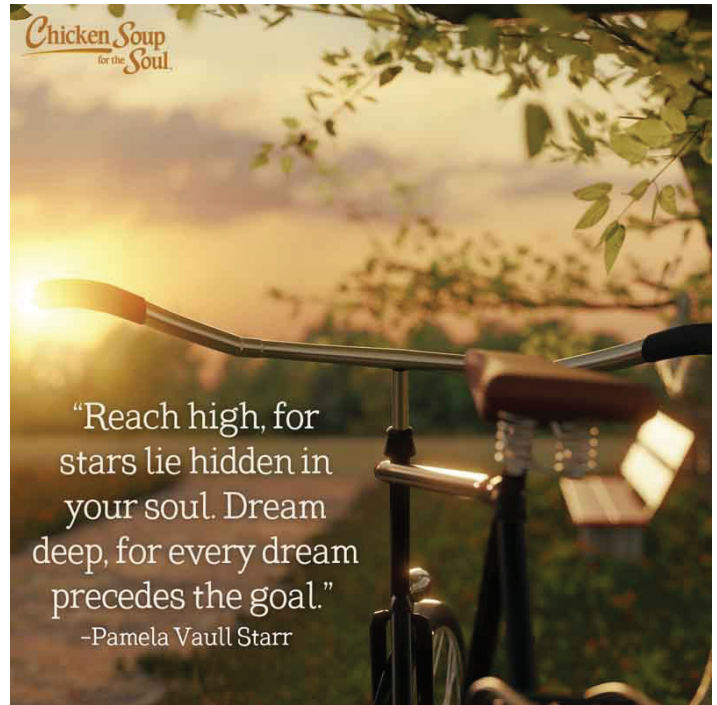


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NOW HIRING

MJ's Sinclair of Groton is looking for someone to work weekends and nights. Stop out and see Jeff for an application.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Groton Tuff Tiger Award Banquet

Back Row: Hank Flihs - Coach's Award, Jonah Theisen - Most Improved, Keegan Kucker - Mr. Hustle, Kyson Kucker - Mr. Hustle, Liam Johnson - Rookie of the Year, Wyatt Hagen - Coach's Award

Front Row: Preston Hinkelman - Most Improved, Henry Pharis - Rookie of the Year, Keenan Moody - Mr. Hustle, Bentley Ehersmann - MVP, Braxten Sombke - Rookie of the Year. (Courtesy Photo)

Upcoming Events

Thursday, May 13

11 a.m.: Track: Northeast Conference Meet in Groton
12:30 p.m.: Scholarship Meet and Greet, GHS Library

Friday, May 14

3:30 p.m.: Track: 7th/8th @ Groton

Sunday, May 16

2 p.m.: GHS Graduation, GHS Arena

Monday, May 17

10 a.m.: Track: 7th/8th Northeast Conference Track Meet at Swisher Field

Thursday, May 20

Noon: Region 1A Track Meet at Sisseton

HARDSHELLS REJOICE: MAY 23 IS WORLD TURTLE DAY

By Tom Emery

Every terrapin, snapper, and slider can pop his head out of his shell and smile.

Sunday, May 23 is World Turtle Day, and there are plenty of reasons to celebrate in South Dakota. The state is home to seven turtle species, though some are threatened or endangered. Biologists are working to ensure the long-range future of South Dakota turtles, and note that the general public can do much to help.

"The long-range future is good for turtles in the state," said Eileen Dowd Stukel, the Wildlife Diversity Coordinator for South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks, "as long as we maintain a diversity of wetland types for aquatic turtles, and assure that turtles are not over-collected for the pet trade or sale to restaurants."

Species of turtles are found statewide, though the southeastern part of the state has some of the highest concentrations. The most common species in South Dakota is the northern painted turtle.

Six of the seven turtle species in South Dakota are aquatic or semi-aquatic, while one, the ornate box turtle, is strictly a land-dweller. The false map turtle is classified as a state-threatened species. The Blanding's turtle was formerly a state endangered species, but is so rare in South Dakota that the designation was removed.

Turtles play valuable roles in South Dakota ecosystems. "The majority of our state's turtle species are aquatic, and depend on environments that provide clean water to support the prey they need," said Stukel. "That makes the presence of turtles an indicator of relatively good water quality."

"Similarly, our only full-time terrestrial turtle, the ornate box turtle, lives in sandhill habitats of south-central South Dakota, and depends on good-quality grasslands," continued Stukel. "Their presence indicates that land owners and land managers are doing a good job with grassland conservation and management."

As elsewhere, South Dakota turtles face a number of challenges, including on roadways, where turtles are commonly found in warmer weather.

"Since turtles are reptiles and therefore cold-blooded, they rely on outside sources to raise their body temperature," remarked Stukel. "They may be attracted to the warm environment found on roads. They also travel across roads built through their habitat in search of nesting areas, or places where they will hibernate for the winter."

Other threats include predators such as raccoons, skunks, and foxes. "However, turtles have evolved with predators, and can withstand this pressure as long as there is sufficient nesting habitat," commented Stukel. "An additional danger is lack of long-term monitoring information on how our turtle populations are doing."

There are many other ways for the average citizen to protect turtles across the state. Turtles should never be removed from the wild unless for a permitted activity such as research or captive propagation. Likewise, domestic pet turtles should not be released into the wild, as they spread disease to the wild populations.

"If you see a turtle crossing the road and it is safe to stop, move the turtle across the road in the direction it was heading," said Stukel. "Don't allow your dog to destroy turtle nests they may encounter, and don't pick up turtles to keep as pets."

Stukel added that citizens should report sightings of turtles that are considered rare to the appropriate state or federal wildlife agency, and support laws and practices that maintain diverse aquatic and terrestrial habitats.

Tom Emery is a freelance writer and historical researcher from Carlinville, Ill. He may be reached at 217-710-8392 or ilcivilwar@yahoo.com.

Service Notice: Leone Henjum

Mass of Christian Burial for Leone Henjum, 99, of Conde will be 10:30 a.m., Thursday, May 13th at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Turton. Father Mark Axtmann will officiate. Burial will follow in St. John's Catholic Cemetery, Conde under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church for one hour prior to services with a rosary beginning at 9:45 a.m. Leone passed away May 10, 2021 at Avera Mother Joseph Manor in Aberdeen.

Governors Call on President Biden to End Border Crisis

PIERRE, SD – Tuesday, Governor Kristi Noem, along with 19 governors, called on President Biden and Vice President Harris to take immediate action on the crisis at the southern border. You can read the governors' letter here.

"The crisis is too big to ignore and is now spilling over the border states into all of our states," wrote Governor Noem and the other governors. "The cause of the border crisis is entirely due to reckless federal policy reversals executed within your first 100 days in office. The rhetoric of the Biden Administration and the rollback of critical agreements with our allies have led to the inhumane treatment of tens of thousands of children and undermined a fragile immigration system."

The governors pointed to a "staggering surge in recent crossings." Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) reported that March border encounters were 172,000, the highest number in nearly 20 years. And CBP encountered 18,890 unaccompanied children in March, the largest monthly number in history.

The border crisis has also exacerbated the opioid epidemic, a problem that Governor Noem has prioritized fixing. CBP reports a 233% increase in the seizure of fentanyl compared to January last year. "Law enforcement officials are recovering drugs, illegal narcotics, and weapons being smuggled across the border by cartels—the same cartels that are also trafficking men, women, and children and jeopardizing their lives," wrote the governors.

Governor Noem recently announced that South Dakota "won't be taking any illegal immigrants that the Biden administration wants to relocate." The governors echoed this sentiment, writing "We have neither the resources nor the obligation to solve the federal government's problem and foot the bill for the consequences of this Administration's misguided actions."

"We urge you to take action to end the humanitarian crisis and secure our southern border immediately," concluded the governors.

Along with Governor Noem, the letter was signed by Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey, Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, Idaho Governor Brad Little, Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves, Missouri Governor Greg Parsons, Montana Governor Greg Gianforte, Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts, New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu, North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt, South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, Texas Governor Greg Abbott, Utah Governor Spencer Cox, and Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon.

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#437 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Everything is declining: new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. Fastest decline is in new cases, which augurs well for the future since the other two metrics follow this one. The 14-day new-case average is down 13 percent since we last talked on Thursday and stands at 39,124. We're down to one state with unchecked spread, and that one is declining rapidly as well. We have now reported a total of 32,772,514 cases in this pandemic, and we have lost 581,669 Americans to this virus. We can hope the declines continue; while we have outbreaks here and there, there are no signs of any particular trouble brewing at the moment.

No US state is reporting an increase in cases over the past week, and 33 are reporting a decrease. For the first time since I've been tracking this, we have just one state in the red unchecked spread category, and that is Michigan. We see steady progress from day to day toward controlling transmission. There's a long way to go, but we're getting somewhere.

On May 10, 2020, a year ago today, there were 1,336,100 cases and 79,550 deaths. Testing was still woefully inadequate. CDC guidelines for reopening were largely abandoned. The Moderna vaccine candidate was cleared for phase 2 trial in the US, and the company was anticipating a phase 3 trial to begin by early summer. A curious thing was turning up, something called silent hypoxia, where people with blood oxygenation levels that should be producing seizures or coma were coming into the hospital fully alert, chatting and checking their social media. They frequently crashed rather suddenly and precipitously shortly thereafter. Store employees were being attacked with guns, knives, and fists when they asked customers to adhere to Covid-19 restrictions. A stand-off was developing between the Cheyenne River and Oglala Tribes and South Dakota's governor over tribal checkpoints on highways leading into tribal land, the natives' attempt to keep their members safe from this virus; the tribes were declining the governor's request to remove the checkpoints. The US government was making arrangements to purchase unsold food directly from farmers and provide it to those in need. The FDA granted emergency use authorization (EUA) to the first antigen test for the coronavirus; these tend to be quicker, but not as accurate, as the RT-PCR which had been in exclusive use to this point. Lab-made monoclonal antibody treatments were expected by late summer. May 10 was Mother's Day, and adult children were separated from their mothers across the country. Meanwhile, the world had passed four million cases on May 9 and was over 281,000 deaths on May 10.

We were starting to see the disproportionate impact of this virus on communities of color in the US, a reflection of employment in essential jobs, lack of access to health insurance and medical care, and poor air and water quality in the places where these communities live. Anticoagulant (blood thinner) therapy was having some success in treatment. More cases of what later came to be named multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), a condition that has devastating consequences, were being reported).

The University of Washington's highly-regarded team at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) has come up with a shocking new estimate based on excess deaths analysis that more than 900,000 people have died from Covid-19 in this country; this is almost 60 percent more than the official number. We've talked about this concept of excess deaths analysis before; it is essentially taking the average number of deaths we've had over the past five years to come up with what is called expected deaths and then comparing that number to the actual number of deaths seen in the current situation. This work looked at excess deaths from March 2020 through May 3, 2021. They estimated only deaths "caused directly by the SARS-CoV-2 virus," not people who died of heart attacks at home because they were too scared to go to the emergency room when the virus was running rampant or people who had strokes because they didn't get their blood pressure monitored during the pandemic or people run over by ambulances taking Covid-19 patients to the hospital. There is general agreement among experts that deaths from Covid-19 have been massively undercounted for a variety of reasons, although there is disagreement about just how undercounted they were. The model employed by the IHME also estimated global deaths are more like seven million than the 3.24 million reported as of May 3. If you missed our earlier discussions of excess deaths analysis, have a look at my Update #79 posted on May 12 at <https://>

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www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3587274557955591, #101 posted June 3 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3649991181683928>, and #136 posted on July 8 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3753580371325008>. In them you will find expanded explanations of the concept, examples, and numbers from various points in the pandemic.)

The big news this week is that the FDA has extended Pfizer/BioNTech's emergency use authorization (EUA) for their vaccine to those aged 12 to 15. Wednesday's emergency meeting of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices already had this issue on the agenda (along with an update on the blood clotting issue seen after the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine is administered), so they should be able to work out the labeling and administration stuff they deal with so the director can sign off yet this week. I'm guessing this vaccine could start going out to kids later this week. Efficacy in the pediatric trials was 100 percent with what the agency described as "robust antibody responses." The vaccine has been well tolerated with no safety issues noted. They're saying they have the capacity to produce up to 2.5 billion doses this year and another three billion next year. This is a huge milestone, and I want to be clear that, if I had a child in this 12 to 15 age range, I'd be camping out on someone's doorstep with that child, waiting until I could get my kid protected, the sooner, the better.

Pfizer must have been funnin' with us a few days ago when they announced they planned to apply for a biologics license for their Covid-19 vaccine in the next few weeks; they did it on Friday, submitting six months of safety data and a bunch of supplementary materials. I don't know a thing about the nuts and bolts of this process, so I can only imagine the piles and piles of information required. Moderna announced it plans to apply for a biologics license for their vaccine this month too. As we discussed the other night, this is not a quick process, but it will be good to have two vaccines fully licensed whenever it happens. Meanwhile, both are still in production and going into arms.

The WHO gave emergency use listing (EUL) to Chinese company Sinopharm's vaccine on Friday. This is a traditional inactivated virus vaccine: The virus is grown in monkey kidney cells in a laboratory, then inactivated and packaged in a vaccine with an aluminum adjuvant. It is given in two doses three weeks apart and can be stored long-term in a standard refrigerator. This makes it much less challenging to distribute in much of the world than some of the current vaccines. The WHO cited 78.1 percent efficacy for this vaccine, although apparently data is sort of thin on people over 60 and there are some doubts about its efficacy in this group. This listing makes the vaccine available to Covax, that international consortium dedicated to getting vaccines to countries across the globe. More vaccines are better. I hope this company has massive production capability.

Novavax is expecting to be able to unblind its phase 3 trial for its vaccine candidate in the US and Mexico "in a few weeks" according to CEO Stanley Erck who was interviewed on CNN today. This 30,000-participant trial has gone on longer than anticipated, undoubtedly because of the drop-off in new case numbers. You will recall that a trial needs a minimum number of participants becoming infected to garner statistically significant data, so fewer cases, while really good for society, are bad for vaccine trials. The upside is that this delay will give us a better look at efficacy against some of these newer variants. The UK trial showed 96 percent efficacy against the earlier D614G strain and 86 percent against B.1.1.7. We'll wait to see what this shows us. Hoping for good news. As always, more vaccines is better.

We have now, in the US, administered 261,599,381 doses out of 329,843,825 delivered. We're generally below two million doses per day, an anticipated, but really disappointing, slowdown as supply meets vaccine hesitance. Around 153 million people, about 46 percent of the population, has had at least one dose of vaccine, and 116 million, almost 35 percent are fully vaccinated. This is definitely enough to put a significant dent in this pandemic here, but it's nowhere near enough to return us to a more normal life. Dr. Jonathan Reiner, professor of medicine and surgery at George Washington University, in an interview with CNN yesterday, said we should see new case numbers rapidly decline once we're above 60 percent of adults who have received at least one dose of vaccine; we are approaching that. I hope we can run these numbers up by quite a lot.

The latest Kaiser Family Foundation poll on attitudes toward vaccination is out. Despite some shifts, the overall trajectory is still one of increasing willingness to be vaccinated. Sixty-six percent of women and 63

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percent of men have been vaccinated or will be as soon as possible, up from 61 percent in March. The Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine pause hurt public confidence in all of the vaccines, not just that one, although most of the damage related to the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson. Seventy-eight percent of those surveyed said they had heard about the pause. Among those who are not planning to be vaccinated right away, 81 percent expressed concern about serious side effects, up from 70 percent last month. While 69 percent of all those surveyed said they are confident in the safety of the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, only 46 percent said they are confident in the safety of the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson. Still, three in 10 who are unvaccinated say they would be more likely to be vaccinated if they needed only one dose.

We know the imprisoned population has been infected at more than three times the national rate. These people are pretty much unable to make choices to protect themselves; they are at the mercy of the system for masks and disinfectants, and they are unable to distance themselves. Among the thousands of prisoners and detainees who have died from Covid-19 are dozens of people who were approved for parole or other release, but not yet released, and who were awaiting trial, that is, still innocent of a crime. In other words, these were people who didn't belong behind bars. The pandemic caused the postponement of tens of thousands of trials, leaving those who couldn't make bail—primarily the poor—sitting ducks in jails. I should add that the vast majority of those were not accused of crimes that carry the death penalty, so these people died without being convicted of crimes, and those were crimes they wouldn't have been put to death for had they been convicted. I try to stay away from policy discussions here because I don't think a public health emergency is the place for politics; but it seems to me there is something very wrong here. The incarcerated, whether convicted of a crime or not, whether slated for release or not, are human beings. It doesn't sit well with me that we essentially sentenced some of them to death by failing to take proper care of them. If you're going to take away someone's freedom, you take on an obligation to see to their welfare. We didn't do that.

The CDC finally on Friday acknowledged on its website and, importantly, in at least some of its guidance that this virus is an airborne threat. They mention that social distancing is not by itself sufficient when exposure is prolonged. We've talked about that more than a time or two, most recently and most comprehensively when discussing a recent study of transmission from MIT scientists. I recommend you review that in my Update #428 posted April 26, 2021 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4659685167381186>.

I don't know how this will work out in the future, but I was intrigued to learn researchers in The Netherlands have used conditioning techniques to train bees to detect SARS-CoV-2 in a patient specimen. Briefly, their method was to present a positive specimen and a swab with sugar water to the bees at the same time. The bees stuck out an appendage called a proboscis to get the sugar water. They also presented negative specimens without the sugar water. Within a few hours of training, the bees stuck out the proboscis whenever they smelled a positive specimen even when there was no sugar water. And ladies and gentlemen, we have a diagnostic test! The team believes with multiple bees on each sample they can achieve 95 percent accuracy. They're thinking this is a method which could be used in places without fancy labs to do their diagnostic work. We should note this work has not been peer-reviewed, but it certainly is interesting.

B.1.617, the variant first identified in India, has now been classified by the WHO as a variant of concern; the CDC has not gone there yet. We do have some evidence of increased transmissibility. There is more information to come from the WHO tomorrow. If you're hazy on just what that means, check out the discussion of variant classifications at my Update #388 posted March 17 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4531713686845002>.

I've come across a dangerous piece of misinformation lately, and I figured we should address it. As much as I don't like to get into policy here, I also don't like to call out individuals by name, but I have throughout this pandemic made an exception to the no-calling-out rule for purveyors of bullshit that hurts people. So today's subject is one Tucker Carlson. He's been all over the vaccines lately, all the while declaring, "I am not an anti-vaxxer" and maintaining he's "just asking questions." The problem is that the questions he is asking are calculated to raise doubts about the safety of vaccines among the very people who are ques-

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tioning and doubting already. And I do not for one minute think he is unaware of this effect because Mr. Carlson is a very smart man, too smart not to get what he's doing here. On Wednesday night, he really went to town on vaccines, citing data from the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) thusly: "Between late December of 2020 and last month, a total of 3,362 people apparently died after getting the covid vaccine in the United States—3,362. That's an average of roughly 30 people every day. It's clear that what is happening now, for whatever reason, is not even close to normal. It is not even close to what we see in previous years with previous vaccines. Most vaccines are not accused of killing large numbers of people Again, more people, according to VAERS, have died after getting the shot in four months during a single vaccination campaign than from all other vaccines combined over more than a decade and a half. Chart that out. It's a stunning picture." Sounds bad, yes?

Nope. A couple of things:

First, VAERS does not contain verified data. Anyone can submit a claim of harm. In fact, a report was submitted to VAERS of a toddler who died on March 3 after receiving a second dose of the Moderna vaccine. Problem with this is that the toddler apparently died of an accidental gunshot wound AND trials for this vaccine in children didn't begin until March 24, so there's no way that child died from—or even after—vaccine. That was clearly a bogus report that was investigated and removed; but that's what needs to happen for every serious adverse event in VAERS. If anyone had been checking for numbers before its removal, they would find the death of this toddler—cue the alarm bells. (I'll also add for the record that, if a toddler died in a clinical trial, the trial would be halted until that got sorted out—no question—and we'd have heard about that.) So the purpose of VAERS is to provide unfiltered data for the CDC to evaluate. Everything from probable to far-fetched gets reported to VAERS; that's its purpose. Reports are checked out and verified later, but VAERS just lists the event. This is invaluable in providing masses of information so that experts skilled in analyzing huge quantities of data can spot patterns that might emerge; this is how these folks spotted the rare blood clotting events following Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccination. It's available to the public, so anyone can go there and look at the data. However, it is important to recognize that data some random TV commentator collects from VAERS doesn't prove much. When asked how the public should analyze the numbers from VAERS, Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, said we shouldn't. Because we don't know what we're doing. Every single side effect reported to VAERS requires investigation and verification before we fit it into what we know about a vaccine. You and I have neither the background nor the context to do that—and neither does Mr. Carlson. And anyone who tells you "VAERS says" some horrible thing happens to people who receive a certain vaccine needs to show you what the subsequent investigations found. If all they've got is a number from VAERS, they're pretty much making it up as they go.

The CDC says they have investigated all the deaths reports after vaccination through May 3 and have not found a connection with the vaccine. Closest we've come is a small number of deaths following the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine after blood clotting events, and that's not yet proven. We think it's probably related, but can't say yet with certainty. And that's it. Nothing else even comes close.

Second thing is this—and we've talked about this before: The fact that one thing follows another doesn't mean one caused the other. A long time ago, people noted that roosters tended to crow shortly before the sunrise, and they concluded that the rooster's crow is what called the sun out of its sleep to appear in the sky. Makes sense, right? Rooster crows, sun rises. Every day. I know you're saying, "Well that's silly." And it is. The fact that the rooster's crow is reliably followed day after day by the sunrise doesn't prove the crow caused the sunrise, does it? Same thing's true of some sickness or even a death after vaccination.

You know what else is reliable? Virtually every person who has a vaccine dose eats within 24 hours of the dose. Hardly any exceptions, right? Can we conclude, based on that "evidence," the vaccine makes you hungry? We can not. See what I mean? We need a plausible mechanism by which the vaccine caused the hunger, we need to see there's no other plausible explanation for the hunger, and we need a bunch of unvaccinated people who are all skipping dinner. We don't have that.

Next, the number of deaths Carlson cites. Three thousand is a lot of deaths. But 135 million people who've received a dose of vaccine is a lot of people too. Turns out—who knew?—Americans die every day, some

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8000 of us, of something. Even before Covid-19 existed, people were dying in droves—of heart disease and cancer and infections and complications of this and that. We can count on one in every 41,000 Americans dying every day. Now Carlson's claim is that some 30 people per day died after being vaccinated. Given that around 41 percent of the population is vaccinated, I'd expect 41 percent of those 8000 daily deaths—people who die from all causes—to be vaccinated people. (Note for the math-allergic: That would be more than 30.) And that's before we consider that the folks who got the bulk of those vaccine doses were not just a random sample of Americans, were they? They have been disproportionately elderly and sick people because that's who was first in line. These are people who are more likely than the average American to die on any given day. Thirty deaths a day is negligible in this age group. All of this alarmism about deaths after Covid-19 vaccinations is drummed-up scaremongering unless and until you identify a link between the vaccine and the deaths. He hasn't done that. Neither has anyone else

As to the claims that all the other vaccines have much lower "death rates," i.e., numbers of people who die within some reasonable time frame after vaccination, something Mr. Carlson misses is that the vast majority of vaccinations in this country are given to children—people who are far less likely to die of anything because they are young. Comparing the number of deaths in the vaccinated 60+ population—or even in the adult population—to the number of deaths in children is ludicrous. He also cherry-picked some data about influenza vaccines, comparing investigated-and-verified deaths to totally-unverified VAERS reports.

