family hope that the chance for accountability is not lost forever," the family said in the letter.

The Justice Department declined to comment.

Rice was playing with a pellet gun outside a recreation center in Cleveland on Nov. 22, 2014, when he was shot and killed by Officer Timothy Loehmann seconds after Loehmann and his partner, Officer Frank Garmback, arrived. The officers had been dispatched to the recreation center after a man drinking beer and waiting for a bus called 911 to report that a "guy" was pointing a gun at people. The caller told a 911 dispatcher that it was probably a juvenile and the gun might be "fake," though that information was never relayed to the officers.

To bring federal civil rights charges in cases like these, the Justice Department must prove that an officer's actions willfully broke the law and are not simply the result of a mistake, negligence or bad judgment. It has been a consistently tough burden for federal prosecutors to meet across both Democratic and Republican administrations, with the Justice Department declining criminal charges against police officers in other high-profile cases in recent years, including in the deaths of Eric Garner in New York City and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

In Rice's case, the Justice Department said poor-quality surveillance video recorded in the area where the shooting took place prevented prosecutors from being able to conclusively determine whether Rice was or was not reaching for his toy gun just prior to being shot. The two officers who were investigated told authorities soon after the shooting that Rice was reaching for the gun prior to being shot and was given multiple commands to show his hands.

But the video, while grainy, shows what prosecutors need to know, said Zoe Salzman, an attorney with Emery Celli Brinckerhoff Abady Ward & Maazel, which is working with Rice's family.

"It is very clear on the most important points," she said. The timing, for one. It shows that Loehmann was primed to shoot within one or two seconds after encountering Rice, and he didn't pause to investigate. She said the officers' claims they gave Rice commands were proven untrue, and prosecutors included them as fact.

But the letter from the Rice family's attorneys said the Justice Department's explanation was designed to make the case seem as "complicated as possible," in an effort to run out the clock on certain federal charges. The letter asks that federal prosecutors convene a grand jury to consider charges against the police officers.

Salzman said the family hopes Cleveland would also reconsider charges but feels its best chance is with the federal government.

"All the Rice family is asking for here is a chance for justice," she said. "Again and again politics trump justice. All they asked for is an honest investigation and a fair presentation of the evidence to a grand jury."

The pandemic has upended the Oscars. Good, producers say

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Ninety seconds. That's how quickly Steven Soderbergh believes the Academy Awards will convince viewers that this year's telecast is different.

The concept for the show, which Soderbergh is producing with Stacey Sher and Jesse Collins, is to treat the telecast not like a TV show but a movie. And he's convinced he's got a doozy of an opening scene.

"We're going to announce our intention immediately," says Soderbergh. "Right out of the gate, people are going to know: 'We've got to put our seatbelt on.'"

Changing the Academy Awards, a 93-year-old American institution, has typically proven an exercise in futility. Tweaks have been tried along the way, yet the basic format has been stubbornly immutable.

But this year, the pandemic has shaken the Oscars like never before. When the broadcast begins April 25 on ABC, there won't be an audience. The base of the show won't be the Academy Awards' usual home, the Dolby Theatre (though the Dolby is still a key location), but Union Station, the airy, Art Deco-Mission Revival railway hub in downtown Los Angeles.

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For the producers, the challenges of COVID are an opportunity to, finally, rethink the Oscars.

"At any step in the creative process of making a movie, when I ask a question about why something is being done a certain way and the answer is, 'Because that's the way it's always been done' — that's a real red flag for me," Soderbergh said in a recent Zoom interview with Collins and Sher. "All of us this year have taken advantage of the opportunity that's been presented to us to really challenge all the assumptions that go into an award show."

No matter how good a job they do, ratings are all but certain to fall from last year's 23.6 million viewers. Award show viewership has cratered during the pandemic, and this year's Oscar nominees — while widely streamed and more diverse than ever — lack the kind of buzz generated in a normal year. Soderbergh praises the best-picture nominees as "one of the most auteur-driven set of films."