And then there's this: Last year, Carlson was in the forefront of those claiming the death toll from Covid-19 was inflated and fake, that just because someone died after being diagnosed with Covid-19, we couldn't conclude the person died from Covid-19, even when they died with Covid-19 symptoms we know can lead to death and knowing the virus exacerbates other preexisting conditions. He ignored all of that to claim that these folks would have died anyway and so you can't reasonably attribute those deaths to Covid-19. (Spoiler: You can and you should.) Now, he's taking the opposite tack: Any death that comes after a vaccination must necessarily be due to the vaccination. Carlson wants to have it both ways. I will note that he does not have a history of making logically consistent statements in general; we haven't even taken a shot at vetting the source here.

It's cool to raise questions. I understand some folks have doubts. But when influential people deliberately use spurious questions to stoke those doubts, then they are not doing a public service. They are hurting the health of the body politic. And that's not OK.

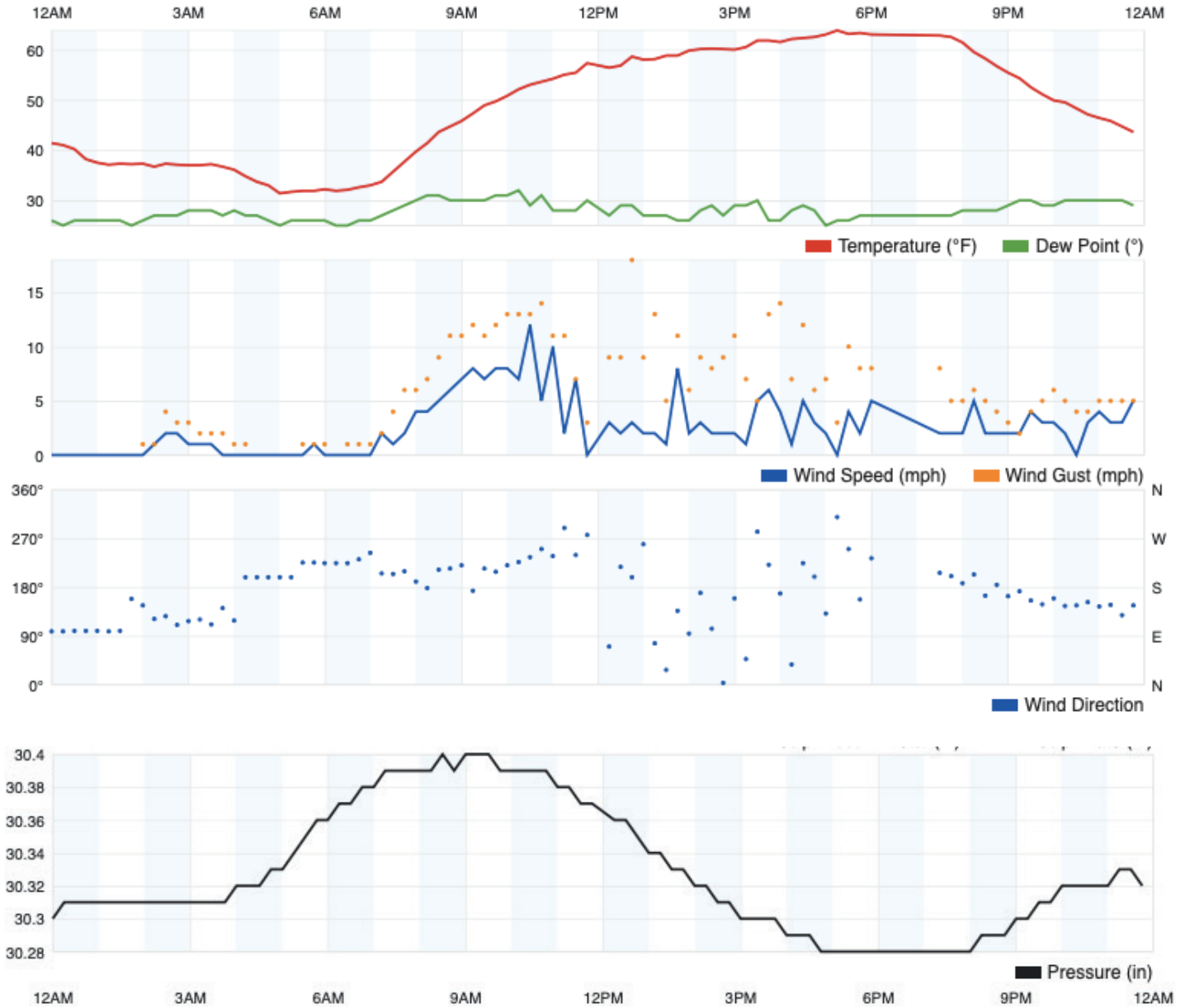
One more thing on vaccines: They will not turn you into a Democrat. Yes, this is really a thing that is going around; but I can assure you that I know several Republicans who have been fully vaccinated and are every bit as Republican as they were when this whole pandemic started. So you can relax on that count. Sigh.

Please be well. If you get a chance, notice someone who is struggling and do something to smooth their path. We'll talk in a few days.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather



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Today



Sunny

High: 69 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 42 °F

Thursday



Mostly Sunny

High: 67 °F

Thursday
Night



Slight Chance
T-storms

Low: 43 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny
then Slight
Chance
Showers

High: 68 °F

Today

- Partly cloudy, breezy gusting 20-30mph.
- Highs 65-70°F

Thursday

- Mostly cloudy, breezy gusting 20-30 mph, isolated light rain showers possible late evening.
- Highs 62-70°F

Friday

- Partly to mostly cloudy, isolated light rain showers possible.
- Highs 63-73°F

Updated: 5/12/2021 4:27 AM Central

There will be multiple chances for light rain showers the latter half of the week, however any precipitation Wednesday through Friday should be isolated. Near normal temps are expected.

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Today in Weather History

May 12, 1984: An F3 tornado wiped out seven farms, crippled fifteen others, killed livestock and scattered several cars and machinery in its path. The tornado first touched down seven miles north and one mile east of Clark and moved southeast through the southwestern sections of Henry until it dissipated at Grover in Codrington County. The path of destruction began on a farm where two barns, a steel grain bin, and a pole barn were demolished, and machinery was damaged. As the tornado moved further southeast, it struck the southwest sections of Henry and split into two tornadoes that moved in two different directions. One went to the northeast that inflicted no damage and dissipated while the other went southeast that continued its destruction path to Grover. Small hail, accumulation to fifteen inches deep, was experienced at Henry and tornado damage included broken windows, numerous homes, and three trailer homes were demolished. Along the path, 80 power poles and several miles of power lines were lost, affecting the power to over 1,000 people. A small plane, southwest of Garden City, was wrapped around a pole.

1760: Ben Franklin was the first person to identify nor'easters. In a letter on this date to Alexander Small of London, Franklin described an experience that happened to him in November 1743 when storm clouds in Philadelphia blocked his view of an eclipse. Franklin assumed that the storm had blown in from the northeast because the surface winds at his location were from that direction. He was puzzled to find out later that his brother had viewed the eclipse with no problems and that the storm had arrived in Boston four hours later. The information caused Franklin to surmise correctly that the storm had moved from southwest to northeast.

1886: An estimated F4 tornado touched down in Vermilion County near Armstrong, Illinois, and passed between Alvin and Rossville before moving into Indiana. At least five houses were destroyed, two of which were entirely swept away. Three people were killed. Five other strong tornadoes occurred across Illinois that day: two near Mt. Carroll, one near Odell, one near Jacksonville, and one in Iroquois County.

1997: A towering F1 tornado ripped its way through the middle of Miami, Biscayne Bay, and Miami Beach right after lunch Monday, smashing cars and windows, tossing trees skyward and scaring the dickens out of thousands of people.

1934 - A dust storm darkened skies from Oklahoma to the Atlantic coast. (David Ludlum)

1971 - Duststorms suddenly reduced visibilities to near zero on Interstate Highway 10 near Casa Grande AZ. Chain reaction accidents involving cars and trucks resulted, killing seven persons. (The Weather Channel)

1972 - In Texas, A cloudburst dumped sixteen inches of rain north of New Braunfels sending a thirty foot wall of water down Blueders Creek into the Comal and Guadalupe Rivers washing away people, houses and automobiles. The flood claimed 18 lives and caused more than twenty million dollars damage. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - A late season snowstorm struck the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies. The storm produced 46 inches of snow at Coal Creek Canyon, located near Boulder. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A heat wave persisted in central California. Afternoon highs of 100 degrees at Fresno CA and 102 degrees at Sacramento CA were records for the date. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Unseasonably warm weather prevailed in the western U.S. Eight cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Pendleton OR with a high of 92 degrees and Phoenix AZ with a reading of 106 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Showers and thunderstorms associated with a low pressure system stalled over New York State drenched Portland ME with 4.50 inches of rain in 24 hours. Rains of 5 to 7 inches soaked the state of Maine over a four day period causing 1.3 million dollars damage. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather from eastern Texas and the Central Gulf Coast States into Missouri and Illinois. Thunderstorms spawned six tornadoes, including one which injured four persons at Doloroso MS. Thunderstorms also produced hail three inches in diameter west of Vicksburg MS, and wind gusts to 83 mph in southern Illinois, north of Vevay Park and at the Coles County Airport. High winds and heavy rain caused 1.6 million dollars crop damage in Calhoun County IL, and in southeastern Louisiana, Saint Joseph was deluged with eight inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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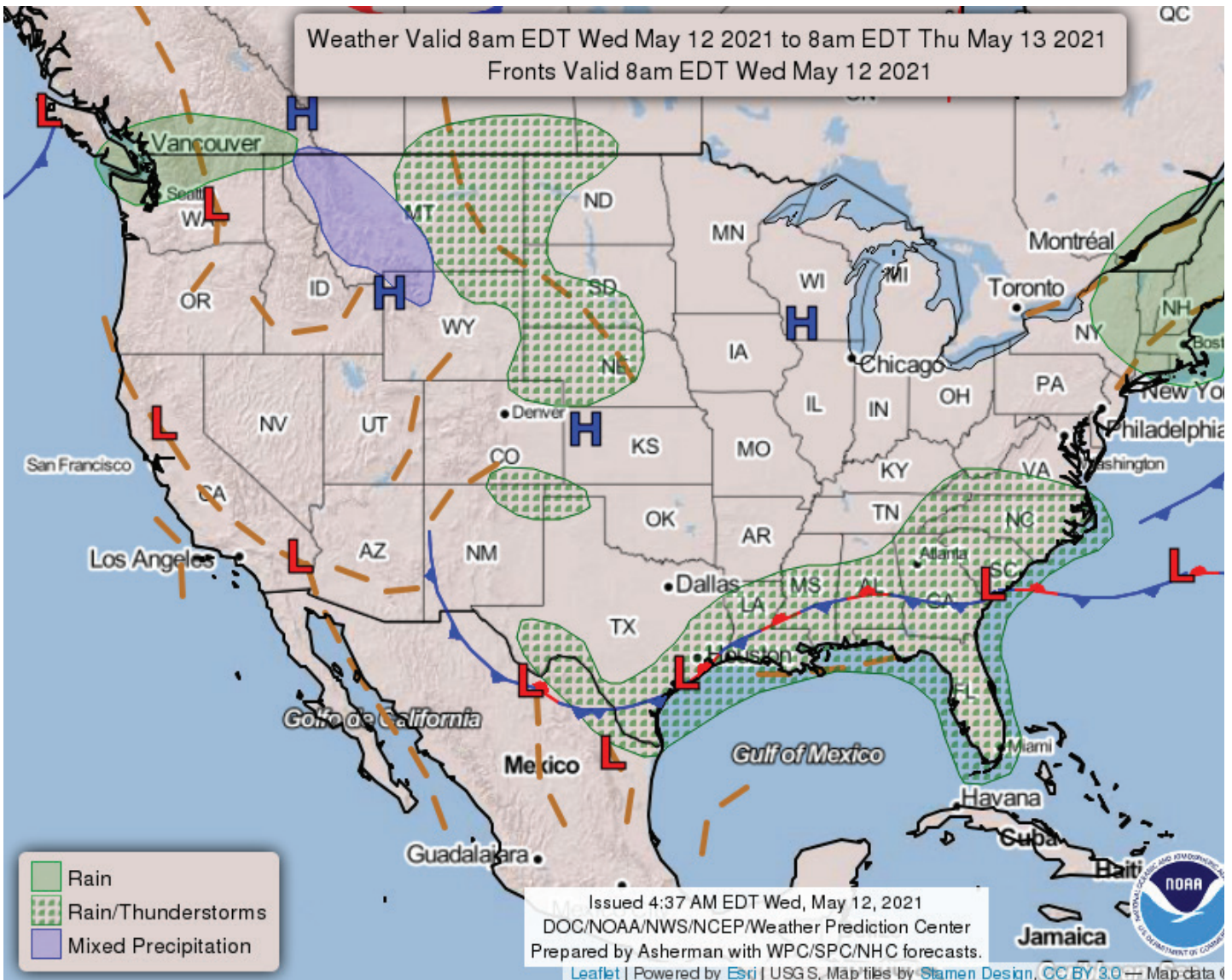
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 63.8 °F at 5:15 PM
Low Temp: 31.4 °F at 5:00 AM
Wind: 18 mph at 12:45 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 90° in 1900
Record Low: 17° in 1946
Average High: 69°F
Average Low: 43°F
Average Precip in May.: 1.21
Precip to date in May.: 0.25
Average Precip to date: 5.18
Precip Year to Date: 3.02
Sunset Tonight: 8:54 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:05 a.m.



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A LOVE THAT KNOWS NO LIMITS

Forgiveness, above everything else, is a sign of love. The more we love and value another person, the quicker we are to forgive that one if they have hurt or harmed us, injured or insulted us. Love, especially true God-like love, will forgive quickly and completely.

On the other hand, when someone does something that is designed to harm us, knowing that it will offend us deeply or cause us great pain, that is another matter completely. We normally – even usually - replace forgiveness with grudges and wait for an appropriate opportunity to get even or settle the score.

David was threatened by his guilt and needed God's forgiveness. It is obvious in the opening verses of Psalm 51. His guilt was destroying and overwhelming him. And he could find nothing within himself that provided him any assurance that God would forgive him. He knew that he did not deserve God's forgiveness. So, he appealed to God's "loving kindness, His steadfast love, His great compassion, His eternal compassion" – all words that are included in the translation of God's hesed – God's love. Why did he find it necessary to ask God to "blot out my transgressions, wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin?" He feared God's wrath for breaking God's commandments,

David realized the significance and seriousness of his sins. According to the laws that governed the children of Israel at that time, God would not forgive him for what he had done. He was frightened! Where could he go? What could he do? Only one option.

Appeal to God for His mercy, faithfulness, and love. And God's mercy, forgiveness, and love have always been and always will be available. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse of all unrighteousness."

Prayer: How thankful we are, Father, for Your never-ending, always-available, yet undeserved love, mercy, grace, presence, and forgiveness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: O God, favor me because of Your loving-kindness. Take away my wrong-doing because of the greatness of Your loving-pity. Psalm 51:1

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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
Cancelled 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

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

07-08-20-36-39, Mega Ball: 22, Megaplier: 3

(seven, eight, twenty, thirty-six, thirty-nine; Mega Ball: twenty-two; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$396 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$168 million

Parker Fox, Division 2 All-American, transfers to Minnesota

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Parker Fox, a 6-foot-8 forward and a native of Minnesota, became the latest transfer to join the revamped Gophers on Tuesday.

Fox played three seasons at Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and was selected this year by the National Association of Basketball Coaches as a Division II All-American. Fox averaged 22.3 points, 9.9 rebounds, 3.5 blocks and 1.7 steals per game and shot 64.4% from the field as a junior for the Wolves.

At Mahtomedi High School, just 20 miles northeast of Williams Arena, Fox was also a standout in both basketball and track and field, where he reached the state tournament in the high jump.

Fox is the fifth incoming transfer secured by new coach Ben Johnson, joining forward Jamison Battle (George Washington) and guards Luke Loewe (William & Mary), E.J. Stephens (Lafayette) and Sean Sutherlin (New Hampshire).

South Dakota pitcher's prosthetic arm found at recycler

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A college baseball player from South Dakota whose prosthetic arm was stolen from his vehicle got it back Tuesday after it was found at a recycling plant.

Augustana's Parker Hanson, a right-handed pitcher, was born without a left hand, but found a way to adapt at a young age so he could play his favorite game all the way up through the college level. His prosthetic arm and its attachments were in a backpack that was stolen from his unlocked pickup truck outside his home.

Hanson got a text Tuesday saying that his prosthetic had been recovered at Millennium Recycling Inc. in Sioux Falls, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. A worker at the plant found it among other items in the recycling facility and picked it out.

"The manager walked in and it was sitting on her desk," Hanson said.

The prosthetic was "pretty banged up" and Hanson said it was no longer usable. He was fundraising both for a new prosthetic and to raise money for charity when he got another piece of good news Tuesday: A Minneapolis-area hospital specializing in pediatric orthopedics was giving him a free replacement.

Hanson discovered his backpack missing on May 3 and took to social media to vent his frustrations. The next day, the Sioux Falls Police Department recovered a backpack with some of the prosthetic's attachments near Hanson's house. At the same time, Hanson's story became widely shared and people started fundraising for a replacement limb.

Nate Riddle and Tim Kachel were the workers who found Hanson's prosthetic Monday night while working a shift picking out nonrecyclable items from the line.

They said they've seen just about everything mixed in with recyclables, but when Riddle picked out the prosthetic arm, he almost threw it away. Before he got the chance, Kachel stopped him.

"I recognized it instantly," Kachel said, "I was jumping up and down screaming 'Stop!'" Kachel keeps up with news and remembered hearing Hanson's story. He said he knew what the arm was as soon as he spotted it.

"I had no idea what was going on since he (Kachel) was freaking out, so I throw it over and he gives me the background," Riddle said.

Riddle was skeptical about Kachel's claims but let him turn the arm in to the front office. Then, on Tuesday morning, the pair's line was paused and everybody was asked to go to the office. There they met Hanson for the first time.

"You never know what you're going to see coming through this line," Kachel said. "He (Hanson) was so relieved and excited, he was shaking."

Hanson learned later Tuesday that he will receive a new prosthetic for free.

Lauren Elm, marketing manager for Shriner's Children's Twin Cities, told the Argus Leader that Hanson was approved to receive a new prosthetic at no cost to him. His fundraiser will continue and the money will go to charity, Elm said.

US casinos match best quarter ever; post-COVID hopes rise

By WAYNE PARRY Associated Press

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — America's commercial casinos matched their best quarter ever in the first three months of this year, as customers continued returning amid the COVID-19 pandemic and internet and sports betting money helped boost revenue numbers.

Figures released Tuesday by the American Gaming Association, the casino industry's national trade group, show the nation's commercial casinos took in over \$11.1 billion in the first quarter of this year.

That matched the industry's best quarter in history, the third quarter of 2019. The figures do not include tribal casinos.

And March was a particularly good month: 12 states reported their highest-ever levels of monthly gambling revenue.

The 2021 first-quarter revenue numbers represented a nearly 18% increase over the first quarter of 2020, when the pandemic began to take hold nationwide, and an increase of more than 4% from the first quarter of 2019, before the pandemic began.

The numbers were even more heartening to industry executives because they came while most casinos were still operating under capacity restrictions designed to slow the spread of the virus.

"Today's report shows gaming's comeback is ahead of schedule," said Bill Miller, the association's president and CEO. "Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, our industry has faced numerous challenges head-on while still reopening responsibly and providing a safe, exciting environment for customers. The gaming industry is generating these impressive results with one hand tied behind our back as capacity and amenity restrictions remain across the country."

Some state-mandated closures remained in effect in the first quarter of this year. Casinos in Pennsylvania and Illinois were allowed to reopen from a second mandated shutdown on January 4 and January 16, respectively. In early March, New Mexico became the last commercial gaming market to resume operations after having been shuttered for just under a year.

Fourteen out of the 25 commercial casino states — home to more than 75% of the nation's commercial casinos — limited casino occupancy to below 50% during the quarter.

One of the few places where commercial casinos were operating at full capacity in the first quarter was South Dakota. It was the first commercial casino state to reopen last year, on May 7, 2020.

Terry Glebocki, CEO of the Ocean Casino Resort in Atlantic City, said customer volumes at her property have been increasing this year, due in part to a multimillion-dollar reinvestment the casino is making.

But there is another factor at play, she said.

"I do think we're seeing more and more people feeling more comfortable coming out" to casinos, she said. "There's a ton of pent-up demand out there. People want to go out and have fun, and that's what

you do at a casino.”

Callie Driehorst, a spokeswoman for MGM Resorts International, said things are looking up.

“We’ve seen significant progress since the start of the year in COVID trends, vaccinations, consumer sentiment, and state-by-state operating restrictions,” she said. “It’s been exciting to see our domestic business improve significantly, and to play a role in the industry’s recovery. As business trends continue to improve, we’ll continue to position our business for long-term, sustainable growth.”

Traditional brick-and-mortar casino games generated 90% of their first-quarter 2019 revenue. March was particularly strong, with revenue from slots and table games coming within 1% of March 2019 totals.

Sports betting revenue set a new quarterly record this year at \$961 million, up 270% from a year earlier, and surpassing 2019’s full-year total of \$909 million.

Helped by the successful opening of online casinos in Michigan, internet gambling generated \$784 million nationwide in the first quarter of this year, more than three times the amount from a year ago.

In March, a dozen states set monthly gambling revenue records: Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Virginia.

Appeals court throws out evidence in health care fraud case

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A federal appeals court says a Pennington County deputy violated the Fourth Amendment when he seized empty drug vials from a paramedic based on nothing more than a hunch that they might be illegal.

The ruling means that federal prosecutors in Rapid City can’t use the vials as evidence in their case against Dane Arredondo, a former Oglala Sioux Tribe ambulance service worker.

The vials were labeled as containing two painkillers, fentanyl and ketamine, according to officials. Arredondo has pleaded not guilty to health care fraud, acquiring controlled substances by fraud and possession of controlled substances.

Prosecutors allege Arredondo took the drugs from his workplace in January 2019.

“For an item’s ‘incriminating character’ to be ‘immediately apparent,’ the officer must have probable cause to associate it with criminal activity,” wrote Judges Ralph Erickson and Jonathan Kobes of the Eight Circuit Court of Appeals in a decision released Monday. Deputy Eric Fenton “possessed no such probable cause,” they said.

Fenton seized the vials at Arredondo’s Rapid Valley home after the deputy responded to a domestic disturbance call.

Judge Raymond Gruender disagreed with his colleagues about the seizure, the Rapid City Journal reported.

The ruling “ignores the totality of the circumstances” in failing to see that “several factors gave Deputy Fenton probable cause to associate the glass vials with criminal activity,” he wrote in his dissent.

Army of fake fans boosts China’s messaging on Twitter

By ERIKA KINETZ Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — China’s ruling Communist Party has opened a new front in its long, ambitious war to shape global public opinion: Western social media.

Liu Xiaoming, who recently stepped down as China’s ambassador to the United Kingdom, is one of the party’s most successful foot soldiers on this evolving online battlefield. He joined Twitter in October 2019, as scores of Chinese diplomats surged onto Twitter and Facebook, which are both banned in China.

Since then, Liu has deftly elevated his public profile, gaining a following of more than 119,000 as he transformed himself into an exemplar of China’s new sharp-edged “wolf warrior” diplomacy, a term borrowed from the title of a top-grossing Chinese action movie.

“As I see it, there are so-called ‘wolf warriors’ because there are ‘wolves’ in the world and you need warriors to fight them,” Liu, who is now China’s Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs, tweeted in February.

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His stream of posts — principled and gutsy ripostes to Western anti-Chinese bias to his fans, aggressive bombast to his detractors — were retweeted more than 43,000 times from June through February alone.

But much of the popular support Liu and many of his colleagues seem to enjoy on Twitter has, in fact, been manufactured.

A seven-month investigation by the Associated Press and the Oxford Internet Institute, a department at Oxford University, found that China's rise on Twitter has been powered by an army of fake accounts that have retweeted Chinese diplomats and state media tens of thousands of times, covertly amplifying propaganda that can reach hundreds of millions of people — often without disclosing the fact that the content is government-sponsored.

This type of analysis is possible because Twitter makes more of its data available to researchers than other social media platforms routinely do.

More than half the retweets Liu got from June through January came from accounts that Twitter has suspended for violating the platform's rules, which prohibit manipulation. Overall, more than one in ten of the retweets 189 Chinese diplomats got in that time frame came from accounts that Twitter had suspended by Mar. 1.

But Twitter's suspensions did not stop the pro-China amplification machine. An additional cluster of fake accounts, many of them impersonating U.K. citizens, continued to push Chinese government content, racking up over 16,000 retweets and replies before Twitter kicked them off late last month and early this month, in response to the AP and Oxford Internet Institute's investigation.

This fiction of popularity can boost the status of China's messengers, creating a mirage of broad support. It can also distort platform algorithms, which are designed to boost the distribution of popular posts, potentially exposing more genuine users to Chinese government propaganda. While individual fake accounts may not seem impactful on their own, over time and at scale, such networks can distort the information environment, deepening the reach and authenticity of China's messaging.

"You have a seismic, slow but large continental shift in narratives," said Timothy Graham, a senior lecturer at Queensland University of Technology who studies social networks. "Steer it just a little bit over time, it can have massive impact."

Twitter, and others, have identified inauthentic pro-China networks before. But the AP and Oxford Internet Institute investigation shows for the first time that large-scale inauthentic amplification has broadly driven engagement across official government and state media accounts, adding to evidence that Beijing's appetite for guiding public opinion — covertly, if necessary — extends beyond its borders and beyond core strategic interests, like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Twitter's takedowns often came only after weeks or months of activity. All told, AP and the Oxford Internet Institute identified 26,879 accounts that managed to retweet Chinese diplomats or state media nearly 200,000 times before getting suspended. They accounted for a significant share — sometimes more than half — of the total retweets many diplomatic accounts got on Twitter.

It was not possible to determine whether the accounts were sponsored by the Chinese government.

Twitter told AP that many of the accounts had been sanctioned for manipulation, but declined to offer details on what other platform violations may have been at play. Twitter said it was investigating whether the activity was a state-affiliated information operation.

"We will continue to investigate and action accounts that violate our platform manipulation policy, including accounts associated with these networks," a Twitter spokesperson said in a statement. "If we have clear evidence of state-affiliated information operations, our first priority is to enforce our rules and remove accounts engaging in this behavior. When our investigations are complete, we disclose all accounts and content in our public archive."

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that it does not employ trickery on social media. "There is no so-called misleading propaganda, nor exporting a model of online public opinion guidance," the ministry said in a statement to AP. "We hope that the relevant parties will abandon their discriminatory attitude, take off their tinted glasses, and take a peaceful, objective, and rational approach in the spirit of openness

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and inclusiveness.”

IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEFIELD

Twitter and Facebook function as formidable — and one-sided — global megaphones for China’s ruling Communist Party, helping to amplify messaging broadly set by central authorities.

Today, at least 270 Chinese diplomats in 126 countries are active on Twitter and Facebook. Together with Chinese state media, they control 449 accounts on Twitter and Facebook, which posted nearly 950,000 times between June and February. These messages were liked over 350 million times and replied to and shared more than 27 million times, according to the Oxford Internet Institute and AP’s analysis. Three-quarters of Chinese diplomats on Twitter joined within the last two years.

The move onto Western social media comes as China wages a war for influence — both at home and abroad — on the internet, which President Xi Jinping has called “the main battlefield” for public opinion.

“On the battlefield of the Internet, whether we can withstand and win is directly related to our country’s ideological security and political security,” he said in 2013, not long after taking power. In September 2019, as Chinese diplomats flocked to Twitter, Xi gave another speech, urging party cadres to strengthen their “fighting spirit.”

Xi has reconfigured China’s internet governance, tightening controls, and bound Chinese media ever more tightly to the party, to ensure, as he said in a 2016 speech, that the media loves, protects and serves the party.

That intimacy was formalized in 2018, when the party consolidated administrative control of major print, radio, film and television outlets under an entity it manages, the Central Propaganda Department.

Like other nations, China has recognized the value of social media for amplifying its messaging and reinforcing its hold on power. But unfettered access to Western social media has given Beijing a unilateral advantage in the global fight for influence.

Twitter and Facebook are blocked within China, and Beijing controls the conversation on domestic alternatives like WeChat and Weibo, effectively cutting off unmediated access to the Chinese public.

“It’s creating a significant challenge for Western democracies. We don’t have the same capacity to influence international audiences given that China has walled off its internet,” said Jacob Wallis, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s International Cyber Policy Centre. “That creates a significant asymmetric advantage.”

Despite the high levels of Chinese government activity, Twitter and Facebook have failed to label state content consistently. In an effort to provide users with more context, Twitter last year began labelling accounts belonging to “key government officials” and state-affiliated media. But Twitter had labeled just 14% of Chinese diplomatic accounts on the platform, as of March 1, failing even to flag dozens of verified profiles.

Twitter said that in keeping with its policy of labelling senior officials and institutions that speak for a country abroad, not all diplomatic accounts will be flagged. It offered no further details on how those decisions are made and declined to provide a list of Chinese accounts that have been labeled.

Facebook also began putting transparency labels on state-controlled media accounts last year. But disclosure is especially weak in languages other than English, despite the fact that Chinese state content has strong distribution in Spanish, French, and Arabic, among other languages.

Facebook had labeled two-thirds of a sample of 95 Chinese state media accounts in English, as of Mar. 1, but less than a quarter of accounts in other languages. Unlike Twitter, Facebook does not flag diplomatic accounts, the majority of which are official embassy and consulate accounts.

Facebook labeled an additional 41 Chinese state media outlets AP and the Oxford Internet Institute brought to their attention, bringing the overall portion of labeled accounts from less than half to nearly 90%. The company said it was looking into the rest.

“We apply the label on a rolling basis and will continue to label more publishers and pages over time,” a company spokesperson said in a statement to AP. The company declined to provide a full list of which Chinese state media accounts it has flagged.

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The China Media Project, a Hong Kong research group, found that transparency labels make a difference: Twitter users liked and shared fewer tweets by Chinese news outlets after August 2020, when the platform started flagging them as state-affiliated media and stopped amplifying and recommending their content.

"We need the labels," said China Media Project director David Bandurski, though he cautioned that they risk painting all Chinese media with the same broad brush, including outlets like Caixin that have managed to maintain a degree of independence. "This is all about co-opting the narrative. Telling China's story means we the party get to tell China's story and no one else. That's happening in Portuguese and Spanish and French. It really is a global plan."

The outspoken editor-in-chief of China's Global Times, Hu Xijin, noticed the impact immediately. On Aug. 14, he tweeted his dismay at the "China state-affiliated media" label that had been added to his profile, saying his follower growth had plummeted. "It seems Twitter will eventually choke my account," he wrote.

COUNTERFEITING CONSENSUS

In early February, China's state news agency Xinhua published a "fact check" of 24 "lies" it said anti-China forces in the West had been spreading about Xinjiang, where China stands accused of genocide for its brutal, systematic repression of minority Uighur Muslims.

According to Xinhua, the real problem in Xinjiang is not human rights, but Uighur terrorism. Beijing has brought stability and economic development to its restive western region, and information suggesting otherwise has been fabricated by U.S. intelligence agencies, a racist scholar, and lying witnesses, Xinhua said.

The story was picked up by other Chinese state media outlets, amplified by China's foreign ministry at a press conference, and blasted across Twitter by the foreign ministry and Chinese diplomats in the United States, India, Djibouti, Canada, Hungary, Austria, Tanzania, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Liberia, Grenada, Nigeria, Lebanon, Trinidad and Tobago, Qatar and the United Kingdom.

From there, it was further amplified by devoted but mysterious fans — like gyagyagya10, whose account pushed out an identical quote-tweet and reply, within seconds, to a message about Xinjiang posted by China's Embassy in London, writing, "Ethnic groups in China are well protected, no matter in economic aspect or in cultural aspect."

This is the ruling Communist Party's global propaganda machine in action: Messages set by key state media outlets and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs get picked up by Chinese diplomats around the world, who repackage the content on Twitter, where it is amplified by networks of fake and suspicious accounts working covertly to shape public discourse for the benefit of China's ruling Communist Party.

Gyagyagya10, who had a single follower, was part of a network of 62 accounts dedicated to amplifying Chinese diplomats in the U.K. that Marcel Schliebs, the Oxford Internet Institute's lead researcher on the project, found exhibited multiple patterns suggesting coordination and inauthenticity.

Little can be gleaned about gyagyagya10 from the image of abstract art posted as a profile photo and the lack of any sort of personal description. Indeed, none of the accounts in the network had fleshed-out profiles with recognizable names and authentic profile photos.

Gyagyagya10's account came to life in mid-August at the same time as more than a dozen other accounts that also devoted themselves exclusively to promoting tweets by the Chinese Embassy in London and Ambassador Liu. Then, after Liu left his post at the end of Jan., they went quiet.

The 62 accounts in the network retweeted and replied to posts by Chinese diplomats in London nearly 30,000 times between June and the end of January, the Oxford Internet Institute found. They exhibited unique patterns in the ways they amplified content.

Like gyagyagya10, they often simultaneously posted identical quote-tweets and replies, and they repeatedly used identical phrases like "Xinjiang is beautiful" and "shared future for mankind" in their comments. Other users who engaged with the two diplomatic accounts did neither.

They were also slavish in their devotion, sometimes replying to more than three-quarters of all the ambassador's tweets. Most weeks, the fake accounts generated at least 30 to 50% of all retweets of Ambassador Liu and the Chinese Embassy in London.

By Mar. 1, Twitter had suspended 31 of the accounts in the pro-China U.K. network and two had been deleted. The remaining 29 — including gyagyagya10 — continued to operate, churning out more than

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10,000 retweets and nearly 6,000 replies in support of China's U.K. diplomats before Twitter permanently suspended them for platform manipulation at the end of April and beginning of May in response to this investigation.

"We are also aware of concerns about some of the Twitter rules," China's Embassy in the U.K. said in a statement to AP. "If it is against the rules of social media to retweet the Chinese Embassy's tweets, then shouldn't these rules be more applicable to retweets of malicious rumors, smears, and false information against China? We hope relevant companies will not adopt double standards."

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs says China uses social media the same way other nations do, with the goal of deepening friendly ties and facilitating fact-based communication.

In practice, China's network on Twitter amplifies messaging set by central authorities, both for domestic and global consumption, as diplomats translate, repackage and amplify content from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and key state media outlets, network analysis and academic research show.

Zhao Alexandre Huang, a visiting assistant professor at Gustave Eiffel University, in Paris, analyzed social media messaging at key points in the U.S.-China trade dispute and found that content first published on the Weibo account of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was repackaged and broadcast around the world by Chinese diplomats on Twitter.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses Weibo like a central kitchen of information," Huang said. "It's an illusion of polyphony."

Within China's state network on Twitter, the most referenced accounts belonged to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its spokespeople, as well as People's Daily, CGTN, China Daily, and Xinhua, and the most active amplifiers were diplomats, AP network analysis showed.

The party's efforts on Twitter have been helped by a core of hyperactive super-fans. Some 151,000 users retweeted posts by Chinese diplomats from June through January. But nearly half of all retweets came from just one percent of those accounts, which together blasted out nearly 360,000 retweets, often in bursts of activity separated by just seconds.

Among the biggest beneficiaries of this concentrated bulk engagement — which is not necessarily inauthentic — were Chinese diplomatic accounts in Poland, Pakistan, India, and South Africa, as well as China's foreign ministry and its spokespeople.

The pro-China accounts that Twitter later suspended were active in a host of languages, with profile descriptions in English, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Italian, French, Russian, Korean, Urdu, Portuguese, Thai, Swedish, Japanese, Turkish, German and Tamil. Some worked cross-network to amplify a range of government accounts, while others appeared to function as smaller cells, dedicated to amplifying diplomats in a specific location.

This manufactured chorus accounted for a significant portion of all the engagement many Chinese diplomats got on Twitter. More than 60% of all retweets for the Chinese embassies in Angola and Greece from June 2020 through January 2021 came from accounts that have been suspended. China's hawkish foreign ministry spokespeople Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian racked up more than 20,000 retweets from accounts that have been sanctioned by Twitter.

INTERNET COMMENTING SYSTEMS

Within China, manipulation of online discourse has been effectively institutionalized. It remains to be seen how aggressive — and how successful — China will be in implementing its model of public opinion guidance on Western social media, which was founded on very different civic values, like transparency, authenticity, and the free exchange of ideas.

The party's systems for shaping public opinion online go far beyond censorship. Budget documents for Chinese propaganda and cyberspace departments include references to cyber armies, teams of trained online commentators tasked with keeping conversation online aligned with the ruling party's interests. Universities in China openly post announcements about their teams of "online commentators" and "youth internet civilization volunteers," composed exclusively of recruits who "love the motherland" and work to guide public opinion by eliminating negative influences and spreading positive energy online.

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The scale of the operation is immense. Ryan Fedasiuk, a research analyst at Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology, reviewed dozens of government budget documents, university announcements and media reports and found that last year, China's Communist Party had some 20 million part-time volunteers, many of them students, and 2 million paid commentators at its disposal to steer conversation online.

For-profit companies also contract with government agencies to run coordinated networks of social media accounts, both human and automated, to help "guide public opinion," according to Mareike Ohlberg, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Asia Program, and Jessica Batke, a senior editor at ChinaFile, an online magazine published by the Asia Society. They poured through thousands of Chinese government procurement notices to identify tenders for such services.

While the majority were for opinion management on domestic platforms, Ohlberg told AP that since 2017 a growing number have also targeted Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. One public security bureau in a relatively small city in northeastern China, for example, wanted to buy a "smart Internet-commenting system," capable of commenting on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube from thousands of different accounts and IP addresses.

"This is just a natural extension of what the party has been doing at home for a very long time," Ohlberg said. "Why would they change that model once they go abroad?"

China's advance on Western social media is one part of a much broader infrastructure of influence that has shaped how Hollywood makes movies, what Western publishers print and what overseas Chinese-language media outlets communicate to China's vast diaspora.

Anne-Marie Brady, a professor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand and an expert in Chinese propaganda, said people may not even realize that information they receive has been, in part, framed by China's ruling Communist Party.

"The propaganda system is vast, and it has incorporated Western social media," she said. "It has helped to reshape perceptions of China. It may not uniquely create a positive image of China, but it creates hopelessness that anything can be done about what China is doing to our democracies."

Number of injured in Russia school shooting rises to 23

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Twenty-three people remained hospitalized on Wednesday following a school shooting in the Russian city of Kazan which killed nine people, including seven youngsters.

All 23 were in stable condition Wednesday morning, the authorities said, though at least eight people — three adults and five children — were to be transferred to Moscow for treatment.

A gunman on Tuesday morning attacked a school in Kazan, a city 430 miles (700 kilometers) east of Moscow, sending students hiding under their desks or running out of the building. Nine people — seven students and two school employees — were killed.

The attacker, identified only as a 19-year-old, was arrested. The authorities gave no immediate details on a motive, but said he legally owned a firearm.

Wednesday was declared a day of mourning in Tatarstan, the Russian region of which Kazan is the capital, with funerals of the victims expected to take place.

Russian media said the gunman was a former student at the school who called himself "a god" on his account on the messaging app Telegram and promised to "kill a large amount of biomass" on the morning of the shooting.

Attacks on schools are rare in Russia, and President Vladimir Putin reacted by ordering the head of the country's National Guard to revise regulations on the types of weapons allowed for civilian use.

The deadliest school attack in Russia took place in 2004 in the city of Beslan, when Islamic militants took more than 1,000 people hostage for several days. The siege ended in gunfire and explosions, leaving 334 dead, more than half of them children.

In 2018, a teenager killed 20 people at his vocational school before killing himself in Kerch, a city in the

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Russian-annexed peninsula of Crimea. In the wake of that attack, Putin also ordered authorities to tighten control over gun ownership. But most of the proposed measures were turned down by the parliament or the government.

Russian lawmaker Alexander Khinshtein said on Telegram that the suspect in the Kazan attack received a permit for a shotgun less than two weeks ago and that the school had no security aside from a panic button. Authorities did not specify what kind of gun the attacker used.

Officials in Kazan said the school had a doorman for security during day time, and she was the one who hit the panic button, alerting law enforcement about the attack.

Russian officials promised to pay families of those killed 1 million rubles (roughly \$13,500) each and said that the payments will be wired by the end of day Wednesday.

The Latest: Pakistan calls for joint Muslim country response

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Latest on confrontations between Israelis and Palestinians as Israel signals a widening military campaign:

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Pakistan condemned Israel's actions and called for Muslim nations to stand by the Palestinians.

Prime Minister Imran Khan took to Twitter, saying: "We stand with Gaza and Palestine."

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi meanwhile urged Muslim nations to unite over Israel's strikes on Palestinian civilian areas.

Protesters are expected to hold a small anti-Israel rally later today in the southern city of Karachi.

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — The Gaza Health Ministry says the death toll from Israeli airstrikes on Gaza has climbed to 43, including 13 children and three women.

It says nearly 300 Palestinians in the territory have been wounded in the strikes.

The strikes began Monday as Palestinians launched a barrage of rockets into Israel. The worst fighting since the 2014 Gaza war was ignited by clashes in Jerusalem in recent weeks between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police focused on the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a site sacred to Jews and Muslims.

The head of Israel's emergency service also says one person has been killed and one seriously wounded by an anti-tank missile fired from the Gaza Strip.

JERUSALEM — The head of Israel's emergency service says one person has been killed and one seriously wounded by an anti-tank missile fired from the Gaza Strip.

Eli Bein of Magen David Adom said the Wednesday morning attack hit a jeep. Israeli media reported the assault Wednesday morning.

The attack came after a night of deadly exchanges of rocket fire between Israel and Palestinians. It was an abrupt escalation of weeks of tension with roots in disputed Jerusalem.

Analysis: Violence upends Biden's Israel-Palestinian outlook

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The surge in Israeli-Palestinian violence has flummoxed the Biden administration in its first four months as it attempts to craft a Middle East policy it believes will be more durable and fairer than that of its predecessor.

Its early hesitation to wade more deeply into efforts to resolve the decades-long conflict has created a leadership vacuum that is exacerbated by political uncertainty in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, each of which is clamoring for outside support and unhappy with America's new determination to toe a middle line.

Israelis and Palestinians alike have denounced the Biden administration's call for all sides to step back following clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in east Jerusalem that escalated into

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rocket attacks on Israel from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and retaliatory strikes from Israel's military.

"The US State Department message is not acceptable to me," Israel's ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan, said on Twitter. "It is impossible to put in the same message statements by Israeli leaders who call for calm alongside instigators and terrorist organizations that launch missiles and rockets."

On the Palestinian side, there is frustration that the U.S. has slow-walked a U.N. Security Council statement that it sees as too unfavorable to Israel.

"The continued paralysis of the Security Council on the situation in Palestine is unacceptable," the Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations, Riyad Mansour, said Tuesday. "The international community, particularly the Security Council, must condemn all of Israel's illegal actions."

Advocates for both sides say the administration appears to be pursuing an interim strategy that lacks coherence and sends mixed messages to the parties, neither of which has shown a willingness to listen or to back down.

The administration, unsurprisingly, has rejected that criticism.

"It is not that we failed to prioritize this," State Department spokesman Ned Price said Tuesday, after giving a brief description of a call between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Israeli counterpart. "The United States is doing what we can knowing that our ability in certain situations is going to be in some cases limited."

President Joe Biden won initial but cautious plaudits from Mideast analysts when he rejected the Trump administration's unabashedly pro-Israel stance and tentatively embraced the Palestinians by restoring aid and diplomatic contacts.

Yet the Biden administration has also retained key elements of President Donald Trump's policies, including several that broke with long-standing U.S. positions on Jerusalem and the legitimacy of Israeli settlements that the Palestinians believe are manifestly biased against them. The administration has said little would be accomplished with immediate, wholesale shifts in Israel-Palestinian policy.

At the same time, Israelis fear that even subtle shifts away from Trump's hard line on the Palestinians and Biden's determination to re-enter the Iran nuclear deal represent a direct threat to its security even as the administration seeks to build on Trump-era Israeli-Arab normalization accords.

"The parties have basically been conditioned over the past four years," said former U.S. Mideast negotiator Aaron David Miller, who served under both Republican and Democratic administrations. "The Trump sugar high for the Israelis and the vinegar high for the Palestinians have created a certain set of expectations that this administration hasn't addressed."

The administration has not yet named an ambassador to Israel nor indicated that it will appoint a special envoy for peacemaking. By contrast, Trump's nomination of an ambassador to Israel was one of his earliest appointments, announced more than a month before inauguration, and President Barack Obama chose former Sen. George Mitchell to serve as his Middle East peace envoy on his second day in office.

"I realize the administration has lowballed and deprioritized the Middle East and Israeli-Palestinian issue. But the lack of an ambassador to Israel and a consul general in Jerusalem is a serious problem during a crisis," Miller said.

Some Democrats and other progressives are also voicing frustration.

"The United States must call for an immediate cease-fire and an end to provocative and illegal settlement activity. And we must also recommit to working with Israelis and Palestinians to finally end this conflict," Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont independent, said in a statement.

While it has categorically condemned Hamas rocket attacks on Israel and backed Israel's absolute right to self-defense, the Biden administration has been yet either unwilling or unable to say whether the Palestinians meet the criteria to enjoy that same right of self-defense. It has also not modified long-held U.S. policy that the Palestinians are ineligible to take their grievances to the International Criminal Court because they are not a state.

This apparent contradiction, along with what the Palestinians consider to be a weak response to Israel's threatened evictions of Palestinian families from east Jerusalem that were a proximate cause of the latest tensions, have frustrated those looking for a new U.S. approach.

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They note that the Biden administration, through a White House statement, has made clear that it believes "Palestinians and Israelis deserve equal measures of freedom, security, dignity and prosperity."

"We're still waiting to see equal measures of empathy," said Zaha Hassan, a visiting fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the lead author of a report it issued last month titled "Breaking the Israel-Palestine Status Quo." "The administration needs to recognize that Palestinian rights need to be respected."

Hassan and others have urged the administration to stop resisting international attempts to put pressure on Israel, like stalling a U.N. Security Council statement condemning the violence. Although it won't win Biden friends in Israel, "it will shore up U.S. credibility around the world and obviously with the Palestinians," Hassan said.

Trump administration officials to testify on Jan. 6 riots

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two senior Trump administration officials plan to defend their actions during the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol when they appear before Congress, with former acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller standing behind every decision he made that day.

Miller will tell the House Oversight Committee on Wednesday that he was concerned before the insurrection that sending troops to the building could fan fears of a military coup and cause a repeat of the deadly Kent State shootings, according to a copy of prepared remarks obtained by The Associated Press.

His testimony, in the latest in a series of congressional hearings centered on the riot, is aimed at rebutting broad criticism that military forces were too slow to arrive even as pro-Trump rioters violently breached the building and stormed inside.