"If the teams in the Super Bowl are from small markets, it's still a great game, people still care," says Collins, who produced The Weeknd's halftime show at this year's Super Bowl.

Collins was also a producer of last month's Grammy Awards, a telecast that drew praise for its personal, jam-session feel. That sense of community is something the Oscars want to exude, too.

"My big thing has always been: It's not intimate. It doesn't feel personal," Soderbergh says. "We're in a COVID world. It has to be that way. Nominees, guests, presenters. That's it. Those are the only people in the room. That was just a weird alignment of catastrophe and my personal preoccupation."

The Oscars, most assuredly, will differ greatly from February's largely virtual Golden Globes. The producers have made a stand against both Zoom and casual wear. This is the Oscars, after all; there will be no acceptance speeches made in a hoodie. The producers pressed the nominees to attend in person, with appropriate safety precautions.

Some bristled at the academy's stance — lockdown regulations are in effect in some countries and cases are persistently high in Europe and elsewhere — leading to compromise. There will be a hub for nominees in London, and, as of late last week, about a dozen remote satellite hook-ups. Some material will be pre-taped; every nominee has spent 45 minutes with the producers.

Soderbergh envisions the broadcast as a three-hour movie, not a webinar. But what does that mean, exactly? If the Oscars are a movie, what kind will it be? From the director of "Ocean's 11" and "Logan Lucky," should we expect a heist film?

"It's going to feel like a movie in that there's an overarching theme that's articulated in different ways throughout the show. So the presenters are essentially the storytellers for each chapter," says Soderbergh. "We want you to feel like it wasn't a show made by an institution. We want you to feel like you're watching a show that was made by a small group of people that really attacked everything that feels generic or unnecessary or insincere. That's the kind of intention when I watch shows like this that is missing for me. A voice. It needs to have a specific voice."

Technically, the broadcast will have a more widescreen look and a more cinematic approach to the music. (Questlove is music director.) Presenters are considered the ensemble cast. One thing you won't see, says Collins, is standard banter before an award is handed out.

"When you see cast members go up to give awards, you'll see a connection," Collins says. "It won't be two people walking up that just met in the greenroom who are struggling to stick with the teleprompter."

It's undeniably a lot to pull off, with ever-fluctuating COVID-19 conditions and restrictions. The logistics are "mind-numbing," Soderbergh says. The egos, a whole other fascinating component. "Oh, it's a chapter for the memoir, for sure," he says. But the show is coming together. "I'm feeling pretty amped," he says.

The role of Academy Awards savior is an unlikely one for Soderbergh, who dramatically bid Hollywood goodbye eight years ago. His criticism then was that the studios weren't innovating and that movies had drifted from the cultural center. But after returning to moviemaking in a restless sprint of adventurous, conceptually daring films (some shot on iPhones, one made on an ocean liner), Soderbergh helped lead the industry back to production during the pandemic, mapping out safety protocols — including the kinds of testing and quarantining that will be in effect for attending nominees next week.

The Oscars are an annual meeting, of sorts, for Hollywood — a moment of reflection, aspiration and

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backslapping for the industry. This year's awards, postponed by two months, follow a punishing pandemic year for the industry that saw movie theaters shuttered and streaming services proliferate. Soderbergh hopes the Oscars will be cathartic, and a shot in the arm for Hollywood.

"The cliché when you go into to pitch a movie is to say it's about hope and scope," he says. "That is kind of what we want to do, to show what's possible."

That includes an affectionate celebration of each category's craft and nominees.

"Snark is something that we didn't want," says Sher, the veteran producer of "Get Shorty," "Django Unchained" and Soderbergh films like "Out of Sight" and "Erin Brockovich." "Instead of looking at it from the outside in with a high degree of cynicism and stark, we're pulling the curtain back and letting them into our community. There are a lot of misperceptions about the business. It's a predominantly blue-color industry, with unions."

On Oscar night, Soderbergh — who typically serves as his own cinematographer under the alias Peter Andrews — plans to be in the production truck alongside the show's director, Glenn Weiss.