Miller will be joined by former acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, who is also testifying for the first time about the Justice Department's role in the run-up to the riot.

Miller will say he was determined that the military have only limited involvement, a perspective he says was shaped by criticism of the aggressive response to the civil unrest that roiled American cities months earlier, as well as decades-old episodes that ended in violence.

The Defense Department has "an extremely poor record in supporting domestic law enforcement," including during civil rights and Vietnam War protests in the 1960s and 1970s and the fatal shooting 51 years ago of four students at Kent State University by Ohio National Guard members, Miller says in his prepared remarks.

"I was committed to avoiding repeating these scenarios," he says.

Miller also denies that former President Donald Trump, criticized for failing to forcefully condemn the rioters, had any involvement in the Defense Department's response.

Miller will be the most senior Pentagon official to participate in hearings on the riots. The sessions so far have featured finger-pointing about missed intelligence, poor preparations and an inadequate law enforcement response.

The Capitol Police have faced criticism for being badly overmatched, the FBI for failing to share with sufficient urgency intelligence suggesting a possible "war" at the Capitol, and the Defense Department for an hours-long delay in getting support to the complex despite the violent, deadly chaos unfolding on TV.

"Our hearing will provide the American people the first opportunity to hear from top Trump Administration officials about the catastrophic intelligence and security failures that enabled this unprecedented terrorist attack on our nation's Capitol," the committee's chair, Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., said in a statement.

Rosen, for his part, is expected to tell lawmakers that the Justice Department "took appropriate precautions" ahead of the riot by putting tactical and other elite units on standby after local police reports indicated that 10,000 to 30,000 people were expected at rallies and protests.

Miller's testimony will amount to the most thorough explanation of Pentagon actions after months of criticism that it took hours for the National Guard to arrive.

In his prepared remarks, he defends his resistance to a heavy military response as being shaped in part

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by public "hysteria" about the possibility of a military coup or concerns that the military might be used to help overturn the election results.

Fearful of amplifying those suspicions — as well as the possibility a soldier might be provoked into violence in a way that could be perceived as an attack on First Amendment activities — he says he agreed in the days before the insurrection to deploy soldiers only in areas away from the Capitol.

"No such thing was going to occur on my watch but these concerns, and hysteria about them, nonetheless factored into my decisions regarding the appropriate and limited use of our Armed Forces to support civilian law enforcement during the Electoral College certification," Miller says. "My obligation to the Nation was to prevent a constitutional crisis."

Although he says the Defense Department should not play a lead role in domestic law enforcement, he felt it important to initiate planning discussions out of concern about a lack of coordination and information-sharing between other agencies.

Democrats have signaled that they intend to press Miller on why it took so long for the National Guard to arrive despite urgent plans for help. In his prepared testimony, Miller contends that those complaints are unjustified, though he also concedes that the Guard was not rushed to the scene — which he says was intentional.

"This isn't a video game where you can move forces with a flick of the thumb or a movie that glosses over the logistical challenges and the time required to coordinate and synchronize with the multitude of other entities involved, or with complying with the important legal requirements involved in the use of such forces," he says.

Although the timeline Miller offers in his remarks generally matches up with that provided by other high-ranking leaders, he notably puts himself at odds with William Walker, who as commanding general of the D.C. National Guard testified to what he said were unusual Pentagon restrictions that impeded his response. He also described a more than three-hour delay between when aid was requested and when it was received.

Walker has since become the House sergeant-at-arms, in charge of the chamber's security.

Miller says that Walker was given "all the authority he needed to fulfill the mission" and that before Jan. 6 had never expressed any concern about the forces at his disposal. Miller says he authorized the deployment of 340 National Guard personnel, the total amount Walker had said would be necessary.

Miller says he approved the activation of the Guard at 3 p.m. That support did not arrive at the Capitol complex until well after 5 p.m., which Miller says reflected the time-consuming process of coordination and planning.

Miller served as a White House counterterrorism adviser under Trump before being tapped as acting defense secretary for the final months of the Trump administration. He replaced Mark Esper, who was fired as defense secretary after the election after being seen by Trump as insufficiently loyal.

The abrupt appointment raised concerns that Miller was in place to be a Trump loyalist. Maloney foreshadowed a focus on Trump at Wednesday's hearing, saying his "inflammatory language provoked and incited the violent mob."

In his opening statement, though, Miller says he believes Trump "encouraged the protesters" but declines to say if Trump bears responsibility. He recounts a Jan. 5 conversation when Trump, impressed by a crowd of supporters at a rally that day, told him 10,000 troops would be needed the next day.

"The call lasted fewer than thirty seconds and I did not respond substantively, and there was no elaboration. I took his comment to mean that a large force would be required to maintain order the following day," Miller says.

Internal emails reveal WHO knew of sex abuse claims in Congo

By MARIA CHENG and AL-HADJI KUDRA MALIRO Associated Press

BENI, Congo (AP) — When Shekinah was working as a nurse's aide in northeastern Congo in January 2019, she said, a World Health Organization doctor offered her a job investigating Ebola cases at double

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her previous salary — with a catch.

“When he asked me to sleep with him, given the financial difficulties of my family I accepted,” said Shekinah, 25, who asked that only her first name be used for fear of repercussions. She added that the doctor, Boubacar Diallo, who often bragged about his connections to WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, also offered several of her friends jobs in return for sex.

A WHO staffer and three Ebola experts working in Congo during the outbreak separately told management about general sex abuse concerns around Diallo, The Associated Press has learned. They said they were told not to take the matter further.

WHO has been facing widespread public allegations of systemic abuse of women by unnamed staffers, to which Tedros declared outrage and emergencies director Dr. Michael Ryan said, “We have no more information than you have.” But an AP investigation has now found that despite its public denial of knowledge, senior WHO management was not only informed of alleged sexual misconduct in 2019 but was asked how to handle it.

The AP has also for the first time tracked down the names of two doctors accused of sexual misconduct, Diallo and Dr. Jean-Paul Ngandu, both of whom were reported to WHO.

Ngandu was accused by a young woman of impregnating her. In a notarized contract obtained by the AP, two WHO staffers, including a manager, signed as witnesses to an agreement for Ngandu to pay the young woman, cover her health costs and buy her land. The deal was made “to protect the integrity and reputation” of WHO, Ngandu said.

When reached by the AP, both Diallo and Ngandu denied wrongdoing. The investigation was based on interviews with dozens of WHO staffers, Ebola officials in Congo, private emails, legal documents and recordings of internal meetings obtained by the AP.

A senior manager, Dr. Michel Yao, received emailed complaints about both men. Yao didn’t fire Ngandu despite the reported misconduct. Yao didn’t have the power to terminate Diallo, a Canadian, who was on a different kind of contract, but neither he nor any other WHO managers put Diallo on administrative leave.

The AP was unable to ascertain whether Yao forwarded either complaint to his superiors or the agency’s internal investigators, as required by WHO protocol. Yao has since been promoted to be director of Geneva’s Strategic Health Operations Department.

Eight top officials privately acknowledged that WHO had failed to effectively tackle sexual exploitation during the Ebola outbreak and that the problem was systemic, recordings of internal meetings show. The revelations come at a time when the U.N. health agency is winding down its response to two recent Ebola epidemics in Congo and Guinea, and is already under pressure for its management of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

WHO declined to comment on specific sex abuse allegations, and none of the 12 WHO officials contacted responded to repeated requests for comment. Spokeswoman Marcia Poole noted that Tedros announced an independent investigation of sex abuse in Congo after media reports came out in October. Findings are due at earliest in August, investigators have said.

“Once we have these, we will review them carefully and take appropriate additional actions,” Poole said. “We are aware that more work is needed to achieve our vision of emergency operations that serve the vulnerable while protecting them from all forms of abuse.”

WHO’s code of conduct for staffers says they are “never to engage in acts of sexual exploitation” and to “avoid any action that could be perceived as an abuse of privileges,” reflecting the unequal power dynamic between visiting doctors and economically vulnerable women. But an internal WHO audit last year found some aid workers weren’t required to complete the agency’s training on sex abuse prevention before starting work during Ebola.

“All of us may have been suspecting for as long as the Ebola response was taking (place) that something like this would be possible,” said Andreas Mlitzke, director of WHO’s office of compliance, risk management and ethics, during an internal meeting in November. Mlitzke likened WHO officials in Congo to “an invading force” and said, “Things like this have historically happened in wartime.”

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Mlitzke said during the meeting that WHO typically "takes the passive approach" in its investigations, and that it couldn't be expected to uncover wrongdoing among staffers.

"What prevents us from doing something proactive is our own psychology," he said.

Ryan, meanwhile, said the sexual harassment incidents were unlikely to be exceptional.

"You can't just pin this and say you have one field operation that went badly wrong," he told his colleagues in an internal meeting. "It does reflect a culture as well ... This is in some sense the tip of an iceberg."

Internal emails from November 2019 show WHO directors were alarmed enough by the abuse complaints that they drafted a strategy to prevent sexual exploitation and appointed two "focal points" to liaise with colleagues in Congo and elsewhere. Directors also ordered confidential probes into sexual abuse problems more broadly and U.N training on how to prevent sexual harassment, along with the independent investigation announced last year.

But staffers remain concerned that not enough has been done. At a WHO meeting in January to address sex abuse, Dr. Renee Van de Weerd, chief of emergency management and support, told colleagues that the risk "remains high across our operations" and that "more robust supervision" was needed.

Dr. Gaya Gamhewage, head of WHO's learning and capacity development, said at an internal WHO discussion on sex abuse that "the impunity with which we have operated is leading to this." She warned, "Training is not going to solve this problem."

Shortly after Ebola was identified in eastern Congo in 2018, WHO's Swiss headquarters gave the outbreak its most serious emergency designation, allowing Geneva to take control from its Africa office. WHO chief Tedros traveled to Congo 14 times during the epidemic to personally oversee the response, and his emergency chief, Ryan, made at least seven visits.

Over 2018 and 2019, three Ebola experts, including two who worked for WHO at the time, told the AP they raised concerns about sex abuse in general, and Diallo in particular, with senior managers. But they said they were told that controlling the Ebola outbreak was more important, and two said Diallo was considered "untouchable" because of his relationship with Tedros.

Complaints about Diallo were also raised with emergency operations manager Yao, who was responsible for leading WHO's overall Ebola response in Congo, with hundreds of staff, under Ryan's supervision. On Feb. 22, 2019, Yao received an email from the WHO outbreak team leader in North Kivu with the subject line, "Private. Chat."

"Chief, please let's have a Private chat tomorrow," the staffer emailed, saying he wanted to discuss Diallo, then an outbreak manager in North Kivu. The staffer didn't want to be identified by the AP for fear of losing his job.

"We cannot afford to have people tarnishing the sweat and effort of individuals sacrificing themselves thru (sic) inappropriate sexual harassment and bullying," the staffer wrote. "I will fill you in (in) private."

Yao responded the next morning: "Ok we shall talk." The staffer said that Yao told him the matter would be handled, but he didn't believe his concerns were taken seriously and was very upset. He added that he was sidelined for complaining about Diallo.

Two WHO officials with knowledge of the situation said the agency investigated complaints that Diallo acted unprofessionally, including an alleged sexual assault, and there was insufficient evidence to corroborate the charges. But investigators failed to interview any of the women involved or the whistleblowers who flagged the harassment claims, according to a senior WHO official who didn't want to be identified for fear of losing his job. Diallo continued to work for WHO months after concerns were raised about him.

Diallo was described as a charismatic, outgoing leader with connections to some of WHO's top managers, including Tedros. In a speech in January 2019, Tedros singled out Diallo among the Ebola responders working under heavy gunfire in Beni.

On WHO's website, Diallo, Tedros and Yao are pictured smiling and bumping elbows during Tedros' June 2019 trip to Congo. On Diallo's Facebook page, he appears in more than a dozen photos with Tedros.

Several months after Tedros' visit, Diallo met Anifa, a young Congolese woman working in an Ebola treatment center in Beni. She said Diallo told her: "How can a beautiful girl like you work here, testing people's

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temperatures and washing their hands? That's terrible." She said he offered her another job at five times more than her current salary where "the conditions were very simple," according to him.

"He wanted me to sleep with him," she told the AP, noting that Diallo frequently wore a badge with "VIP" inscribed in red, attached to his dark blue WHO vest. Anifa declined to share her full name, fearing it could harm her future job prospects. The AP doesn't identify victims of sexual abuse.

"I told him I studied hard to be employed by the treatment center," Anifa said. She rejected Diallo's offer, saying that "if he hires me after sleeping with him ... I would be a sex slave, not a WHO employee."

Diallo denied the claims outright.

"I have never offered a woman a job in exchange for sex and I have never sexually harassed a woman in my life," he told the AP in an email. He said he was never informed of any complaints about his behavior at WHO or disciplined for misconduct, and his relationship with Tedros was "purely professional."

Diallo said his contract for WHO finished at the end of July and he hasn't worked for the agency since.

The same manager, Yao, was also told of alleged sexual misconduct by the other doctor, Ngandu, in an email obtained by the AP dated April 23, 2019, with the subject line, "Urgent need for your guidance." Outbreak manager Mory Keita wrote in French: "I hereby inform you that we have a colleague who has impregnated a girl from Beni."

Keita told Yao that a young woman and her aunt had come to the Hotel Okapi in Beni with two armed police officers, looking for senior WHO staff. They said the young woman had been having an affair with Ngandu, and the hospital had confirmed she was now pregnant. Ngandu was avoiding them, the aunt said, so they went to the police to find him.

Keita told Yao that when confronted, Ngandu acknowledged a relationship with the girl but said it was only for two weeks. The woman's aunt, however, said her niece first spent the night with him about a month and a half ago, and at the time he gave her \$100, "a detail that Ngandu could not deny," the email noted.

The two women demanded payment for all medications and hospital treatment during pregnancy and the purchase of land for the child, "given that Dr. Jean-Paul will abandon the girl and she will be obliged to raise her child alone."

"We have asked Jean-Paul to honor the request from the family of the girl and the aunt and try to find some common ground," Keita said. "(Ngandu) suggested that we manage the situation here at our level here in Beni and not inform the hierarchy, but I felt ... you should be informed so that you would tell us your directions for how to better manage this problem."

Less than one week later, Ngandu and the young woman signed a notarized contract in which he agreed to pay her \$100 a month until her baby was delivered, to provide all necessary health care, and to buy her a plot of land in Beni. Four witnesses signed the document, including two from WHO, Keita and Achile Mboko, a human resources officer. Keita didn't respond to requests for comment, and Mboko acknowledged his signature and presence.

Two handwritten contracts signed by the young woman and Ngandu confirmed he paid \$2,800 for land with a house in a Beni neighborhood and transferred ownership rights to her in August 2019.

"This was a private matter and did not implicate WHO," Ngandu told the AP. Ngandu said he wasn't the father of the baby and that he agreed to the settlement after WHO colleagues, including Keita, "advised me to settle out of court to avoid sullyng the reputation of the organization and myself."

Ngandu, who is from Congo, said he wasn't disciplined by WHO and continued to work until his contract ended in June 2019. Ngandu is now based in Namibia and said he is in talks with WHO for potential future employment. The young woman declined to talk to the AP.

Paula Donovan, co-director of the Code Blue Campaign, which is campaigning to end sexual exploitation by U.N. peacekeepers, said WHO's attempt to effectively silence the victim was "beyond concerning."

"It's a perversion of justice that WHO thinks they could take the law into their own hands and resolve a case without going to the proper authorities," Donovan said. "If this is how they treated one case, how are they treating all the others?"

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In May 2019, Yao was told of yet another unrelated sexual harassment complaint in Bunia, roughly 200 kilometers (125 miles) north of Beni. Two women told the World Bank they were refused jobs at WHO because they declined to sleep with the recruiting officer, in an email seen by an Ebola aid worker. The aid worker, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals, told the AP that the World Bank alerted Yao, but nothing was done.

Throughout the summer, Yao was praised for his leadership of the Ebola response. He was named in a July 17 tweet from Ebba Kalondo, a spokesperson for the African Union, as one of WHO's "exceptional men" and was pictured alongside colleagues, including Diallo. Kalondo urged her followers: "Know their names. Write about them."

Two months later, a young Congolese woman named Reby, then 20, met Diallo when he came into the Vodacom shop where she was working. He gave her \$100 for "transport costs" to meet him at a hotel and asked her how much she made in the telecommunications job, she told the AP.

"My God, a beautiful girl like you who gets \$60 a month is not enough," he said, according to Reby. "If you sleep with me, you are going to be a high-ranking member of the Ebola response in Beni and you are going to receive around \$800 a month."

Reby declined to use her full name for fear of retribution. She said she refused Diallo's offer, but continued to see him when he came into her shop. "From that day on, he always called me the difficult girl," she said.

In a confidential slide presentation in January 2020, WHO officials reported that an internal U.N. review of the Ebola response in Congo had found a need for "safe-guarding mechanisms for preventing sexual exploitation." All staff were to complete training on harassment and other issues.

The publication of general sex abuse allegations in Congo in the media last fall set off a flurry of responses from WHO.

Yao said in an internal meeting in September that despite U.N. protocols to prevent sexual abuse, "it looks like this system is not working at the grassroots level." He added that a recent U.N. assessment hadn't revealed any problems, "so we were surprised about a case happening."

WHO director-general Tedros called the allegations a "shocking" betrayal in an email to staff and promised "serious consequences," including immediate dismissal and referral to local authorities.

At a town hall meeting in November, emergencies chief Ryan said sexual abuse issues had been "neglected" for years and apologized to his staff.

"There are behaviors here that are not acceptable," he said.

WHO staffers, especially women, were unconvinced.

"Quite frankly, I think this is not good enough," said Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, at the same meeting. "We know in every situation we go in, we're at risk."

"(It) doesn't matter how many processes you have if the culture is 'turn a blind eye,'" wrote Linda Doull, coordinator of WHO's global health cluster, into the meeting's chatroom.

Others said WHO's feigned ignorance of the sexual abuse problems in Congo was in line with the agency's past failures to discipline even criminal actions.

"We had a staff member in our office beat his wife with a concrete block on the roof of our office and his penalty was to lose one step of his grade," wrote epidemiologist Boris Pavlin, into the group chat, referring to the U.N. system's staff ranking scale.

Staffers also worried that problems persisted in the agency's response to another Ebola outbreak in Congo last year.

"We still do not have a robust (sexual abuse prevention) program in place," Geneva-based project officer Jessica Kolmer said during a meeting in November. She said donors told them their new measures, including posting flyers in their offices and establishing a sexual abuse prevention committee, were "not sufficient."

Back in Congo, Anifa said she was deeply disturbed that WHO staffers hadn't been disciplined for their treatment of women.

"I condemn WHO for not sanctioning Dr. Boubacar Diallo because I know already they have complaints

against him," she said. "I asked myself, 'Why did the people who came to help us, to fight Ebola here at home, why do they want to destroy our lives?'"

Shekinah said she "couldn't count how many times" she slept with Diallo. She said she knew about a dozen other women in Beni whom he had similarly victimized.

"I wanted to quit," she said. "But because of my financial problems, I endured it."

Shekinah said she was often paid in cash or mobile credit, with little paperwork. Even after she and Diallo separated, she said, he continued to ask for nude pictures or video calls while she was naked.

Diallo should be punished "for his sexual abuse of all those girls in Beni as a lesson to these international organizations that this should not happen again," she said. "I would like justice to be done."

Escalating Mideast violence bears hallmarks of 2014 Gaza war

By FARES AKRAM and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Rockets streamed out of Gaza and Israel pounded the territory with airstrikes early Wednesday as the most severe outbreak of violence since the 2014 war took on many hallmarks of that devastating 50-day conflict, with no endgame in sight.

Gaza's Hamas rulers and other militant groups have fired barrages of hundreds of rockets that at times have overwhelmed Israel's missile defenses, causing air raid sirens and explosions to echo across Tel Aviv, Israel's biggest metropolitan area, and other cities.

Israeli airstrikes have leveled two apartment towers in the Gaza Strip, where 2 million Palestinians have lived under a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas took power in 2007. Warning shots have allowed civilians to evacuate the buildings, but the material losses will be immense. Israel faced heavy criticism over the tactic during the 2014 war.

Just after daybreak Wednesday, Israel unleashed dozens of airstrikes in the course of a few minutes, targeting police and security installations, witnesses said. A wall of dark gray smoke rose over Gaza City. The Hamas-run Interior Ministry said airstrikes destroyed the central police headquarters in Gaza City, a compound with several buildings.

The death toll in Gaza rose to 43 Palestinians, including 13 children and three women, according to the Health Ministry. Nearly 300 people have been wounded, including 86 children and 39 women. Six Israelis, including three women and a child, were killed by rocket fire Tuesday and early Wednesday, and dozens of people were wounded.

An Associated Press journalist at a hospital in Gaza City saw five dead and seven wounded, including women, from an Israeli airstrike that hit a car in the city.

Meanwhile, Gaza militants fired an anti-tank missile across the border, killing an Israeli and wounding two others, who were evacuated under fire, according to Eli Bein, head of the Magen David Adom emergency service. It was not immediately clear if they were soldiers or civilians.

The Israeli military said militants have fired more 1,050 rockets since the conflict began, with 200 of them falling short and landing inside Gaza. The military said it also shot down a drone that entered Israel from Gaza. Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a military spokesman, said two infantry brigades were sent to the area, indicating preparations for a possible ground invasion.

Samah Haboub, a mother of four in Gaza, said she was thrown across her bedroom in a "moment of horror" by an airstrike on an apartment tower next door. She and her children, aged 3 to 14, ran down the stairway of their apartment block along with other residents, many of them screaming and crying.

"There is almost no safe place in Gaza," she said.

The destruction of apartment towers was among several tactics used during the 2014 war that are now the subject of an investigation by the International Criminal Court into possible war crimes. Israel is not a member of the court and has rejected the probe.

In a brief statement, ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said she had noted "with great concern" the escalation of violence in the region and "the possible commission of crimes under the Rome Statute" that established the court.

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Conricus said Israeli forces have strict rules of engagement and follow international laws on armed conflict. "We are definitely very mindful of civilian casualties in Gaza and we want to minimize them," he said. "That's the priority."

The latest eruption of violence began a month ago in Jerusalem, where heavy-handed police tactics during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers ignited protests and clashes with police. A focal point was the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a site sacred to Jews and Muslims.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since the Islamic militant group seized power in Gaza from rival Palestinian forces in 2007. The conflicts ended after regional and international powers convinced both sides to accept an informal truce.

While the violence has been widely condemned, there is no sign that either side is willing to back down. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to expand the offensive, saying "this will take time."

Still, diplomats are seeking to intervene, with Qatar, Egypt and the United Nations working to deliver a cease-fire.

The U.N. Security Council also planned to hold its second closed emergency meeting in three days Wednesday on the escalating violence. Council diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity because discussions have been private, said the U.N.'s most powerful body did not issue a statement because of U.S. concerns that it could escalate tensions.

The unrest in Jerusalem has spread across Israel itself, with an outbreak of communal violence in mixed Jewish-Arab communities, as Hamas has called for a full-scale Palestinian intifada, or uprising. The last such uprising also began with violence at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, in 2000, and lasted more than five years.

In the Israeli city of Lod, a 52-year-old man and his 16-year-old daughter were killed early Wednesday when a rocket had landed in the courtyard of their one-story home. Their car parked outside was wrecked and the interior of the house was filled by debris. The deceased were reportedly Arab citizens of Israel.

Lod also saw heavy clashes after thousands of mourners joined a funeral for an Arab man who was killed the previous night, the suspect a Jewish gunman. The crowd fought with police, and set a synagogue and some 30 vehicles on fire, Israeli media reported.

"An intifada erupted in Lod, you have to bring in the army," the city's mayor, Yair Revivo, said. Authorities have declared a state of emergency and ordered the redeployment of paramilitary border police companies from the occupied West Bank as reinforcements.

In neighboring Ramle, ultra-nationalist Jewish demonstrators were filmed attacking cars belonging to Arabs. In the northern port town of Acre, protesters torched a Jewish-owned restaurant and hotel.

Confrontations erupted last weekend at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, which is the third-holiest site in Islam and the holiest site in Judaism. Over four days, Israeli police fired tear gas and stun grenades at Palestinians in the compound who hurled stones and chairs at the forces. At times, police fired stun grenades into the carpeted mosque.

On Monday evening, Hamas began firing rockets from Gaza. From there, the escalation was rapid.

In a televised address, Hamas' exiled leader, Ismail Haniyeh, said Israel bore responsibility. "It's the Israeli occupation that set Jerusalem on fire, and the flames reached Gaza," he said.

Hamas has not commented on Israel's claims that it has killed a number of senior militants. Militant group Islamic Jihad confirmed that three senior commanders were killed in a strike on their hideout in a Gaza City apartment building.

The Israeli military on Wednesday released footage of an airstrike on what it said was the house of a "high-ranking operative" in Hamas, where weapons were stored. Earlier, the military said it struck a building where two senior members of Hamas' military intelligence wing, were present. Hamas activists tweeted that the two were killed in the strike, along with a woman and her son.

Netanyahu said Israel had attacked hundreds of targets. The fiercest attack was a set of airstrikes that brought down an entire 12-story building. The building housed important Hamas offices, as well as a gym and some start-up businesses. Israel fired a series of warning shots before demolishing the building, allowing people to flee and there were no casualties.

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Israeli aircraft heavily damaged another Gaza City building early Wednesday. The nine-story structure housed residential apartments, medical companies and a dental clinic. A drone fired five warning rockets before the bombing. Israel said the building housed Hamas intelligence offices and the group's command responsible for planning attacks on Israeli targets in the occupied West Bank.

Fighter jets struck the building again after journalists and rescuers had gathered around. There was no immediate word on casualties. The high-rise stood 200 meters (650 feet) away from the AP bureau in Gaza City, and smoke and debris reached the office.

Soon after the bombing, Hamas announced that it would resume its attacks, and fired 100 rockets at the Israeli desert town of Beersheba. Hamas said the renewed barrage was in response to the strike on the building.

Kremlin-imposed cuts at US Embassy leave thousands adrift

By DANIEL KOZIN and JIM HEINTZ Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Under Kremlin orders, the U.S. Embassy has stopped employing Russians, forcing the embassy to cut its consular staff by 75% and limit many of its services.

The order went into effect on Wednesday, bringing the sharply deteriorating U.S.-Russia relationship to an intensely personal level.

Because of the cuts, the embassy can offer only very limited services, such as considering "life-and-death" visa applications. That leaves Russian businessmen, exchange students and romantic partners adrift because they won't be able to obtain visas. Even Americans will be unable to register their newborns or renew their passports.

For Anastasia Kuznetsova, a 20-year-old engaged to marry a Californian, it's a crushing blow. She had already spent about two years seeking a fiancée's visa. The notoriously laborious process for Russians to get U.S. visas had already been slowed by COVID-19.

"I felt destroyed, much more depressed than I was before," said Kuznetsova, who last saw her fiancé in January on a trip to Mexico. "We have no idea when it's going to continue working and if we will be able to see each other even during these years."

Thomas H V Anthony, an American living in Russia, was already frustrated because of a delay in registering the birth of his daughter, a record of the child's claim to U.S. citizenship.

"My expectation was as things get better with the situation with the pandemic, gradually the consulate would open more and more and more," he said. "It was a big shock to suddenly get an email from them, about two weeks ago, saying effective on the 11th we will no longer be offering any consular services."

For Anthony, this means his daughter, who was born before the pandemic, will not be able to travel to visit her grandparents in the United States in the foreseeable future.

The embassy has made no statements on whether it is taking measures to beef up the consular staff with new employees from the United States.

Embassy spokespeople could not be reached for clarification on how the mission will handle other jobs also filled by locals, such as security.

An order signed last month by President Vladimir Putin called for creating a list of "unfriendly" countries whose missions could be banned from hiring Russians or third-country nationals. The list includes the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Poland and several other European countries, but the United States is the first for which the ban is being enforced.

The move followed U.S. sanctions imposed over Russian interference in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and involvement in the SolarWind hack of federal agencies. Each country expelled 10 of the other's diplomats.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the ban on local employees is in line with convention.

"We rarely employ any local personnel in the country where our diplomatic mission is. And thus we have the full right to transfer this practice onto the regulations which manage the work of the U.S. Embassy and their general consulate in the Russian Federation," he said last month.

Yulia Kukula, a university student who was accepted for a PhD program in sustainable energy at Arizona State University, may have found a laborious and costly way around the problem of getting her visa to attend university.

After searching online for advice from others in her situation, Kukula was able to sign up for an interview for a visa at the U.S. consulate in neighboring Kazakhstan. But that's a 2,300-kilometer (1,400-mile) trip from Moscow, and the interview isn't until October.

The United States once had three other consulates in Russia — in Yekaterinburg, Vladivostok and St. Petersburg — which somewhat eased the travel burden for people seeking visas. But those consulates have closed or stopped providing visas amid diplomatic spats in recent years, in what Alexis Rodzianko, head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, called "a visa war."

That had already placed a burden on the companies in his chamber whose executives needed to travel. "Now it looks like it's impossible for the indefinite future," he said.

The travel restrictions of the pandemic have shown that videoconferencing can't entirely replace the in-person contact of business travel, he said.

"They're especially good for people who already know each other and they're much less effective for people getting to know each other," he said.

He also sees a larger problem if the visa halt lasts for long.

He worries that because the U.S. and Russian governments are adversaries, a lack of contacts between people on both sides could lead to "dehumanization," adding, "which is very dangerous because that's what you need to fight a war."

Kuznetsova, who had hoped to celebrate her wedding in the United States this year and had even quit her university in Russia in preparation for the move, feels trapped as a small piece in a large geopolitical dispute.

"I understand that there can be problems between countries, it's normal, it's happened throughout all of history, but it's not normal to divide people and separate them, especially when it's families and the lives of people," she said.

Public service in the US: Increasingly thankless, exhausting

By MARTHA IRVINE AP National Writer

STERLING HEIGHTS, Mich. (AP) — He scurries through his apartment, downing a quick mug of coffee, brushing his teeth, feeding his pet rabbit, Auggie, before leaving. Not so long ago, Bill Mathis would have headed to his high school classroom to discuss great literature like "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "The Odyssey" with his freshman.

It was his dream job, the one he referenced in a childhood journal he still keeps: "I would love to be a teacher," he scrawled in pencil as a third grader.

Now Mathis has taken a new job, in Michigan's newly legalized cannabis industry. The pay is better, the hours more regular, the stress less, he says. No longer does he worry that he'll catch COVID-19. "What about us and our families?" he asked his school board in Romeo, Michigan, last August after it unveiled a plan to offer in-person classes.

Ultimately, the 29-year-old teacher felt few in the rural suburb north of Detroit understood. "Good riddance," one resident said.

His is but one story of the plight of the American public servant. Historically, jobs like teaching, firefighting, policing, government and social work have offered opportunities to give back to communities while earning solid benefits, maybe even a pension. Surveys still show public admiration for nurses and teachers and, after the terror attacks of 9/11, firefighters.

But many public servants no longer feel the love.

They're battered and burnt out. They're stretched by systems where shortages are common — for teachers in Michigan and several other states, for instance, and for police in many cities, from New York and Cincinnati to Seattle. Colleagues are retiring early or resigning, as Mathis did. There are mental breakdowns,

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substance abuse and even suicide, especially among first responders.

Even before the coronavirus arrived, researchers have found in 2018 that about half of American public servants said they were burnt out, compared with 20% over workers overall.

Some wonder who will pick up the slack, as more young people avoid public service careers. In the federal government, just 6% of the workforce is younger than age 30, while about 45% is older than 50, according to the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service.

The pandemic has only made matters worse.

In addition to the risk COVID-19 poses for those on the front lines, "The workload is up. Financial security is down," said Elizabeth Linos, a behavioral scientist and public management scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies public workers.

Linus, whose research has included 911 operators, physician moms and others, says surveys during the pandemic have found that anxiety rates for frontline workers are 20 times higher than usual. "I've really never seen anything like it," she said.

Long before the pandemic, mistrust of the government and its workers was building. "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help,'" President Ronald Reagan famously said in a 1986 speech, as the country braced for a recession.

By the time the 2008 Great Recession arrived, anti-union sentiment also was more prevalent -- a big deal in the Detroit area, known as a union stronghold because of the auto industry. That bashing has grown to include unions that represent public servants, teachers included.

"They protect bad behavior, and they punish good behavior," said Tim Deegan, a dad from Waterford, Michigan, who manages a pizza parlor. He notes that he has no such protections for a job that often finds him working 60 hours a week.

Earlier this year, Deegan took part in a rambunctious social media discussion about the large numbers of Michigan teachers who are retiring early, even more during the pandemic. Educators certainly had their supporters in the online thread. But others, including Deegan, were angry. He told the story of his girlfriend's son -- how they'd switched him to another school district because he felt the online teaching was so poor. Some teachers, he said, have "phoned it in" for years, with few repercussions.

Bill Mathis, not one to shy from speaking his mind, jumped into the discussion. He posted about leaving teaching because of the health risks to himself and his girlfriend, Annie, who has lupus, and how his salary made it hard to pay his bills.

"So you weren't in it for the kids?" another commenter asked, drawing dozens of emoticon reactions, from anger to laughter.

Mathis wondered why he'd bothered. Of course, he loved his students, but some would never believe it. "This time, last year we were heroes," praised early on in the pandemic by exhausted parents who'd been forced to step into the role of teacher, he said. "Now, not so much."

Derek Lies, a dad of two boys in Romeo, said he felt for teachers -- at first. But as the union pushed back on returning to the classroom, "my sympathy went away," he said.

The good reputation of the schools in Romeo had been part of the draw when Lies, a mechanical engineer, moved with his family to Michigan from California more than five years ago. But he started to worry when the pandemic arrived, and he became a regular presence at the school board meetings thereafter. When Mathis made his case about safety at last August's online meeting, Lies was unmoved.

"If you want to keep your job, you have to come to work," Lies said in a recent interview. "And if that's not OK, we're going to have to find someone to replace you."

Years ago, Lies was a firefighter. He doesn't deny that burnout is real and that COVID-19 has made many jobs harder. "Maybe I've become less understanding," he said. If there's one group of public servants who have reason to gripe, he added, it's police, who've faced heightened scrutiny over the killings of George Floyd and others.

"I can't imagine anyone wanting that job right now," Lies said.

Increasingly, first responders across the country are acknowledging the difficulties of the job and addressing mental health, addiction and the occasional suicide. In Sterling Heights, where Mathis lives, fire

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chief Kevin Edmond gives time off to crews who've responded to fatal fires and other trauma.

Edmond, who's been a firefighter and EMT for 35 years, said younger staffers are more open to the department's mental health and peer support programs.

"When I first started, there wasn't such a thing. ... It was basically you'll get over it," he said. "Unfortunately, because of our profession, we see a lot of bad things."

While staffing levels in his department have remained the same since the mid-1990s, the number of runs the department makes for various emergencies has increased from 5,000 annually to more than 16,000. "A lot of people are using EMS as their primary health care providers," often because they have no insurance, Edmond said.

He's constantly on the lookout for new recruits and, with the requirement that his firefighters also have EMT certification, has extended his search to Ohio and other states. The department, as many others do, also has a Young Explorers program with a few high schools to try get more teens interested before they choose another career path.

Attracting young people to public service fields can be a challenge. But Linos, the UC-Berkeley researcher, says it's not necessarily the difficulty that scares them off.

In fact, in the case of policing, her research has found that more people apply when told the job is challenging. Her research has found that a sense of belonging and feeling supported by a supervisor also helps soothe burnout.

Even so, Linos says today's young people see other ways to "do good" – and make more money doing it.

"The private sector and the social sectors, like the nonprofits, have co-opted the public service message, and so ... are saying, 'Come change the world,' right?" Linos said. "So what government may have lost is the monopoly on public service."

A number of young adults also are running for public office, seeing that as a way to give back.

Mai Xiong, a new member of the Macomb County Board of Commissioners -- the county where Mathis lives -- is one of them. As a woman of Hmong descent, and with hate crimes against people of Asian descent on the rise during COVID-19, she worried how voters might react to her candidacy.

Before last year's election, she campaigned door to door, pulling her young children in a wagon behind her. She was heartened that the reaction in Warren, the city that includes her district, was largely positive. And she won handily, taking out an old-guard member of the board.

"I have faith in people," said Xiong, who's 35 and owns a clothing business. "I put myself out there in a very vulnerable position, knowing that at any given time, I could be targeted. But I have to put myself out there to get a voice at the table."

Last month, the board adopted her resolution condemning hate crimes and hateful rhetoric against Asian Americans.

Twenty miles to the north, back in Romeo, sixth-grade geography teacher and union leader Sue Ziel recalls starting to feel more resentment from the public when the recession began in 2008. A Gallup poll then found that public approval of unions dropped to a low of 48 percent, compared with 72 percent when the poll began in 1936, though it has been creeping up.

"Why were we the enemy? You can't love a teacher and hate a union because it's the same thing," said Ziel, who has remained in the school district Mathis left.

As the pandemic hit, she initially felt "paralyzed" at the thought of having to teach kids online and in person at the same time. She also got the virus.

"I remember sitting in tears and telling my husband 'I don't know if I can do this,' and those words have never come out of my mouth," said Ziel, who left a job in advertising 24 years ago to teach. Even before then, she said the demands of the job had increased. There are more required certifications, more focus on standardized testing, while pay freezes diminished teacher wages across the state of Michigan.

As a veteran with experience on which she could draw, Ziel pushed through but said younger staffers were more likely to struggle with less support in a stressful time, as Mathis did.

"It breaks my heart. I really think the world of Bill," she said. With his bushy beard, he looked a bit like a lead singer in a rock band and he connected well with his ninth graders, she said, though his sometimes

quirky style wasn't always as appreciated by what can be a buttoned-up Romeo community.

"When you talk about a calling to be a teacher, he's like the poster child," Ziel said. As union leader, she accompanied Mathis to meetings with administrators after he posted a profanity-laden rant about COVID-19 and teaching last year, though he didn't name the district. He has since removed the foul language but isn't sorry he expressed how he felt. "I was scared," he said.

In the Sterling Heights apartment he shares with two roommates, Mathis still displays various mementos students have given him over the years. He pulls out an electric guitar covered with student signatures from a musical he helped direct. There's a jar filled with hand-written messages students wrote to inspire him on bad days. A painting a student created and brought on his last day rests on a nearby shelf.

He reads a card to "Mr. Mathis" from a female student he had nicknamed "Smiley."

"When battling a lot of issues and intense sadness in high school, this one teacher encouraged me to smile ...," the card reads. "That nickname made such a difference."

The day he told his students he was leaving was "one the hardest days of my life," Mathis said. He didn't share anything about his new job, only that he needed to take care of himself and his family. Now at the cannabis plant, he spends much of his day compiling and shipping orders of gummies and other pot products.

Now that he's vaccinated, he's thought about becoming a mentor to a young person, or volunteering for a youth theater. He'd still like to give back, but on his own terms.

He doubts he'd return to teaching in a state where some school districts have had to resort to hiring people who aren't always trained for the job.

"In my lifetime, I think there will be small reforms, but I don't think it'll be enough ...," Mathis said. "It really hurts me to say -- I'm happy that I left teaching."

COVID-19 pet boom has veterinarians backlogged, burned out

By KELLI KENNEDY Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — During the gloomiest stretches of the pandemic, Dr. Diona Krahn's veterinary clinic has been a puppy fest, overrun with new four-legged patients.

Typically, she'd get three or four new puppies a week, but between shelter adoptions and private purchases, the 2020 COVID-19 pet boom brought five to seven new clients a day to her practice in Raleigh, North Carolina. Many are first-time pet owners.

Like many veterinarians across the country, she's also been seeing more sick animals. To meet the demand, vets interviewed by The Associated Press have extended hours, hired additional staff and refused to take new patients, and they still can't keep up. Burnout and fatigue are such a concern that some practices are hiring counselors to support their weary staffs.

"Everyone is working beyond capacity at this point," said Krahn, who added evening hours last year.

Approximately 12.6 million U.S. households got a new pet last year after the pandemic was declared in March 2020, according to a COVID-19 Pulse Study by the American Pet Products Association.

Meanwhile, fewer people relinquished their pets in 2020, so they needed ongoing care, experts said. And as people worked from home and spent more time with their pets, they've had more opportunities to notice bumps, limps and other ailments that could typically go untreated.

Vets were already struggling to meet the pre-pandemic demand, with veterinary schools unable to churn out enough doctors and techs to fill the void.

Krahn left her North Carolina practice three months ago and now oversees nine veterinary and animal hospital clinics across Utah and Idaho under Pathway Vet Alliance.

"All of my practices are booking out several weeks in advance. Clients are actually calling around and scheduling appointments at multiple locations," and even resorting to emergency care facilities, she said.

Banfield Pet Hospital, one of the largest national providers of preventive veterinary medicine, had approximately half a million more pet visits in 2020 than in 2019. And its telehealth service more than doubled in volume from March through the end of last year.

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Thrive, another veterinary hospital primary care group, with 110 facilities across the U.S., reported a 20% increase in demand during the pandemic. Both repeated a common refrain — as humans spent more time with their pets, they were more in tune with their ailments — big and small.

“With COVID, a lot of people became powerless to the ones closest to them,” said Claire Pickens, a senior director at Thrive, “but the one thing they still had the ability to control was caring for their pet.”

Clinics have been forced to streamline, having patients fill out forms online or by phone pre-appointment because hiring additional staff often isn’t an option.

“The industry is growing at a rate that it can’t fill all the roles needed to keep up with the increased demand for services,” said Pickens.

Veterinary positions are projected to grow 16% by 2029, nearly four times the average of most other occupations, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics. Vet tech jobs are expected to increase nearly 20% in the next five years.

“We are still short staffed despite active seeking of additional staff,” said Dr. Katarzyna Ferry, Veterinary Specialty Hospital of Palm Beach Gardens.

Verg, a 24-hour emergency and specialty hospital in Brooklyn, reported a 40% jump in emergency care since the pandemic began. That’s also meant more pet hospitalizations, straining various specialties like surgery and cardiology.

“The demand continues to grow,” causing extreme weariness in a profession known for its big-hearted workers, said Verg’s chief medical officer, Dr. Brett Levitzke.

“Fear of the unknown with the pandemic leads to more intense emotions from our clients,” said Levitzke. He’s seen expletive-laced outbursts and threats from pet owners, and also outpourings of love, with cards and baked goods. After the toll on the staff became noticeable, they hired a compassion fatigue specialist for support.

“Unfortunately, compassion fatigue, anxiety, and depression already plagued our profession, and the pandemic has certainly taken it to another level,” Levitzke said.

Krahn said she sold her North Carolina practice to Pathway and later took an administrative role with the company in part to provide practical and emotional support to veterinarians, knowing the toll first-hand.

“As veterinarians, it’s our job to care, but we also take care of people through their animals,” said Krahn. “Doctors and support teams struggle with caring for themselves in a way that preserves them to be able to keep doing this.”

Number of children traveling alone at border eases in April

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The number of unaccompanied children encountered on the U.S. border with Mexico in April eased from an all-time high a month earlier, while more adults were found coming without families, authorities said Tuesday.

Authorities encountered 17,171 children traveling alone, down 9% from 18,960 in March, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, but still well above the previous high of 11,475 reported in May 2019 by the Border Patrol, which began publishing numbers in 2009.

Overall, the Border Patrol’s 173,460 encounters with migrants on the Mexican border in April were up 3% from 169,213 in March, the highest level since April 2000. The numbers aren’t directly comparable because a solid majority of those stopped in April were quickly expelled from the country under federal pandemic-related powers that deny rights to seek asylum. Being expelled carries no legal consequences, so many people try to cross multiple times.

Border Patrol encounters with people coming in families fell in similar proportion to unaccompanied children — down 10% to 48,226 from 53,406 in March. Slightly more than one of three family encounters resulted in pandemic-related expulsions.

The numbers offer the latest read on one of the most serious challenges to Joe Biden’s young presidency. Despite some encouraging news in April on unaccompanied children and families, Biden has a lot riding on a new “humane” asylum system that has yet to be unveiled. There don’t appear to be quick, easy answers.

Single adults from Mexico and Central America drove the overall increase in activity in April. The Border Patrol had 108,301 encounters with adults traveling without children, up 12% from 97,074 in March. Nearly nine of 10 adult encounters ended in expulsions under pandemic-related authority granted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Biden has exempted unaccompanied children from expulsion, allowing them to stay in the U.S. while pursuing asylum claims. Families with young children are also often released in the U.S. while their cases wind through the bottlenecked immigration court system.

The government has made big strides moving children from grossly overcrowded Border Patrol facilities to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shelters, which are more suited to longer-term stays until children are placed with sponsors in the United States, typically parents or close relatives.

The average stay for an unaccompanied child in Border Patrol custody has plummeted to about 20 hours, below the legal limit of 72 hours and down from 133 hours in late March, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said last week. There were 455 unaccompanied children in Border Patrol custody on Monday, down from more than 5,700 in late March.

Health and Human Services has opened 14 emergency intake centers, raising capacity to nearly 20,000 beds from 952 when the Federal Emergency Management Agency stepped in to help March 13. As of Monday, Health and Human Services had 20,669 children in its care.

Mexico has been reluctant to take back Central American families with young children, especially in Tamaulipas state bordering Texas' Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. Many are being released in the U.S. while their asylum cases are considered by immigration authorities. Some families are flown to El Paso, Texas, and San Diego to be expelled from there, where Mexican authorities are more willing to take them.

Judge asked to OK evidence of Ahmaud Arbery's past troubles

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — Attorneys for a white father and son charged with chasing and killing Ahmaud Arbery are asking a judge to allow evidence of the slain Black man's past problems to be presented when their clients stand trial for murder.

Prosecutors are fighting to keep Arbery's criminal record and other prior problems out of the trial, while seeking the judge's permission to introduce unflattering evidence about the defendants — namely text messages that contain racist slurs and social media posts with racist themes.

Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley has scheduled hearings on legal motions Wednesday and Thursday at a courthouse in Brunswick, 70 miles (110 kilometers) south of Savannah.

The judge's rulings could have a big impact on how the trial plays out. Last week he scheduled jury selection to begin Oct. 18 in the murder trial of Travis McMichael and his father Greg McMichael, as well as a neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan.

All three are charged with malice murder and other counts in Arbery's Feb. 23, 2020, slaying. The McMichaels armed themselves and pursued the 25-year-old Black man in a pickup truck after they spotted him running in their neighborhood. Bryan joined the chase and took cellphone video of Travis McMichael shooting Arbery three times at close range with a shotgun.

The case sparked a national outcry during a year of protests over killings of unarmed Black people. The Justice Department on April 28 added hate crime charges against the McMichaels and Bryan, who all pleaded not guilty to the federal counts before a U.S. magistrate judge on Tuesday.

In state court this week, Walmsley plans to hear arguments on 12 legal motions awaiting settlement ahead of the planned murder trial.