"There's been so much resistance to make any big moves, but at least what we'll have done, coming out the other end, is give the academy, the network and the viewers some real information about what they like and what they don't like because we made some big moves," Soderbergh says. "That means it will evolve, and it needs to evolve."

Gaetz and DeSantis: A friendship that may become a liability

By STEVE PEOPLES, BRENDAN FARRINGTON and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — When he launched his campaign to become Florida's governor in January 2018, few expected Ron DeSantis to prevail in America's toughest political battleground.

The 39-year-old congressman was largely unknown outside his Daytona Beach district. He didn't have the professional staff or fundraising prowess typically required to compete in such a large state. And he was going up against a more established rival for the Republican nomination.

But at his side, DeSantis had a key ally with strong connections in state politics and the respect of the White House: Matt Gaetz, the Florida congressman now embroiled in a federal sex trafficking investigation. Gaetz appeared at campaign events alongside DeSantis, played his Democratic rival Andrew Gillum in mock debate preparations and encouraged then-President Donald Trump to back DeSantis for governor.

At one campaign stop in Navarre, Florida, Gaetz jokingly referred to DeSantis as "Batman" to his "Robin."

There is no indication that DeSantis is tied to the federal probe of Gaetz, which has also ensnared several other prominent figures in Florida Republican politics. But the investigation could spark new scrutiny of their political partnership and become a liability for DeSantis as he runs for reelection ahead of a possible presidential bid in 2024.

The Associated Press spoke to nearly a dozen people with direct knowledge of how the DeSantis-Gaetz relationship evolved in recent years. Many of them spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations and observations. They describe a friendship of political convenience between two young, ambitious Republicans eager to rise in a party that was quickly being redefined by Trump.

Gaetz served as an informal political adviser to DeSantis. But as DeSantis became a more seasoned political player, the people said, the bond changed.

"When Ron first got elected governor, he did not have any experience in Tallahassee and Mr. Gaetz did, and so he relied on Mr. Gaetz for his Tallahassee knowledge when he first got there," said Peter Feaman, a national committeeman for the Republican Party of Florida. "Once Ron got his feet underneath him up in Tallahassee, the only thing they've had in common is their support for Mr. Trump and conservative principles. Other than that, I'm not aware of any interaction between the two whatsoever."

Government agents are investigating whether Gaetz had sex with a 17-year-old and other underage girls and violated federal sex trafficking laws, people familiar with the probe have told the AP. No charges have been filed, and Gaetz has vehemently denied the allegations. The governor has not been accused of any wrongdoing.

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Still, the investigation may be moving uncomfortably close to the governor's office. Besides Gaetz himself, the influential Florida political figures under federal scrutiny include Jason Pirozzolo, a hand surgeon and DeSantis campaign donor, and DeSantis' political appointee Halsey Beshears, the state's former top business regulator.

Asked specifically whether DeSantis or his staff had been questioned as part of the investigation, the governor's spokesperson Meredith Beatrice said: "This is an ongoing DOJ investigation. We have no comment."

DeSantis and Gaetz briefly overlapped in Congress. They were more frequent regulars at Fox News, where Gaetz was a recurring guest and DeSantis used a flood of appearances to gain momentum in the governor's race.

Those Fox News appearances also helped DeSantis get on Trump's radar. Gaetz built on that growing profile and was among the Republicans who encouraged Trump to endorse DeSantis in the GOP primary. Trump's ultimate backing unleashed a flood of fundraising dollars that put DeSantis on a path to victory.

Throughout the campaign, Gaetz was a steady presence. He was among those on stage with DeSantis when he was declared the winner in the governor's race.

After the victory, Gaetz was one of just four chairmen — and the only current elected official — to lead DeSantis' transition team. Gaetz, who spent six years in the Florida legislature, advised the governor-elect on hiring and policy decisions and appeared with him in public.