Defense attorneys for the McMichaels want the jury to know about 10 incidents from Arbery's past, including that he was on probation at the time he was killed. Court records show Arbery had pleaded guilty to charges that he carried a gun onto a high school campus in 2013, a year after he graduated, as well as a shoplifting charge for stealing a TV from a Walmart store in 2017.

Prosecutors say Arbery's past is irrelevant considering none of the defendants knew him prior to the

fatal chase.

"The only purpose for placing the 'other acts' of Mr. Arbery before a jury is to smear the character of Mr. Arbery and suggest that his murder was deserved," prosecutors wrote in a court filing.

Prosecutors have asked the judge to allow jurors to see text messages and social media posts that they contend show a lack of "racial goodwill" by all three defendants. They include a text message exchange from 2019 in which Travis McMichael twice uses a racist slur for Black people.

Georgia Bureau of Investigation agent Richard Dial has testified Bryan told investigators that Travis McMichael uttered a racist slur while standing over Arbery as he bled in the street. Jason Sheffield, an attorney for Travis McMichael, said his client denies making the remark.

Democrats press for broader voter access as GOP resists

By BRIAN SLODYSKO and CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans in the U.S. Senate mounted an aggressive case against Democrats' sweeping election and voter-access legislation, pushing to roll back proposals for automatic registration, 24-hour ballot drop boxes and other changes in an increasingly charged national debate.

The legislation, a top priority of Democrats in the aftermath of the divisive 2020 election, would bring about the largest overhaul of U.S. voting in a generation, touching nearly every aspect of the electoral process. It would remove hurdles to voting erected in the name of election security and curtail the influence of big money in politics.

At the end of a long, contentious day, the Rules Committee deadlocked 9-9 on Tuesday over advancing the bill to the full Senate in its current form. That leaves it to Democratic leader Chuck Schumer to try to invoke a special process to force the legislation ahead.

Though it is federal legislation, Republicans are fighting a national campaign against it rooted in state battles to restrict new ways of voting that have unfolded during the pandemic. Just Tuesday, the Arizona Legislature sent the governor a bill that would make it easier to purge infrequent voters from a list of those who automatically get mail-in ballots, the latest battleground state to push through changes likely to take months or years to finally settle in court.

GOP Senate leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky is so determined to stop the legislation that he made a rare appearance at Tuesday's Rules Committee session in Washington. McConnell and other Republicans on the panel argued for a wave of amendments against key sections of the bill, which Democrats turned aside in an hours-long voting session.

McConnell declared, "Our democracy is not in crisis" and said he wasn't about to cede control of elections to new laws "under the false pretense of saving it."

With Democrats holding the White House and narrow control of Congress, they see the legislation as crucial — perhaps their best chance to counter efforts by state-level Republicans who have seized on former President Donald Trump's false claims about the 2020 election to push ballot restrictions.

Yet even as they tout the measure, Democrats find themselves playing defense, unable to push their legislative response to President Joe Biden's desk. While the elections overhaul has passed the House, there's no clear path forward in the Senate, which is split 50-50. Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have both said they oppose making changes to the Senate's filibuster rules, which would be needed to maneuver the bill past unified Republican opposition.

Trump's election claims, which have only increased in the six months since his defeat, were rejected by Republican as well as Democratic election officials in state after state, by U.S. cybersecurity officials and by courts up to the U.S. Supreme Court. And his attorney general said there was no evidence of fraud that could change the election outcome.

"President Trump told a big lie, one of the biggest ever told. We all know that. Every single person in this room knows that," Sen. Schumer, the Democratic majority leader, said at the hearing. "And it's taking root, this big lie is taking root in our country, not just in the minds of his voters but in the laws of the land."

The laws emerging around the country "are about one thing and one thing alone: making it harder for

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Americans to vote," he said.

The Democrats' measure would not stop every bill being passed in Republican states across the country. But it would make it difficult, if not impossible, for states to press ahead with many of the new rules.

That's because the legislation would create nationwide rules for early voting and no-excuse absentee voting, standardizing the process. Currently, six states don't offer early, in-person voting and a third of states still require an excuse — such as illness or planning to be away from home on Election Day — to vote by mail, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Republicans walked a narrow line during much of the discussion on Tuesday, criticizing congressional Democrats for seeking to change voting rules while at the same time offering robust support for GOP state lawmakers who are doing the same.

The GOP senators cited high voter turnout in last year's presidential election during the pandemic as proof that the system worked without the Democrats' changes and voters were not disenfranchised. But they offered little justification for GOP efforts at the state level to impose new limits on voting, particularly mail voting.

Republicans also attacked provisions that would create a new public financing system for political campaigns and strengthen the enforcement capabilities of the federal agency tasked with policing elections, as well as dozens of other proposals that would dictate how states conduct their elections.

"This bill doesn't protect voting rights, it steals voting rights from the American people," said Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas.

While Republicans argue the new state rules are needed to secure the vote, critics warn the states are seeking to reduce voter access, particularly for Black voters, who are a crucial part of the Democratic Party base. That could usher in a new Jim Crow era for the 21st century, they warn.

"These bills moving in state capitals across America are not empty threats, they are real efforts to stop people from voting," said Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat and chairwoman of the Senate Rules Committee.

Yet moderate members of the Democratic caucus — not just Republicans — pose a sizable obstacle to the bill becoming law.

Manchin has called for any elections overhaul to be done on a bipartisan basis, despite Republican insistence that no changes are necessary. Other Democrats want to pare back the bill to core voting protections to try to put Republicans on the spot.

Democrats have been making their own changes to draw more support.

In the latest version of the legislation, states would have more time and flexibility to put new federal rules in place. Some election officials had complained of unrealistic timelines, increased costs and onerous requirements.

States would have more time to launch same-day voter registration at polling places and to comply with new voting system requirements. They would also be able to apply for an extension if they were unable to meet the deadline for automatic voter registration. Officials have said these are complex processes that require equipment changes or upgrades that will take time.

Democrats are also dropping a requirement that local election offices provide self-sealing envelopes with mail ballots and cover the costs of return postage. They plan to require the U.S. Postal Service to carry mail ballots and ballot request forms free of charge, with the federal government picking up the tab.

But Republicans argue the changes would do little to limit what they view as unwarranted federal intrusions into local elections.

"Giving states more time to implement bad policy doesn't make the policy less bad," said Sen Roy Blunt of Missouri, the ranking minority member on the committee. "I think the federal government taking over elections is the wrong thing to do."

House GOP set to oust Trump critic Liz Cheney from top post

By ALAN FRAM and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans seem ready to toss Rep. Liz Cheney from her leadership post after she repeatedly rebuked former President Donald Trump for his false claims of election fraud and his role in fomenting the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol attack.

Voting behind closed doors Wednesday, lawmakers were expected to remove Cheney, R-Wyo., from the party's No. 3 House position, a jarring blow to what's been a fast-rising career. She is Congress' highest-ranking Republican woman and a daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, and her demotion would provide the latest evidence that challenging Trump can be career-threatening.

In an audacious signal that she was not backing down, Cheney took to a nearly empty House chamber Tuesday evening to deliver an unapologetic four-minute assault on her GOP adversaries and defense of her own position.

"Remaining silent and ignoring the lie emboldens the liar," she said, adding, "I will not sit back and watch in silence while others lead our party down a path that abandons the rule of law and joins the former president's crusade to undermine our democracy."

Cheney's replacement was widely expected to be Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., who entered the House in 2015 at age 30, then the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. Stefanik owns a more moderate voting record than Cheney but has evolved into a vigorous Trump defender who's echoed some of his unfounded claims about widespread election cheating.

It was initially unclear when the separate vote on Cheney's replacement would be.

Stripping Cheney, 54, of her leadership job would stand as a striking, perhaps historic moment for the GOP.

One of the nation's two major parties was in effect declaring an extraordinary admission requirement to its highest ranks: fealty to, or at least silence about, Trump's lie that he lost his November reelection bid due to widespread fraud. In states around the country, officials and judges of both parties found no evidence to support Trump's claims that extensive illegalities caused his defeat.

It's been clear that Cheney's days in leadership were numbered as House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., No. 2 leader Steve Scalise, R-La., joined Trump and other Republicans from across the party's spectrum aligned against her.

Critics said Cheney's offense wasn't her views on Trump but her persistence in publicly expressing them, undermining the unity they want party leaders to display as they message in advance of next year's elections, when they hope to win House control.

"It's not about right or wrong. It's about the focus" of House Republicans, Scalise said Tuesday.

Many Republicans also agree with Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who's said the allegiance many GOP voters have to Trump is so intense that the party can't succeed without him.

A small number of Republicans have spoken out against removing Cheney.

"It will do nothing but drive some people away from our party," said Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, the GOP's 2012 presidential nominee and one who has clashed often with Trump.

Seemingly conceding that the numbers were against her, Cheney made no discernible effort to cement support ahead of Wednesday's vote, several Republicans said.

Rather, she all but erected billboards advertising her clash with Trump, declaring in a Washington Post column last week, "The Republican Party is at a turning point, and Republicans must decide whether we are going to choose truth and fidelity to the Constitution."

Cheney has told Republicans she intends to remain in Congress and seek reelection next year in her solidly pro-Trump state. The former president has said he'll find a GOP primary challenger to oppose her.

Cheney arrived in Congress in 2017 with a well-known brand as an old-school conservative, favoring tax cuts, energy development and an assertive use of U.S. power abroad. By November 2018 she was elected to her current leadership job unopposed and seemed on an ambitious pathway, potentially including runs at becoming speaker, senator or even president.

She occasionally disagreed with Trump during his presidency over issues like his withdrawal from Syria and attacks on Dr. Anthony Fauci over the pandemic. But her career hit turbulence in January once she

became one of 10 House Republicans to back his second impeachment for inciting his supporters' deadly Capitol assault of Jan. 6. The Senate acquitted him.

In a memorable statement before the House impeachment vote, Cheney said: "The president of the United States summoned this mob, assembled the mob, and lit the flame of this attack. Everything that followed was his doing."

Her words — and her pre-vote announcement, which allowed Democrats to cite her opposition during the debate — infuriated many House conservatives.

She withstood a February effort by conservatives to boot her from leadership in a 145-61 secret ballot, but a McCarthy speech on her behalf is credited with saving her. That wasn't expected to happen this time.

Since then, she's stood by her views, in one noteworthy incident while McCarthy stood awkwardly nearby at a news conference.

Stefanik also arrived in Congress with sterling GOP establishment credentials. A Harvard graduate, she worked in President George W. Bush's White House and for the campaign of the GOP's 2012 vice presidential nominee, Wisconsin Rep. and later Speaker Paul Ryan.

Her district, bordering Canada and Vermont, voted twice for Barack Obama and then twice for Trump in the past four presidential elections. She opposed Trump's trademark 2017 tax cut and his efforts to unilaterally spend billions on his southwestern border wall.

Stefanik grabbed center stage as a fierce Trump defender in 2019 as the House impeached him over his efforts to pressure Ukraine to produce damaging information about Joe Biden, his Democratic rival. Senate acquittal followed.

While Stefanik has won adoration from Trump, some of Washington's hardest-right conservatives have remained suspicious of her moderate record.

Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, a member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, wrote colleagues Tuesday chastising "Republicans who campaign as Republicans but then vote for and advance the Democrats' agenda once sworn in."

No Stefanik challenger has yet emerged, and other conservatives like Scalise and Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, are in her camp.

"We have a great deal of support from the Freedom Caucus and others," she said Tuesday.

Scientists race to study variants in India as cases explode

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — A potentially worrisome variant of the coronavirus detected in India may spread more easily. But the country is behind in doing the kind of testing needed to track it and understand it better.

On Monday, the World Health Organization designated the new version of the virus a "variant of concern" based on preliminary research, alongside those that were first detected in Britain, South Africa and Brazil but have spread to other countries.

"We need much more information about this virus variant," said Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's technical lead for COVID-19. "We need more sequencing, targeted sequencing to be done and to be shared in India and elsewhere so that we know how much of this virus is circulating."

Viruses mutate constantly, and the surge in infections here has resulted in more opportunities for new versions to emerge.

But India was slow to start the genetic monitoring needed to see if those changes were happening and if they were making the coronavirus more infectious or deadly.

Such variants also need to be monitored to see if mutations help the virus escape the immune system, potentially leading to reinfections or making vaccines less effective. For now, the WHO stressed that COVID-19 vaccines are effective at preventing disease and death in people infected with the variant.

Indian scientists say their work has been hindered by bureaucratic obstacles and the government's reluctance to share vital data. India is sequencing around 1% of its total cases, and not all of the results are uploaded to the global database of coronavirus genomes.

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When there isn't enough sequencing, there will be blind spots and more worrisome mutations could go undetected until they're widespread, said Alina Chan, a postdoctoral researcher at Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard who is tracking global sequencing efforts.

Ravindra Gupta, a professor of clinical microbiology at the University of Cambridge, said: "It has all the hallmarks of the virus that we should be worried about."

First detected in the coastal Maharashtra state last year, the new variant has now been found in samples in 19 of the 27 states surveyed. Meanwhile a variant first detected in Britain has declined in India in the past 45 days.

Indian health officials have cautioned that it is too soon to attribute the nation's surge solely to such variants. Experts point out that the spread was catalyzed by government decisions to not pause religious gatherings and crowded election rallies.

Dr. Gagandeep Kang, who studies microorganisms at Christian Medical College at Vellore in southern India, said researchers need to figure out if the variant is capable of infecting those who previously had COVID-19 and, if so, whether it could result in severe disease.

"I don't get why people don't see this as important," she said.

Sequencing efforts in India have been haphazard. The country uploads 0.49 sequences per 1,000 cases to GISAID, a global data sharing effort, Chan said. The U.S., which had its own troubles with genetic monitoring, uploads about 10 in 1,000, while the U.K. does so for about 82 per 1,000 cases.

Late last year, Indian government institutions were ordered to buy domestic raw materials wherever possible, in keeping with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's goal of turning India "self-reliant." This proved impossible, since all materials for sequencing were imported, resulting in more paperwork, said Anurag Agarwal, the director of the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology. The obstacles were most pronounced between September and December, he said, but his lab was able to find workarounds and continued sequencing.

Other labs didn't, and scientists said that should have been when India ramped up its sequencing, because cases were declining at the time.

Even after a federal effort started in Jan. 18, bringing together 10 labs that can sequence 7,500 samples weekly, the actual work didn't start until mid-February due to other logistical issues, said Dr. Shahid Jameel, a virologist who chairs the scientific advisory group advising the consortium.

By then, India's cases had begun spiking.

Jameel said India has sequenced around 20,000 samples, but only 15,000 were publicly reported because some were missing vital data. Until late last month, a third of the samples sent by states were unusable, he said.

And now, the raging virus has infected many of the staff in the labs doing the work.

"Many of our labs are facing this problem," he said.

'Saboteur,' 'St. Elsewhere' star Norman Lloyd dies at 106

By LYNN ELBER and MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Norman Lloyd, whose role as kindly Dr. Daniel Auschlander on TV's "St. Elsewhere" was a single chapter in a distinguished stage and screen career that put him in the company of Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin and other greats, has died. He was 106.

Lloyd's son, Michael Lloyd, said his father died Tuesday at his home in the Brentwood neighborhood of Los Angeles.

His credits stretch from the earliest known U.S. TV drama, 1939's "On the Streets of New York" on the nascent NBC network, to 21st-century projects including "Modern Family" and "The Practice."

"If modern film history has a voice, it is Norman Lloyd's," reviewer Kenneth Turan wrote in the Los Angeles Times in 2012 after Lloyd regaled a Cannes Film Festival crowd with anecdotes about rarified friends and colleagues including Charlie Chaplin and Jean Renoir.

The wiry, 5-foot-5 Lloyd, whose energy was boundless off-screen as well, continued to play tennis into

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his 90s. In 2015, he appeared in the Amy Schumer comedy "Trainwreck."

His most notable film part was as the villain who plummets off the Statue of Liberty in 1942's "Saboteur," directed by Hitchcock, who also cast Lloyd in the classic thriller 1945's "Spellbound."

His other movie credits include Jean Renoir's "The Southerner," Charlie Chaplin's "Limelight," "Dead Poets Society" with Robin Williams, "In Her Shoes" with Cameron Diaz and "Gangs of New York" with Daniel Day-Lewis.

On Broadway, Lloyd played the Fool opposite Louis Calhern's King Lear in 1950, co-starred with Jessica Tandy in the comedy "Madam, Will You Walk" and directed Jerry Stiller in "The Taming of the Shrew" in 1957.

He was also part of Welles' 1937 modern-dress fascist-era production of "Julius Caesar" that has gone down in history as one of the landmark stage pieces in the American theater. Norman played the small but key role of Cinna the Poet, opposite Welles' Brutus. Stage magazine put Welles on its June cover and proclaimed the production "one of the most exciting dramatic events of our time."

Born Nov. 8, 1914, in Jersey City, New Jersey, Lloyd jumped into acting as a youngster in the 1920s. On stage, he was a regular with Welles' Mercury Theater, the groundbreaking 1930s troupe that also featured Joseph Cotton and Agnes Moorehead and formed the basis of Welles' classic film debut, "Citizen Kane."

His other plays included "Crime," directed by Elia Kazan and featuring his future wife, Peggy Craven. The couple were married for 75 years, until Peggy Lloyd's death in 2011 at age 98.

TV viewers knew him best as the memorable calm center of St. Eligius hospital on the 1982-88 NBC drama series "St. Elsewhere." His Dr. Daniel Auschlander was originally only supposed to appear in a few episodes, but Lloyd became a series regular and stayed with the show for the entire run. The series would inspire such shows as "E.R." and "Grey's Anatomy."

Lloyd worked steadily as a TV actor and director in the early 1950s, but the political liberal found his career in jeopardy during the Hollywood blacklist period aimed at communists or their sympathizers.

In 1957, Hitchcock came to his rescue, Lloyd told the Los Angeles Times in 2014. When the famed director sought to hire Lloyd as associate producer on his series "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" but was told "There is a problem with Norman Lloyd," Hitchcock didn't back down, Lloyd recalled.

"He said three words: 'I want him,'" Lloyd said. He was immediately hired and eventually worked as executive producer on another series, "The Alfred Hitchcock Hour."

His other TV credits include roles in "Star Trek: The Next Generation," "Murder, She Wrote," "The Paper Chase," "Quincy M.E.," "Kojak" and "The Practice."

In 2014, in recognition of his 82 years in show business, and reaching the age of 100, the Los Angeles City Council proclaimed that his birthday of Nov. 8, would be honored as "Norman Lloyd Day."

Israel, Hamas escalate heavy fighting with no end in sight

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel stepped up its attacks on the Gaza Strip, flattening a high-rise building used by the Hamas militant group and killing at least three militants in their hideouts on Tuesday as Palestinian rockets rained down almost nonstop on parts of Israel.

It was the heaviest fighting between the bitter enemies since 2014, and it showed no signs of slowing.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to expand the offensive, while Gaza militants unleashed a fierce late-night barrage of rockets that set off air-raid sirens and explosions throughout the densely populated Tel Aviv metropolitan area.

Just after daybreak Wednesday, Israel unleashed dozens of airstrikes in the course of a few minutes, targeting police and security installations, witnesses said. A wall of dark gray smoke rose over Gaza City. Iyad al-Bozum, a spokesman for the Hamas-run Interior Ministry, said airstrikes destroyed the central police headquarters in Gaza City, a compound with several buildings.

Five Israelis, including three women and a child, were killed by rocket fire Tuesday and early Wednesday, and dozens of people wounded. The death toll in Gaza rose to 35 Palestinians, including 10 children,

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according to the Health Ministry. Over 200 people were wounded.

In the West Bank, meanwhile, a 26-year-old Palestinian was killed during clashes with Israeli troops that entered al-Fawar refugee camp in southern Hebron, the ministry said.

In another sign of widening unrest, demonstrations erupted in Arab communities across Israel, where protesters set dozens of vehicles on fire in confrontations with police.

The fighting between Israel and Hamas was the most intense since a 50-day war in the summer of 2014. In just over 24 hours, the current round of violence, sparked by religious tensions in the contested city of Jerusalem, increasingly resembled that devastating war.

The booms of Israeli airstrikes and hisses of outgoing rocket fire could be heard in Gaza throughout the day, and large plumes of smoke from targeted buildings rose into the air. Israel resumed a policy of airstrikes aimed at killing wanted militants and began to take down entire buildings — a tactic that drew heavy international criticism in 2014.

In Israel, the nonstop barrages of rocket fire left long streaks of white smoke in their wake, while the explosions of anti-rocket interceptors boomed overhead. Air-raid sirens wailed throughout the day, sending panicked residents scurrying for cover.

In a nationally televised address, Netanyahu said that Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad militant groups “have paid, and I tell you here, will pay a heavy price for their aggression.”

He claimed that Israel had killed dozens of militants and inflicted heavy damage on hundreds of targets. “This campaign will take time,” he said. “With determination, unity and strength, we will restore security to the citizens of Israel.”

He stood alongside Defense Minister Benny Gantz, a political rival, in a show of unity. “There are lots of targets lined up. This is only the beginning,” Gantz said. The military said it was activating some 5,000 reservists and sending troop reinforcements to the Gaza border.

The current violence has coincided with the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, a time of heightened religious sentiments.

Critics say heavy-handed Israeli police measures in and around Jerusalem’s Old City helped stoke nightly unrest. Another flashpoint has been the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, where dozens of Palestinians are under threat of eviction by Jewish settlers.

Confrontations erupted last weekend at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, which is the third-holiest site in Islam and the holiest site in Judaism. Over four days, Israeli police fired tear gas and stun grenades at Palestinians in the compound who hurled stones and chairs at the forces. At times, police fired stun grenades into the carpeted mosque.

On Monday evening, Hamas began firing rockets from Gaza. From there on, the escalation was rapid.

In a televised address, Hamas’ exiled leader, Ismail Haniyeh, said Israel bore responsibility. “It’s the Israeli occupation that set Jerusalem on fire, and the flames reached Gaza,” he said.

Palestinian health officials gave no breakdown on the death toll in Gaza, but Islamic Jihad confirmed that three senior commanders were killed in a strike on their hideout in a Gaza City apartment building. The Health Ministry said 10 children and a woman were also killed.

Netanyahu said Israel had attacked hundreds of targets. The fiercest attack was a set of airstrikes that brought down an entire 12-story building. The building housed important Hamas offices, as well as a gym and some start-up businesses. Israel fired a series of warning shots before demolishing the building, allowing people to flee and there were no casualties.

Israeli aircraft heavily damaged another Gaza City building early Wednesday. The nine-story structure housed residential apartments, medical companies and a dental clinic. A drone fired five warning rockets before the bombing. Israel said the building housed Hamas intelligence offices and the group’s command responsible for planning attacks on Israeli targets in the occupied West Bank.

Fighter jets struck the building again after journalists and rescuers had gathered around. There was no immediate word on casualties. The high-rise stood 200 meters (650 feet) away from the Associated Press bureau in Gaza City, and smoke and debris reached the office.

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Soon after the bombing, Hamas announced that it would resume its attacks and aimed 100 rockets at the Israeli desert town of Beer-Sheva. Hamas said the renewed barrage was in response to the strike on the building. The latest rocket attack early Wednesday killed a man and his seven-year-old daughter in the central city of Lod, according to Israel's Kan public radio.

The Israeli military said hundreds of rockets were launched toward Israel. Two women, including an Indian caregiver, were killed in separate rocket strikes in the southern city of Ashkelon.

Then, late at night, Hamas said it unleashed a barrage of 130 rockets toward Tel Aviv in response to the destruction of the high-rise. As the rockets rose into the skies, mosques across Gaza blared with chants of "God is great," "victory to Islam" and "resistance."

One rocket killed a woman in the city of Rishon LeZion, and another struck a bus in the nearby city of Holon, wounding three people, including a young girl.

The violence was beginning to spill over to Israel's own Arab population.

In Lod, thousands of mourners joined a funeral for an Arab man killed by a suspected Jewish gunman the previous night. The crowd clashed with police, and set a synagogue and some 30 vehicles, including a police car, on fire, Israeli media reported. Paramedics said a 56-year-old man was seriously hurt after his car was pelted with stones.

The city's mayor, Yair Revivo, described the situation in the mixed Jewish-Arab city as "civil war," and the government ordered a deployment of paramilitary border guards from the West Bank to Lod.

In neighboring Ramle, ultra-nationalist Jewish demonstrators were filmed attacking cars belonging to Arabs. In the northern port town of Acre, protesters torched a Jewish-owned restaurant and hotel. Police arrested dozens of others at Arab protests in other towns.

Diplomats sought to intervene, with Qatar, Egypt and the United Nations working to deliver a cease-fire. All three serve as mediators between Israel and Hamas.

The U.N. Security Council planned to hold its second closed emergency meeting in three days Wednesday on the escalating violence, an indication of growing international concern. Council diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity because discussions have been private, said the U.N.'s most powerful body did not issue a statement because of U.S. concerns that it could escalate tensions.

The escalation comes at a time of political limbo in Israel.

Netanyahu has been caretaker prime minister since an inconclusive parliamentary election in March. After failing to form a coalition government by a deadline last week, his political rivals have now been given the opportunity.

The support of an Arab-backed party with Islamist roots is key for the anti-Netanyahu bloc. But the current tensions might deter the party's leader, Mansour Abbas, from joining a coalition with Jewish parties, at least for the time being.

The sides have three more weeks to reach a deal. If they fail, Israel would likely begin an unprecedented fifth election campaign in just over two years.

Judge dismisses NRA bankruptcy case in blow to gun group

By JAKE BLEIBERG and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — A federal judge dismissed the National Rifle Association's bankruptcy case Tuesday, leaving the powerful gun-rights group to face a New York state lawsuit that accuses it of financial abuses and aims to put it out of business.

The judge was tasked with deciding whether the NRA should be allowed to incorporate in Texas instead of New York, where the state is suing in an effort to disband the group. Though headquartered in Virginia, the NRA was chartered as a nonprofit in New York in 1871 and is incorporated in the state.

Judge Harlin Hale said in a written order that he was dismissing the case because he found the bankruptcy was not filed in good faith.

"The Court believes the NRA's purpose in filing bankruptcy is less like a traditional bankruptcy case in which a debtor is faced with financial difficulties or a judgment that it cannot satisfy and more like cases

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in which courts have found bankruptcy was filed to gain an unfair advantage in litigation or to avoid a regulatory scheme," Hale wrote.

His decision followed 11 days of testimony and arguments. Lawyers for New York and the NRA's former advertising agency grilled the group's embattled top executive, Wayne LaPierre, who acknowledged putting the NRA into Chapter 11 bankruptcy without the knowledge or assent of most of its board and other top officers.

"Excluding so many people from the process of deciding to file for bankruptcy, including the vast majority of the board of directors, the chief financial officer, and the general counsel, is nothing less than shocking," the judge added.

Phillip Journey, an NRA board member and Kansas judge who had sought to have an examiner appointed to investigate the group's leadership, was concise about Hale's judgment: "1 word, disappointed," he wrote in a text message.

LaPierre pledged in a statement to continue to fight for gun rights.

"Although we are disappointed in some aspects of the decision, there is no change in the overall direction of our Association, its programs, or its Second Amendment advocacy," LaPierre said via the NRA's Twitter account. "Today is ultimately about our members — those who stand courageously with the NRA in defense of constitutional freedom. We remain an independent organization that can chart its own course, even as we remain in New York to confront our adversaries."

Lawyers for New York Attorney General Letitia James argued that the case was an attempt by NRA leadership to escape accountability for using the group's coffers as their personal piggybank. But the NRA's attorneys said it was a legitimate effort to avoid a political attack by James, who is a Democrat.

LaPierre testified that he kept the bankruptcy largely secret to prevent leaks from the group's 76-member board, which is divided in its support for him.

Hale dismissed the NRA's case without prejudice, meaning the group can refile it. However, he warned that in doing so the NRA's leaders would risk losing control.

The judge wrote that if the case is refiled, he would immediately take up "concerns about disclosure, transparency, secrecy, conflicts of interest" between NRA officials and their bankruptcy legal team. He said that the lawyers "unusual involvement" in the NRA's affairs raised concerns that the group "could not fulfill the fiduciary duty" and might lead him to appoint a trustee to oversee it.

Hale noted the NRA could still pursue other legal steps to incorporate in Texas, but James said such a move would require her approval — and that seems unlikely.

In a tweet, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott said: "Texas stands with the @NRA and we look forward to working with the Association on their plans to move to Texas."

The NRA declared bankruptcy in January, five months after James' office sued seeking its dissolution following allegations that executives illegally diverted tens of millions of dollars for lavish personal trips, no-show contracts and other questionable expenditures.

James is New York's chief law enforcement officer and has regulatory power over nonprofit organizations incorporated in the state. She sued the NRA last August, saying at the time that the "breadth and the depth of the corruption and the illegality" at the NRA justified its closure. James took similar action to force the closure of former President Donald Trump's charitable foundation after alleging he used it to advance business and political interests.

During a news conference after the ruling, James said she read transcripts of LaPierre's testimony, which was "filled with contradictions." She reiterated that she intends to see the NRA dissolved, which ultimately would be decided by a judge, not the attorney general. The discovery process in her lawsuit is ongoing, James said, and she expects a trial to happen sometime in 2022.

"There are individuals and officers who are using the NRA as their personal piggy bank and they need to be held accountable," James said.

Shannon Watts, who founded Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, said in a series of tweets that the bankruptcy dismissal "comes at the worst possible time for the NRA: right as background checks are being debated in the Senate."

"It will be onerous if not impossible for the NRA to effectively oppose gun safety and lobby lawmakers while simultaneously fighting court battles and mounting debt," said Watts, whose organization is part of the Michael Bloomberg-backed Everytown for Gun Safety.

The NRA's financial standing has been upended by the coronavirus pandemic, but there was consensus during the bankruptcy trial that it remains financially sound

Last year, the group laid off dozens of employees, canceled its national convention and scuttled fund-raising. The NRA's bankruptcy filing listed between \$100 million and \$500 million in assets and the same range in liabilities. In announcing the case, it trumpeted being "in its strongest financial condition in years."

Adam Skaggs, chief counsel at the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, said that even a weakened NRA will likely continue to shape America's gun debates.

"I think the question is, despite those self-inflicted wounds and despite the fact that they're in some ways a shadow of their former self, can they continue to exert influence and try and keep the opponents of even the most modest reforms to increase gun safety toeing the line?" he said.

Liz Cheney says Trump and GOP backers threaten democracy

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A combative Rep. Liz Cheney lashed out at leaders of her own Republican Party late Tuesday, taking to the House floor on the eve of her near-certain ouster from a leadership post to warn that former President Donald Trump and his GOP supporters are threatening to "undermine our democracy."

In an abruptly announced evening appearance in a nearly empty House chamber, Cheney, R-Wyo., cast herself as a defender of the Constitution. Her four-minute speech also served notice that she had no intention of backing down in her battle against a former president who has retained loyalty among many GOP lawmakers and voters, even as it leaves her once promising political career in question.

"Remaining silent and ignoring the lie emboldens the liar," she said, adding, "I will not sit back and watch in silence while others lead our party down a path that abandons the rule of law and joins the former president's crusade to undermine our democracy."

Cheney has for weeks faced calls for her ouster from her leadership job after her repeated public rejection of Trump's false claim that he lost his reelection bid last November because of widespread cheating. She's also insistently blamed him for inciting supporters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, resulting in five deaths, even as other Republicans have sought to downplay the attack.

That stance has angered many Republicans who say that as her party's No. 3 House leader, she should focus on messages that would help the party win House control in next year's elections, not on internal party divisions over the former president. GOP lawmakers plan to meet Wednesday behind closed doors and are expected to strip her of her leadership job and ultimately replace her with Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., a Trump loyalist.

The widespread GOP opposition to Cheney's stubborn stance has created a jaw-dropping moment in which one of the country's two major parties is insisting on acceptance of, or silence about, the former president's falsehoods as the price of remaining in Republican leadership.

"Millions of Americans have been misled by the former president," Cheney said. "They have heard only his words, but not the truth as he continues to undermine our democratic process, sowing seeds of doubt about whether democracy really works at all."

The latest spike in hostilities was prompted last week when Trump released a statement saying, "The Fraudulent Presidential Election of 2020 will be, from this day forth, known as THE BIG LIE!"

On Tuesday, Cheney said: "Today, we face a threat America has never seen before. A former president who provoked a violent attack on this Capitol, in an effort to steal the election, has resumed his aggressive effort to convince Americans that the election was stolen from him. He risks inciting further violence."

Trump foes have been using "the big lie" to describe his repetition of his fallacious claim that the election was fraud-ridden. State and local agencies and courts around the country have found no evidence

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that Trump lost due to cheating.

Cheney did not mention her GOP adversaries by name. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., and No. 2 House Republican Steve Scalise, R-La., have called for her removal and are supporting Stefanik to replace her.

Cheney is a daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney. Her career had defined her firmly as an old-school conservative GOP figure, advocating for tax cuts and an assertive U.S. presence abroad.

She criticized Trump at times during his presidency. But their relationship plummeted after she became one of just 10 House Republicans to vote for impeaching him for inciting his backers to invade the Capitol as Congress formally certified now-President Joe Biden's electoral college victory.

Gas stations report shortages as pipeline shutdown drags on

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ, JEFF AMY and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

CHAMBLEE, Ga. (AP) — More than 1,000 gas stations in the Southeast reported running out of fuel, primarily because of what analysts say is unwarranted panic-buying among drivers, as the shutdown of a major pipeline by a gang of hackers entered its fifth day Tuesday.

Government officials acted swiftly to waive safety and environmental rules to speed the delivery of fuel by truck, ship or rail to motorists and airports, even as they sought to assure the public that there was no cause for alarm.

The Colonial Pipeline, the biggest fuel pipeline in the U.S., delivering about 45% of what is consumed on the East Coast, was hit on Friday with a cyberattack by hackers who lock up computer systems and demand a ransom to release them. The attack raised concerns, once again, about the vulnerability of the nation's critical infrastructure.

A large part of the pipeline resumed operations manually late Monday, and Colonial anticipates restarting most of its operations by the end of the week, U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said.

Motorists may still feel a crunch because it takes a few days to ramp up operations, but she said there is no reason to hoard gasoline.

"We know that we have gasoline; we just have to get it to the right places," she said.

S&P's Oil Price Information Service put the number of gas stations encountering shortages at more than 1,000.

"A lot of that is because they're selling three or four times as much gasoline that they normally sell in a given day, because people do panic," said Tom Kloza, an analyst with S&P. "It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

The pipeline runs from the Texas Gulf Coast to the New York metropolitan area. The states most dependent on the pipeline include Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee and the Carolinas, Kloza said.

In Virginia, 7.7% of the state's nearly 3,900 gas stations reported running out of fuel Tuesday, according to Gasbuddy.com, which tracks supply. In North Carolina, 8.5% of almost 5,400 stations were out, the company said.

There were scattered reports of higher gasoline prices, but prices were rising even before the pipeline incident heading into the busy summer driving season. Nevertheless, Granholm warned gas station owners, "We will have no tolerance for price gouging."

To ease brief shortages, the White House is considering temporarily waiving a law that says ships delivering products between U.S. ports must be built and manned by Americans.

The Transportation Department also is relaxing some workforce requirements and enlisting railroads to deliver fuel inland. And the Environmental Protection Agency lifted some fuel quality requirements on an emergency basis.

"We're looking at every option we have across the federal government and all of the federal agencies," Granholm said.

In Georgia, Gov. Brian Kemp suspended state taxes on motor fuels through Saturday. Georgia collects a gasoline tax of 28.7 cents per gallon and a diesel tax of 32.2 cents per gallon.

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"It will probably help level the price at the pump off for a little while," Kemp said.

However, he urged people not to hoard gasoline, saying he expects the situation to be resolved soon.

"You don't need to go out and fill up every 5-gallon can you've got," the governor said.

Scattered gas stations in metro Atlanta were out of fuel Monday and Tuesday. In Georgia, nearly 6% of about 6,400 stations had run out of fuel, Gasbuddy.com said.

In Florida, drivers in some areas faced long lines, and 3% of gas stations had run out.

The state's governor, Ron DeSantis, declared a state of emergency Tuesday evening in response to the gasoline. The move activates the Florida National Guard, as needed, and directs state emergency management officials to work with federal and local officials.

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam also declared a state of emergency.

Dave Gussak drove from one station to the next in Tallahassee, Florida, in search of gas, seeing a line nearly a mile long at the pumps outside a Costco. He eventually passed a station with gas on the way to Florida State University where he works.

"This is insane," he said.

Irena Yanava's tank was about half full, but she wasn't about to take chances as she sat in her car at the same Tallahassee gas station.

"I know that I'll be needing it soon, so why not?" she said.

Citgo's Fairfax, Virginia, terminal ran out of premium reformulated gasoline, and its Richmond, Virginia, terminal was out of unleaded regular, according to the American Automobile Association, citing a shipper bulletin.

The Colonial Pipeline carries jet fuel as well. American Airlines rerouted two long-haul flights from Charlotte, North Carolina, because of possible shortages. Passengers flying to Honolulu will have to change planes in Dallas, and those heading to London will stop in Boston to refuel.

Southwest and United flights carried extra fuel on flights to Nashville, Tennessee, Baltimore and some other airports in case jet fuel was unavailable at those airports. Normally airlines load only enough fuel for a single flight, because topping off adds to the plane's weight and hurts mileage. Most planes can carry enough fuel for a round trip, but the extra fuel burn costs money.

Pentagon chief during Jan. 6 riot defends military response

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's acting defense secretary during the Jan. 6 Capitol riots plans to tell Congress that he was concerned in the days before the insurrection that sending troops to the building would fan fears of a military coup and could cause a repeat of the deadly Kent State shootings, according to a copy of prepared remarks obtained by The Associated Press.

Christopher Miller's testimony is aimed at defending the Pentagon's response to the chaos of the day and rebutting broad criticism that military forces were too slow to arrive even as pro-Trump rioters violently breached the building and stormed inside.

He casts himself in his opening statement as a deliberate leader who was determined that the military have only limited involvement, a perspective he says was shaped by criticism of the aggressive response to the civil unrest that roiled American cities months earlier, as well as decades-old episodes that ended in violence.

The Defense Department, he will tell members of the House Oversight Committee on Wednesday, has "an extremely poor record in supporting domestic law enforcement," including during civil rights and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s.

"And some 51 years ago, on May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guard troops fired at demonstrators at Kent State University and killed four American civilians," Miller will say, adding, "I was committed to avoiding repeating these scenarios."

He will also deny that Trump, criticized for failing to forcefully condemn the rioters, had any involvement in the Defense Department's response and will say that Trump had even suggested that 10,000 troops might be needed for Jan. 6.

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Miller, expected to testify alongside former acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen and District of Columbia Police Chief Robert Contee III, will be the most senior Defense Department official to participate in congressional hearings on the riots. The sessions so far have featured finger-pointing about missed intelligence, poor preparations and an inadequate law enforcement response.

The Capitol Police have faced criticism for being badly overmatched, the FBI for failing to share with sufficient urgency intelligence suggesting a possible "war" at the Capitol, and the Defense Department for an hourslong delay in getting support to the complex despite the violent, deadly chaos unfolding on TV.

"Our hearing will provide the American people the first opportunity to hear from top Trump Administration officials about the catastrophic intelligence and security failures that enabled this unprecedented terrorist attack on our nation's Capitol," the committee's chair, Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., said in a statement.

Rosen, testifying publicly for the first time about Jan. 6, is expected to tell lawmakers that the Justice Department "took appropriate precautions" ahead of the riot, putting tactical and other elite units on standby after local police reports indicated that 10,000 to 30,000 people were expected at rallies and protests, according to prepared remarks obtained by the AP.

Miller's testimony will amount to the most thorough explanation of Pentagon actions after months of criticism that it took hours for the National Guard to arrive.

In his remarks, he will defend his resistance to a heavy military response as being shaped in part by public "hysteria" about the possibility of a military coup or concerns that the military might be used to help overturn the election results.

Fearful of amplifying those suspicions — as well as the possibility that a soldier might be provoked into violence in a way that could be perceived as an attack on First Amendment activities — he says he agreed in the days before the insurrection to deploy soldiers only in areas away from the Capitol.

"No such thing was going to occur on my watch but these concerns, and hysteria about them, nonetheless factored into my decisions regarding the appropriate and limited use of our Armed Forces to support civilian law enforcement during the Electoral College certification," Miller will say. "My obligation to the Nation was to prevent a constitutional crisis."

Although he will say the Defense Department should not play a lead role in domestic law enforcement, he felt it important to initiate planning discussions out of concern about a lack of coordination and information-sharing between other agencies.

Democrats have signaled that they intend to press Miller on why it took so long for the National Guard to arrive despite urgent pleas for help. Miller will contend that those complaints are unjustified.

"This isn't a video game where you can move forces with a flick of the thumb or a movie that glosses over the logistical challenges and the time required to coordinate and synchronize with the multitude of other entities involved, or with complying with the important legal requirements involved in the use of such forces," he will say.

Although the timeline Miller offers in his remarks generally matches up with that provided by other high-ranking leaders, he notably puts himself at odds with William Walker, who as commanding general of the D.C. National Guard testified to what he said were unusual Pentagon restrictions that impeded his response. He also described a more than three-hour delay between the time support was first requested and when it was received.

Walker has since become the House sergeant-at-arms, in charge of the chamber's security.

Miller will say that Walker was given "all the authority he needed to fulfill the mission" and that before Jan. 6 he had never expressed any concern about the forces he had at his disposal. He says he authorized the deployment of 340 National Guard personnel, the total amount Walker had said would be necessary, and authorized him to use a 40-member quick reaction force provided that Walker could deliver a so-called concept of operations.

Miller said he approved the activation of the Guard at 3 p.m. That support did not arrive at the Capitol complex until well after 5 p.m., which Miller said reflected the time-consuming process of coordination and planning.

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Miller, an Army veteran, served as a White House counterterrorism adviser under Trump before being tapped as acting defense secretary for the final months of the Trump administration. He replaced Mark Esper, who was fired after the election after being seen by Trump as insufficiently loyal.

The abrupt appointment raised concerns that Miller was in place to be a Trump loyalist. Maloney foreshadowed a focus on Trump at Wednesday's hearing, saying the former president's "inflammatory language provoked and incited the violent mob."

In his opening statement, though, Miller says he believes Trump "encouraged the protesters" but declines to say if Trump bears responsibility for the events. He recounts a Jan. 5 conversation when Trump, impressed by a crowd of supporters at a rally that day, told him 10,000 troops would be needed the next day.

"The call lasted fewer than thirty seconds and I did not respond substantively, and there was no elaboration. I took his comment to mean that a large force would be required to maintain order the following day," Miller says.

Democrats press for broader voter access as GOP resists

By BRIAN SLODYSKO and CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans in the U.S. Senate mounted an aggressive case Tuesday against Democrats' sweeping election and voter-access legislation, pushing to roll back proposals for automatic registration, 24-hour ballot drop boxes and other changes in an increasingly charged national debate.

The legislation, a top priority of Democrats in the aftermath of the divisive 2020 election, would bring about the largest overhaul of U.S. voting in a generation, touching nearly every aspect of the electoral process. It would remove hurdles to voting erected in the name of election security and curtail the influence of big money in politics.

At the end of a long, contentious day, the Rules Committee deadlocked 9-9 over advancing the bill to the full Senate in its current form. That leaves it to Democratic leader Chuck Schumer to try to invoke a special process to force the legislation ahead.

Though it is federal legislation, Republicans are fighting a national campaign against it rooted in state battles to restrict new ways of voting that have unfolded during the pandemic. Just Tuesday, the Arizona Legislature sent the governor a bill that would make it easier to purge infrequent voters from a list of those who automatically get mail-in ballots, the latest battleground state to push through changes likely to take months or years to finally settle in court.

GOP Senate leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky is so determined to stop the legislation that he made a rare appearance at Tuesday's Rules Committee session in Washington. McConnell and other Republicans on the panel argued for a wave of amendments against key sections of the bill, which Democrats turned aside in an hours-long voting session.

McConnell declared, "Our democracy is not in crisis" and said he wasn't about to cede control of elections to new laws "under the false pretense of saving it."

With Democrats holding the White House and narrow control of Congress, they see the legislation as crucial — perhaps their best chance to counter efforts by state-level Republicans who have seized on former President Donald Trump's false claims about the 2020 election to push ballot restrictions.

Yet even as they tout the measure, Democrats find themselves playing defense, unable to push their legislative response to President Joe Biden's desk. While the elections overhaul has passed the House, there's no clear path forward in the Senate, which is split 50-50. Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have both said they oppose making changes to the Senate's filibuster rules, which would be needed to maneuver the bill past unified Republican opposition.

Trump's election claims, which have only increased in the six months since his defeat, were rejected by Republican as well as Democratic election officials in state after state, by U.S. cybersecurity officials and by courts up to the U.S. Supreme Court. And his attorney general said there was no evidence of fraud that could change the election outcome.

"President Trump told a big lie, one of the biggest ever told. We all know that. Every single person in

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this room knows that," Sen. Schumer, the Democratic majority leader, said at the hearing. "And it's taking root, this big lie is taking root in our country, not just in the minds of his voters but in the laws of the land."

The laws emerging around the country "are about one thing and one thing alone: making it harder for Americans to vote," he said.

The Democrats' measure would not stop every bill being passed in Republican states across the country. But it would make it difficult, if not impossible, for states to press ahead with many of the new rules.

That's because the legislation would create nationwide rules for early voting and no-excuse absentee voting, standardizing the process. Currently, six states don't offer early, in-person voting and a third of states still require an excuse — such as illness or planning to be away from home on Election Day — to vote by mail, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Republicans walked a narrow line during much of the discussion on Tuesday, criticizing congressional Democrats for seeking to change voting rules while at the same time offering robust support for GOP state lawmakers who are doing the same.

The GOP senators cited high voter turnout in last year's presidential election during the pandemic as proof that the system worked without the Democrats' changes and voters were not disenfranchised. But they offered little justification for GOP efforts at the state level to impose new limits on voting, particularly mail voting.

Republicans also attacked provisions that would create a new public financing system for political campaigns and strengthen the enforcement capabilities of the federal agency tasked with policing elections, as well as dozens of other proposals that would dictate how states conduct their elections.

"This bill doesn't protect voting rights, it steals voting rights from the American people," said Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas.

While Republicans argue the new state rules are needed to secure the vote, critics warn the states are seeking to reduce voter access, particularly for Black voters, who are a crucial part of the Democratic Party base. That could usher in a new Jim Crow era for the 21st century, they warn.

"These bills moving in state capitals across America are not empty threats, they are real efforts to stop people from voting," said Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat and chairwoman of the Senate Rules Committee.

Yet moderate members of the Democratic caucus — not just Republicans — pose a sizable obstacle to the bill becoming law.

Manchin has called for any elections overhaul to be done on a bipartisan basis, despite Republican insistence that no changes are necessary. Other Democrats want to pare back the bill to core voting protections to try to put Republicans on the spot.

Democrats have been making their own changes to draw more support.