And as DeSantis began to fill out his administration, he tapped Gaetz's father, former Florida Senate President Don Gaetz, to serve on a transition advisory committee on education and workforce development.

While the governor and the congressman were close politically, they were in very different places in their personal lives. DeSantis was married with young children. Gaetz was single.

Modest signs of tension began to emerge as DeSantis settled into the governor's office.

One issue was Gaetz's habit of showing up at Republican political events, often with different women, dressed as if they were going out to a nightclub. Critics suggested privately that Gaetz was acting like a "frat boy." DeSantis' wife, Casey DeSantis, one of the governor's closest political advisers, was cooling to Gaetz as well.

Trump, who remains deeply popular among many GOP voters, could hold significant sway over each man's political future. While the former president is said to be fond of Gaetz and DeSantis, he has been more publicly aligned with the governor recently.

Over the weekend, DeSantis was the lone presidential prospect invited to share the stage with Trump at a private donor reception at Mar-a-Lago. Gaetz did not participate in the event, which was the party's biggest formal gathering since Trump left office.

As the investigation unfolds, DeSantis is taking steps to position himself for higher office. He recently hired veteran Republican consultant Phil Cox to lead his reelection team as part of a significant political expansion. The team is so far staying hyperfocused on his 2022 reelection, but allies privately acknowledge that a strong showing next year will put DeSantis in a strong standing for the 2024 presidential contest.

Meanwhile, Gaetz is continuing to look out for DeSantis' political ambitions — whether DeSantis wants him to or not.

Even as investigators were probing his activities this spring, Gaetz issued three separate press releases from his congressional office promoting DeSantis.

"He is a strong potential presidential candidate in 2024," Gaetz said he told Fox News, according to one of the official press releases. "The Biden team knows that, and so they're trying to somehow cast aspersions on the Florida experience because you know what, throughout America, there's a lot of Florida envy right now."

GOP leaders diverge on Trump, putting party in limbo

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — One by one, the Republican leaders of Congress have made the trip to Mar-a-Lago

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to see Donald Trump.

Kevin McCarthy visited after the deadly Jan 6 Capitol insurrection, counting on the former president's help to win back control of the House in 2022. The chair of the Senate Republican campaign committee, Rick Scott, stopped by to enlist Trump in efforts to regain the Senate. Lindsey Graham goes to play golf.

But missing from the appearances has been perhaps the most powerful Republican elected official in the country, Mitch McConnell, a onetime ally who ushered the former president's legislative and judicial agenda to fruition, but now claims to want nothing to do with Trump.

The very public pilgrimages, and the noticeable refusal to make one, have placed congressional Republicans at a crossroads, with one branch of the party keeping close to Trump, hoping to harness the power of his political brand and loyal voters for their campaigns, and the other splitting away, trying to chart the GOP's post-Trump future.

With no obvious heir apparent or leader-in-waiting, the standoff between the party's two highest-ranking figures poses an uneasy test of political wills and loyalties, particularly for the rank-and-file lawmakers in Congress dependent on both men for their political livelihoods. Congress has become more Trump-like in the former president's absence, as a new generation of Trump-aligned lawmakers emerges, particularly in the Senate, and more centrist Republicans announce their retirements.

"We've got enough problems without fighting within ourselves," said Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., who was swept into office this year with Trump's support.

"You know, being a football coach, that's what I would tell our players and coaches," he said. "You bring your whole team down. So that's pretty much how I think about this. As a team, we don't need arguing between teammates. We just need them to be on the same page."

The stark fallout was on display at the Republican donor retreat when Trump lashed into McConnell as a "stone-cold loser" but then was feted with an honorary award from Scott, the National Republican Senatorial Committee chair launching the campaign efforts.

Asked about it later, McConnell responded with perhaps the most cutting retort of all: He simply ignored Trump.

"What I'm concentrating on is the future," said McConnell, the Senate Republican leader.

Unlike past presidents who did not win a second term, the end of Trump's presidency has not brought closure as much as it has a lingering uncertainty on Capitol Hill about the party's pathway back to power. He is promising to return to the political stage, perhaps for his own bid for the White House. But more immediately he is being enlisted by GOP leaders in support of congressional candidates to win back the House and Senate.

As McConnell tries to position Republicans as the opposition to President Joe Biden's agenda, it is clear that while he is the leader of the Senate, Trump remains, for now, the leader of the GOP.

"Is it ideal? I don't know. But is it sustainable? Sure," said Scott Jennings, a GOP strategist and longtime McConnell confidant. "It's easy to see how they both could frankly be successful in their individual goals without ever speaking another word to each other."

Jennings said McConnell and Trump aren't jockeying for power as much as bringing complementary skills to the campaigns ahead. The former president can rev up his base of supporters with rally-style speeches while McConnell can assemble the campaign strategies and candidates to regain control of the Senate.

"One of them is in party-building mode, which is McConnell, and the other one is in ax-grinding mode," he said.

"They don't have to be golfing buddies," he said.

The congressional leaders want, and expect, Trump to play a role in next year's midterm elections as they try to wrest control from Democrats, who have the slimmest majorities in the House and Senate in recent memory.

"God, yes," Graham, R-S.C., said recently. "He's sitting on a mountain of money and has a 90% approval rating among Republicans."

McCarthy, the House Republican leader, said Trump has been helpful so far in House GOP campaign efforts. "Like all of the former presidents, they help, they're engaged in many different ways," McCarthy said.

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Yet as Trump assembles a political operation from his private club in Florida, his biggest priority so far appears to be trying to defeat some of the party's most prominent lawmakers, including Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, who were among those voting to impeach him over the Jan. 6 insurrection.

While Trump has also endorsed some GOP incumbents, other Republican lawmakers, particularly in the Senate, have simply announced they are retiring.

Asked specifically if Trump should quit attacking the Republican Party's leaders, McCarthy demurred.

"The No. 1 thing I want to have happen is make sure the next century is the American century," he said. "If the next century is going to be ours, we're going to have to change administrations, we're going to have to change Congress. That's my focus."

The deadly riot has become a political line of demarcation on Capitol Hill over those GOP lawmakers who stood with Trump to overturn Biden's victory during the Electoral College tally. Trump was impeached for inciting the insurrection as he urged a mob of supporters to "fight like hell" for his presidency.

One of the lawmakers Trump recently endorsed is Alabama GOP Rep. Mo Brooks, who is running for the Senate seat that will be vacant with the retirement of longtime GOP Sen. Richard Shelby.

Brooks had been a leader of the House efforts to challenge the election results and joined the rally outside the White House on Jan. 6. Trump encouraged the mob that day to head to the Capitol. Five people died, including a Trump supporter shot by police and a police officer who died later after fighting the mob of Trump loyalists who stormed the Capitol.

At a dinner last month at Mar-a-Lago, Scott said he encouraged the president's support to win back the Senate — after the primaries are settled.

Many Republicans recall the 2010 election when they won back control of the House, but not the Senate, because some of the candidates who won primary elections on the tea party wave were too conservative or hardline to appeal to voters statewide.

Shelby said he wished the former president and McConnell would "put their differences aside," minding President Ronald Reagan's admonition not to battle each other.

"Republicans fighting Republicans benefits who? The Democrats," said Shelby.

"I wish he'd stay out of all the Senate races, but he's not," Shelby said about Trump.

"He's got a lot of energy, he's got a dedicated following. I don't think he's looking for retirement."

China's growth surges to 18.3% but rebound leveling off

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — China's economy grew by double digits in the latest quarter but an explosive rebound from the coronavirus pandemic is slowing abruptly as manufacturing and consumer spending return to normal.

The economy grew by 18.3% over a year ago, official data showed Friday, a figure that was magnified by comparison with early 2020, when factories and shops were closed and activity plunged. Growth compared with 2020's final quarter, when a recovery was under way, slowed to 0.6%, among the weakest of the past decade.

The latest figures "mask a sharp slowdown" in the world's second-largest economy as stimulus spending and easy credit are wound down, Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital economics said in a report.

"China's post-COVID rebound is leveling off," Evans-Pritchard said.

Manufacturing, auto sales and consumer spending have recovered to above pre-pandemic levels since the ruling Communist Party declared victory over the coronavirus last March and allowed factories and stores to reopen. Restaurants and shopping malls are filling up, though visitors still are checked for the virus's telltale fever.

The economy "delivered a stable performance with a consolidated foundation and good momentum of growth," the National Bureau of Statistics said in a report.

Forecasters expect economic growth of at least 7% this year but say China's outlook is clouded by trade

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tension with Washington and disruptions in global supplies of processor chips needed by smartphone makers and other tech industries the ruling party is counting on to propel a self-sustaining economy and reduce reliance on trade.

The latest figures are in line with expectations due to the low basis for comparison in early 2020. The economy shrank by 6.8% in the first quarter, the worst performance since at least the mid-1960s.

Activity started to recover in the second quarter of 2020, when the economy expanded by 3.2% over a year earlier. That accelerated to 4.9% in the third quarter and 6.5% in the final three months of the year.

For the full year, China eked out 2.3% growth, becoming the only major economy to expand while United States, Europe and Japan struggled with renewed disease outbreaks.

This year, the International Monetary Fund and private sector forecasters expect growth to rise to above 8%. The ruling party's official target is "above 6%."

Government data indicate consumer spending, a pillar of the ruling party's plan to reduce reliance on exports, is accelerating while growth in factory output and investment are slowing.

Retail spending rose 34.2% in March, up from 33.9% for the full first quarter, according to the NBS. Factory output rose 24.5% in the first quarter while investment in real estate, factories and other fixed assets increased 25.6%.

"The focus should be on consumption data, which kept improving," Chaoping Zhu of JP Morgan Asset Management said in a report.

Quarterly growth compared with the previous quarter should stabilize at 1%-2%, according to Iris Pang of ING. Pang raised her full-year growth forecast to 8.2% from 7%.

Still, some warn a Chinese recovery still isn't certain because global demand is weak as some governments re-impose anti-disease curbs that are disrupting business and trade.

Tech industries are hampered by U.S. sanctions that block access to chips and other technology for Chinese tech giant Huawei and other companies in a feud with Beijing over technology and security.

President Joe Biden says he wants better relations with Beijing but has yet to indicate whether he will roll back sanctions or tariff hikes imposed on Chinese goods by his predecessor, Donald Trump.

"China-U.S. relations will be critical for China's economic growth, mostly in technology development," said Pang in a report. "It is likely that the U.S. will continue to put more pressure on China."

Spending on restaurants jumped 75.8% in the first quarter over a year ago, a period when most were closed for weeks. E-commerce rose 29.9%.

Overall growth shrugged off the impact of a government appeal to China's public to avoid travel during February's Lunar New Year holiday, usually the busiest travel and consumer spending period.

March exports, reported earlier, rose 30.6% over a year earlier as global consumer demand revived. Exports to the United States jumped 53.6% despite tariff hikes still in place on Chinese goods in a trade war launched by Trump.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, April 17, the 107th day of 2021. There are 258 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 17, 1970, Apollo 13 astronauts James A. Lovell, Fred W. Haise and Jack Swigert splashed down safely in the Pacific, four days after a ruptured oxygen tank crippled their spacecraft while en route to the moon.

On this date:

In 1492, a contract was signed by Christopher Columbus and a representative of Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, giving Columbus a commission to seek a westward ocean passage to Asia.

In 1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki ended the first Sino-Japanese War.

In 1905, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Lochner v. New York*, struck down, 5-4, a New York State law limit-

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ing the number of hours that bakers could be made to work. (This ruling was effectively overturned in 1937 by the high court's West Coast Hotel Co. v. Parrish decision.)

In 1961, some 1,500 CIA-trained Cuban exiles launched the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in an attempt to topple Fidel Castro, whose forces crushed the incursion by the third day.

In 1969, a jury in Los Angeles convicted Sirhan Sirhan of assassinating Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

In 1972, the Boston Marathon allowed women to compete for the first time; Nina Kuscsik was the first officially recognized women's champion, with a time of 3:10:26.

In 1973, Federal Express (later FedEx) began operations as 14 planes carrying 186 packages took off from Memphis International Airport, bound for 25 U.S. cities.

In 1975, Cambodia's five-year war ended as the capital Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge, which instituted brutal, radical policies that claimed an estimated 1.7 million lives until the regime was overthrown in 1979.

In 1986, at London's Heathrow Airport, a bomb was discovered in the bag of Anne-Marie Murphy, a pregnant Irishwoman about to board an El Al jetliner to Israel; she'd been tricked into carrying the bomb by her Jordanian fiance, Nezar Hindawi. The bodies of kidnapped American Peter Kilburn and Britons Philip Padfield and Leigh Douglas were found near Beirut; they had been slain in apparent retaliation for the U.S. raid on Libya.

In 1991, the Dow Jones industrial average closed above 3,000 for the first time, ending the day at 3,004.46, up 17.58.

In 1993, a federal jury in Los Angeles convicted two former police officers of violating the civil rights of beaten motorist Rodney King; two other officers were acquitted. Turkish President Turgut Ozal died at age 66.

In 2013, 15 people were killed when a fertilizer plant exploded in West, Texas. Sports returned to Boston two days after the deadly Marathon bombing as the Buffalo Sabres defeated the Bruins in a 3-2 shootout (players on both teams wore "Boston Strong" decals on their helmets).

Ten years ago: U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton visited Japan, where she expressed confidence the country would fully recover from its tsunami and nuclear disasters. Actor Michael Sarrazin, 70, died in Montreal.

Five years ago: Brazil's lower house of Congress voted to impeach President Dilma Rousseff, who repeatedly argued that the push against her was a "coup." (Rousseff was removed the following August.) Pennsylvania became the 24th state to legalize a comprehensive medical marijuana program as Gov. Tom Wolf signed the bill into law. Actor Doris Roberts, who played the tart-tongued, endlessly meddling mother on CBS' "Everybody Loves Raymond," died at age 90.

One year ago: President Donald Trump urged supporters to "LIBERATE" three states led by Democratic governors, apparently encouraging protests against stay-at-home mandates aimed at stopping the coronavirus. Washington Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee accused Trump of "fomenting domestic rebellion and spreading lies." Governors of both parties indicated that they would be cautious in returning to normal; some warned that they couldn't do it without help from Washington to expand testing. Singer Taylor Swift canceled all of her performances and appearances for the rest of the year.

Today's Birthdays: Actor David Bradley is 79. Composer-musician Jan Hammer (yahn HAH'-mur) is 73. Actor Olivia Hussey is 70. Actor Clarke Peters is 69. Rapper Afrika Bambaataa is 64. Actor Sean Bean is 62. Former NFL quarterback Boomer Esiason (eh-SY'-uh-suhn) is 60. Actor Joel Murray is 59. Rock singer Maynard James Keenan is 57. Actor Lela Rochon (LEE'-lah rohn-SHAHN') is 57. Actor William Mapother is 56. Actor Leslie Bega is 54. Actor Henry Ian Cusick is 54. Actor Kimberly Elise is 54. Singer Liz Phair is 54. Director/producer Adam McKay is 53. Rapper-actor Redman is 51. Actor Jennifer Garner is 49. Country musician Craig Anderson is 48. Singer Victoria Beckham is 47. Actor-singer Lindsay Korman is 43. Actor Tate Ellington is 42. Actor Nicholas D'Agosto is 41. Actor Charlie Hofheimer is 40. Actor Rooney Mara is 36. Actor Jacqueline MacInnes Wood is 34. Actor Paulie Litt is 26. Actor Dee Dee Davis is 25.