In the latest version of the legislation, states would have more time and flexibility to put new federal rules in place. Some election officials had complained of unrealistic timelines, increased costs and onerous requirements.

States would have more time to launch same-day voter registration at polling places and to comply with new voting system requirements. They would also be able to apply for an extension if they were unable to meet the deadline for automatic voter registration. Officials have said these are complex processes that require equipment changes or upgrades that will take time.

Democrats are also dropping a requirement that local election offices provide self-sealing envelopes with mail ballots and cover the costs of return postage. They plan to require the U.S. Postal Service to carry mail ballots and ballot request forms free of charge, with the federal government picking up the tab.

But Republicans argue the changes would do little to limit what they view as unwarranted federal intrusions into local elections.

"Giving states more time to implement bad policy doesn't make the policy less bad," said Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri, the ranking minority member on the committee. "I think the federal government taking over elections is the wrong thing to do."

Prosecutor plans to seek death penalty in spa shootings

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A man accused of killing eight people, six of them women of Asian descent, in shootings at three Atlanta-area massage businesses was indicted Tuesday on murder charges by two separate grand juries, and one prosecutor filed notice that she'll also seek hate crime charges and the death penalty.

A Fulton County grand jury indicted Robert Aaron Long, 22, in the March 16 slayings of Suncha Kim, 69; Soon Chung Park, 74; Hyun Jung Grant, 51; and Yong Ae Yue, 63. A separate grand jury in Cherokee County indicted Long for a separate shooting there that resulted in the killings of Xiaojie "Emily" Tan, 49; Daoyou Feng, 44; Delaina Yaun, 33; and Paul Michels, 54.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis also filed notice that she intends to seek a hate crime sentence enhancement and the death penalty against Long, who is white. The hate crime charges are based on the actual or perceived race, national origin, sex and gender of the four women killed, the notice says.

The charges and the decisions to seek the death penalty and a sentencing enhancement under the hate crime law "send a message that everyone within this community is valued," Willis said during a news conference Tuesday.

"Today we have taken another step forward in seeking justice for the victims of this crime and for their family members," Cherokee County District Attorney Shannon Wallace said in a news release.

Wallace said she will make a decision on whether to seek the death penalty before Long's arraignment, which has not yet been scheduled.

Georgia's new hate crimes law does not provide for a stand-alone hate crime. After a person is convicted of an underlying crime, a jury must determine whether it's motivated by bias, which carries an additional penalty.

The 19-count Fulton County indictment includes charges of murder, felony murder, aggravated assault and domestic terrorism.

The domestic terrorism charge says Long committed a series of illegal acts "which were interrelated by distinguishing characteristics, with the intent to cause serious bodily harm and to kill individuals and groups of individuals, and with the intent to intimidate the civilian population of this state and of its political subdivisions."

Four aggravated assault charges have to do with the shootings of the four victims who died. For a fifth, the indictment says Long pointed a gun at another woman, causing her "reasonable apprehension of immediately receiving a violent injury."

The charges in the 23-count Cherokee County indictment are related to the shooting at a spa near suburban Woodstock in which four were killed and one person was wounded. Six other people were inside the spa when the shooting happened, Wallace said. The Cherokee County charges include malice murder, felony murder, attempt to commit murder and aggravated assault.

Willis' decision to seek the death penalty is a departure from her stance during her campaign to be district attorney last year.

During a 2020 candidate forum, Willis answered yes when asked: "Will you commit to refuse to seek the death penalty?"

"Last year I told the voters of Fulton County that I could not imagine a circumstance where I would seek (the death penalty)," Willis said during the news conference. "Unfortunately, a case has arisen ... that I believe warrants the ultimate penalty and we shall seek it."

The killings are eligible for the death penalty because each was committed while Long was in the act of committing another capital offense, namely the killings of the victims, Willis' notice of intent says. Each killing was also "outrageously or wantonly vile, horrible, or inhuman in that it involved depravity of mind" and was committed during an act of domestic terrorism, the notice says.

Police have said Long shot and killed four people, three of them women and two of Asian descent, at Youngs Asian Massage near Woodstock just before 5 p.m. on March 16. He also shot and wounded a fifth person, investigators said.

He then drove about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south to Atlanta, where he shot and killed three women at Gold Spa before going across the street to Aromatherapy Spa and fatally shooting another woman, police have said. All of the Atlanta victims were women of Asian descent.

After the shootings at the two Atlanta spas, Long got back into his car and headed south on the interstate, police said.

Long's parents called authorities to help after recognizing their son in still images from security video that the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office posted on social media. They provided cellphone information that allowed authorities to track their son to rural Crisp County, about 140 miles (225 kilometers) south of Atlanta.

State troopers and sheriff's deputies spotted his SUV on Interstate 75, and one of them forced Long to spin to a stop by bumping his vehicle. Long then surrendered to authorities.

In an initial interview with investigators, Long claimed to have a "sex addiction," and authorities said he apparently lashed out at businesses he viewed as a temptation. But those statements spurred outrage and widespread skepticism given the races of the victims.

Lawyers: Black man didn't drive into deputies who shot him

By BEN FINLEY and JONATHAN DREW Associated Press

ELIZABETH CITY, N.C. (AP) — Lawyers for relatives of Andrew Brown Jr., a Black man fatally shot by deputies, said Tuesday that body camera videos show that he didn't strike them with his car before they opened fire, contradicting a local prosecutor.

Chance Lynch, a lawyer who viewed the footage in private with Brown's family, said Brown was sitting in his stationary car with his hands on the wheel when the first of numerous shots was fired. Family members had previously seen about 20 seconds of the video but were shown approximately 18 minutes on Tuesday under a judge's order.

The family's lawyers say the footage contradicts statements by the local district attorney, who said in court that deputies didn't start firing until after Brown's vehicle struck them twice. Lynch's description aligns with what another family attorney said after seeing the shorter clip.

"We did not see any actions on Mr. Brown's part where he made contact with them or tried to go in their direction," Lynch told reporters. "In fact, he did just the opposite. While there was a group of law enforcement that were in front of him, he went the opposite direction."

Lynch, who described the shooting as "unconstitutional" and "unjustified," said body camera footage of the shooting's aftermath shows that deputies found no weapons on Brown.

"My father did not deserve to die at all," his son Jha'rod Ferebee told reporters after watching the footage. "He did not deserve to get killed in any way, shape or form. He did not pose any threat at all."

Brown was outside his house in Elizabeth City when he was shot on April 21, prompting days of protests by residents demanding public release of body camera footage. At the time, Pasquotank County deputies were serving search and arrest warrants that accused Brown of possessing small amounts of cocaine and methamphetamine that he intended to sell.

During a court hearing last month over the sheriff's request to release the video, District Attorney Andrew Womble said Brown's car was backing up when it first "made contact" with law enforcement officers, then came to a stop before moving again. "The next movement of the car is forward. It is in the direction of law enforcement and makes contact with law enforcement. It is then and only then that you hear shots," Womble said.

Lynch said Tuesday that deputies may have reached out and touched the car as Brown tried to drive away, but that he didn't initiate the contact.

Pasquotank County Sheriff Tommy Wooten II has said his deputies weren't injured.

Womble didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment Tuesday. Lawyers for Brown's family, in addition to Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, have called for a special prosecutor to step in. But under state law, Womble would have to agree to step aside.

An independent autopsy commissioned by Brown's family found that he was shot five times, including

in the back of the head. The state's autopsy has not been released yet.

After last month's hearing, Judge Jeffery Foster declined to release the video publicly, but ruled the family should be shown less than 20 redacted minutes of five videos taken from body cameras and a dashboard camera. In total, the unedited and unredacted video runs about two hours. Foster said the video must remain from public view for at least 30 days to allow an independent state investigation to unfold but that he would consider releasing it after that.

On Tuesday, shortly after the Brown family news conference, Wooten issued a statement reiterating that he would have preferred a public release of the video but that he respects the court's decision.

Three deputies who were involved in the shooting remain on leave pending the probe by the State Bureau of Investigation. Four others initially put on leave were allowed to return to duty after the sheriff said they didn't fire shots. The FBI has also launched a civil rights probe.

Younger adolescents get ready to receive COVID-19 vaccine

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH, KATHLEEN FOODY and SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Parents, schools and vaccine clinics rushed to begin inoculating younger adolescents Tuesday after U.S. regulators endorsed Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine for children as young as 12, a decision seen as a breakthrough in allowing classroom instruction to resume safely around the country.

A handful of cities started offering shots to children ages 12 to 15 less than a day after the Food and Drug Administration gave the vaccine emergency use authorization for that age group. Most communities were waiting for a federal advisory committee that meets Wednesday to sign off on the move, while anxious families called clinics and pharmacies to ask about the soonest appointments.

In Atlanta, 12-year-old Jane Ellen Norman got her first dose of the Pfizer vaccine at Mercedes-Benz Stadium on Tuesday morning. The girl said she looked forward to having "a little bit more freedom."

Her mother, English Norman, said she also booked an appointment for her 14-year-old son immediately after learning that the FDA on Monday had declared the vaccine safe for the nearly 17 million 12- to 15-year-olds in the U.S. Now, the entire family — including Norman's husband, a physician, and their 17-year-old son — has begun the vaccination process.

"We're five for five," the 52-year-old artist said.

Most COVID-19 vaccines worldwide have been authorized for adults. Pfizer's vaccine is being used in multiple countries for teens as young as 16, and Canada recently became the first to expand use to children 12 and up. Parents, school administrators and public health officials elsewhere have eagerly awaited approval for the shot to be made available to more young people.

The official sign-off on the vaccine's use in the 12-15 age group will not occur until at least Wednesday, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention committee meets. Local governments that began offering shots right away viewed the FDA decision on Monday as enough of a green light to start the process.

"Under all relevant legal authority, once the FDA gives approval, a prescriber is permitted to prescribe the vaccine," Kelly Cofrancisco, a spokesperson for Pennsylvania's Montgomery County, said as shots for residents 12 and up started Tuesday.

In the Kansas City area, Children's Mercy Hospital has run vaccine clinics for 16- to 21-year-olds since last month and plans to expand them to cover the younger ages soon. Dr. Ryan McDonough, a pediatrician who oversees the COVID-19 vaccine clinics, said he has been deluged with calls from patients and texts from friends and relatives wanting to sign up their kids.

"It is about getting back to normal," McDonough said. "It is about getting their kid in school five days a week. It is about going to see grandma and grandpa. It is about getting back to sports. It is all about normalcy, and people just want to get back to pre-pandemic life."

The Iowa-based grocery store chain Hy-Vee, which has 278 stores in eight Midwestern states, was looking to begin offering the vaccine to younger adolescents as soon as Thursday. Interest has been strong among parents, who deluged stores with calls and emails after the FDA signed off on the vaccine, Hy-Vee spokesperson Christina Gayman said.

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"Some people tried to go ahead and go online and make an appointment," she said. "But we at this time have let those individuals know, 'Hey, we cannot vaccinate that age group just yet.'"

Chicago, meanwhile, said it was ready to begin vaccinating people between 12 and 15 but would wait until Thursday to start administering shots. The city's public health commissioner, Dr. Allison Arwady, noted that the communities with the lowest vaccination rates continue to have the highest numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases and rates of hospitalization and death — even in teens and young adults.

"Help us increase vaccine uptake and get past COVID by bringing your whole family to get vaccinated together," Arwady urged in a news release.

Fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Goluszka was ready. For more than a year, she and her friends have celebrated birthdays and holidays at a distance. The teenagers left gifts outside each other's homes as a replacement for the parties they planned and then canceled as the pandemic wore on. Elizabeth said she also missed dance competitions and chatting with friends over lunch at Batavia High School in Chicago's western suburbs.

"I'm just so looking forward to getting back to a sort of normal high school experience, like having the homecoming dance and being able to have lunch with friends," she said.

Dr. Monica Verduzco-Gutierrez said her son, Nicolas, had hoped to be part of the clinical trials for the Pfizer but they were no longer signing up participants by the boy's 12th birthday. The family relocated this summer to San Antonio when Verduzco-Gutierrez accepted a new job and it's been difficult for Nicolas to make friends or explore much.

Attending classes in person helped, but there's not much time to socialize at school. Masks and social distancing don't make it any easier either, he said, and he's looking forward to getting vaccinated.

"It will be really nice to be able to say, 'Hey, want to go get ice cream or something?'" Nicolas said.

The regulators' decision was good news to education officials in Massachusetts, where all high schools must resume in-person classes five days a week by Monday. Two-thirds already are doing so.

"I think it is a great opportunity, obviously, to create even more safety in our schools for our students and our staff and getting closer to herd immunity," said Russell Johnston, senior associate commissioner at the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. "I think it is really important."

But not everyone is eager. Polling by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that just 3 in 10 parents of children ages 12 to 15 say they would get their child vaccinated as soon as possible. One-quarter said they would wait a while to see how the vaccine is working.

Indianapolis parent Inna Ekhaus said it was a "no-brainer" for her and her husband to get vaccinated to curb the spread of COVID-19 and to protect themselves. But after doing a risk-benefit analysis, she does not plan to take the couple's two sons, ages 13 and 10, to get inoculated.

Ekhaus said her boys, who are otherwise healthy, got COVID-19 in October and reported only minor symptoms.

"For the kids, I don't think the due diligence has been done to show the long-term effects, and children's bodies are still developing," said the 38-year-old tech worker.

Preakness allows Medina Spirit to enter with extra testing

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Sports Writer

BALTIMORE (AP) — Medina Spirit is set to run in the Preakness on Saturday to go for the second leg of the Triple Crown, as long as the Kentucky Derby winner passes a series of additional drug tests.

Maryland racing officials reached an agreement with trainer Bob Baffert on Tuesday to allow Medina Spirit and his other horses to enter races this weekend at Pimlico Race Course subject to extra testing and monitoring. If Medina Spirit, who failed a postrace drug test after winning the Kentucky Derby, comes back clean in test results expected Friday, he is likely to be the favorite to win the Preakness.

"We reached an agreement with Mr. Baffert and his lawyers that allows for additional testing, additional monitoring — essentially a watchlist to ensure the integrity of the sport leading up to the race," Maryland Jockey Club lawyer Alan Rifkin said. "We're very pleased to have that and we appreciate Mr. Baffert's

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patience and the way in which his lawyers went about it.”

Medina Spirit, fellow Baffert-trained Preakness colt Concert Tour and filly Beautiful Gift, who is expected to run in the Black-Eyed Susan Stakes on Friday, are all subject to the extra scrutiny.

“Baffert has given these consents to further the interests of horse racing and the public,” lawyer Craig Robertson wrote in a letter to the Maryland Jockey Club. “The integrity of the sport is of the utmost importance to Mr. Baffert, and by consenting to this testing regimen and monitoring, he reaffirms his commitment and dedication to the sport.”

Medina Spirit drew the No. 3 post in a field of 10 horses for the Preakness as the 9-5 morning-line favorite. Concert Tour drew the outside 10th post and is the second choice in the wagering at 5-2.

Ram drew the No. 1 post at 30-1, Keepmeinmind the No. 2 at 15-1, Crowded Trade the No. 4 post at 10-1, Midnight Bourbon the No. 5 post at 5-1, Rombauer the No. 6 at 12-1, France Go de Ina the No. 7 at 20-1, Unbridled Honor the No. 8 at 15-1 and Risk Taking the No. 9 at 15-1.

Keepmeinmind and Midnight Bourbon are the only Kentucky Derby horses returning for the Preakness to challenge Medina Spirit. Trainer Brad Cox opted to skip the race with Mandaloun, who would be named the Derby winner if Medina Spirit is disqualified, and Essential Quality, who went off as the 3-1 Derby favorite.

Medina Spirit won that race May 1 as a 12-1 long shot. He won't be anywhere close to that if he gets to the Preakness.

“To me, if everyone runs their race that we have seen from them in the past, I think this is Medina Spirit's race to lose,” NBC Sports analyst Matt Bernier said.

Baffert earlier Tuesday said it was brought to his attention that a veterinarian treated Medina Spirit with an antifungal medication to treat dermatitis that includes the steroid betamethasone. Medina Spirit failed a post-Derby drug test because of the presence of betamethasone.

Stronach Group chief veterinary officer Dr. Dionne Benson said at the Preakness draw that test results on the three Baffert horses are expected back Friday. This is an additional layer of blood testing from blood taken last week, Monday and Tuesday on top of the usual postrace tests.

“(The tests) will allow us to ensure that if there is or was any betamethasone or any other medications, whether therapeutic or illegal, in the horse, we will know about them before the race,” Benson said. “Because traditionally most of the testing now will occur after the race, and this allows us to, instead of addressing the issue after the fact, to prevent the issue from becoming a problem.”

Benson said if betamethasone is detected by laboratory testing in any of the horses, officials will ask Baffert to scratch that horse.

Feds: Ex-NYC officer charged with bribery sent racist text

By TOM HAYS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A white New York City police officer once bragged about trying to scare Black people for kicks by randomly pointing his gun at them while on the job, federal prosecutors said Tuesday in announcing corruption charges against the officer and two others who worked together at the same precinct.

In court papers, prosecutors quoted a text that Robert Smith allegedly sent following his retirement in 2020 recounting how he would point his gun out his car window at people he described using a version of the N-word.

He would “watch their reaction and drive away,” he wrote. “Hilarious.”

Smith also exchanged messages about committing numerous robberies and shakedowns, or “shakes” as he called them, prosecutors said. “Bro I robbed everyone,” they said he wrote.

On video, he described himself as “the perp that got away” and “one of the most corrupt cops in the 105,” referring to the 105th Precinct in Queens, where the three defendants served, prosecutors added.

The texts and videos were not cited as evidence in the bribery case in federal court in Brooklyn. But prosecutors used them to argue that Smith should be denied bail.

The former officer pleaded not guilty on Tuesday at an arraignment where a judge agreed he should remain behind bars. His lawyer declined comment afterward.

The court papers accused Smith and current Officer Robert Hasset of hatching a scheme starting in

2016 to take thousands of dollars in bribes to summon a specific tow truck company to car accident scenes, instead of using a system meant to distribute the business at random. Smith allegedly recruited a second current officer, Heather Busch, to join the kickback scam after he retired.

Smith and Hassett also were accused of using restricted police databases to run the names of car accident victims and provide the information to a person who sold it to physical therapy businesses and personal injury attorneys to solicit business. The middleman paid the officers about \$7,000 for information on more than 100 people, the court papers said.

"As alleged, the defendants shamelessly violated their oaths of office and the public trust by trading their badges for cash payments," acting U.S. Attorney Mark Lesko said in a statement.

Smith, 44, was additionally facing charges he agreed to transport a kilo (2.2 pounds) of heroin for drug traffickers after his retirement. He was paid \$1,200 in a deal to carry his gun and retired police identification for the task, prosecutors said.

Hassett, 36, and Busch, 34, were to appear in court by teleconference later Tuesday. The names of their attorneys were not immediately available.

Leigh Perkins, who took Orvis beyond fly fishing, dies at 93

By WILSON RING Associated Press

The man who transformed the Vermont-based Orvis company from a niche fly-fishing supply company into a global retailer of outdoor supplies, apparel and protector of the environment has died. Leigh H. Perkins was 93.

The Sunderland-based Orvis company says Perkins died May 7 in Monticello, Florida. The cause of death was not released.

An online tribute published on the company's website said Perkins was a lifelong outdoorsman who hunted or fished more than 250 days a year into his 90s who had a reverence for nature and conservation.

The company says that Perkins began donating 5% of pre-tax profits to conserving fish and wildlife.

While Orvis is based in Sunderland, not far from the headwaters of the Batten Kill — one of the most famous trout streams in the state — the company's reach goes across the world.

"He followed that fly rod to all corners of the world and he made connections and relationships to both places and people across the globe," Simon Perkins, Leigh Perkins' grandson and the current president of Orvis, said Tuesday.

Simon Perkins is the third generation of his family to lead the company.

Christopher Saunders, a project coordinator for the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, who describes himself as a passionate fly fisherman, said the legacy of Leigh Perkins is considerable for both the sport of fly fishing and Vermont.

Saunders said Vermont was a cradle of the fly fishing industry, but over the years the focus of the world moved west. Perkins made sure fly fishing in Vermont remained prominent.

"To this day people still make pilgrimages to go to Orvis and fly fish on the Batten Kill river and surrounding areas," Saunders said.

"He obviously was committed to more than the bottom line," Saunders said. "There was a lot of focus on education."

In 1966, Perkins began what the company describes as the world's first fly-fishing schools, first in Vermont and then elsewhere. Saunders said those schools helped introduce thousands of anglers to fly fishing.

Perkins was born in Cleveland in 1927, but went to college in western Massachusetts. His mother imbued him with a love of the outdoors and hunting and fishing.

Orvis, founded in 1856 by Charles F. Orvis, was a niche business with 20 employees and \$500,000 in annual sales when Perkins bought it in 1965. Over the next 27 years, Perkins transformed it into a retail and mail-order business with sales that topped \$90 million.

Since then, the company estimates it's grown fourfold.

Perkins is survived by his wife Anne, four children, a number of stepchildren, grandchildren and great-

grandchildren.

School shooting in Russia kills 9 people; suspect arrested

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A gunman launched an attack on a school in the Russian city of Kazan that left at least nine people dead Tuesday — including seven youngsters — and sent students hiding under their desks or running out of the building.

At least 21 others were hospitalized, six in extremely grave condition, authorities said.

The attacker, identified only as a 19-year-old, was arrested, officials said. They gave no immediate details on a motive.

But Russian media said the gunman was a former student at the school who called himself “a god” on his account on the messaging app Telegram and promised to “kill a large amount of biomass” on the morning of the shooting.

“I was in the classroom when a man with a firearm broke into our classroom and just started shooting,” said student Akhmat Khairulin. He said students hid under their desks at their teacher’s direction, though one jumped out of a window.

Attacks on schools are rare in Russia, and President Vladimir Putin reacted by ordering the head of the country’s National Guard to revise regulations on the types of weapons allowed for civilian use.

Four boys and three girls, all eighth-graders, died, as well as a teacher and another school employee, said Rustam Minnikhanov, governor of the Tatarstan republic, where Kazan is the capital.

The teacher who died, Elvira Ignatyeva, had been an English instructor at the school for four years, the state news agency Tass reported.

Footage released by Russian media showed students dressed in black and white running out of the building. Another video depicted shattered windows, a stream of smoke coming out of one, and the sound of gunfire. Dozens of ambulances lined up at the entrance.

Russian media said while some students were able to escape, others were trapped inside during the ordeal.

“The terrorist has been arrested, 19 years old. A firearm is registered in his name. Other accomplices haven’t been established. An investigation is underway,” Minnikhanov said.

Authorities said the 21 hospitalized included 18 children.

Authorities announced a day of mourning on Wednesday and canceled all classes in Kazan schools. Authorities tightened security at all schools in the city of about 1.2 million people, 430 miles (700 kilometers) east of Moscow.

The deadliest school attack in Russia took place in 2004 in the city of Beslan, when Islamic militants took more 1,000 people hostage for several days. The siege ended in gunfire and explosions, leaving 334 dead, more than half of them children.

In 2018, a teenager killed 20 people at his vocational school before killing himself in Kerch, a city in the Russian-annexed peninsula of Crimea. In the wake of that attack, Putin ordered authorities to tighten control over gun ownership. But most of the proposed legislative changes were turned down by the parliament or the government, the Kommersant newspaper reported.

Russian lawmaker Alexander Khinshtein said on Telegram that the suspect in the Kazan attack received a permit for a shotgun less than two weeks ago and that the school had no security aside from a panic button. Authorities did not specify what kind of gun the attacker used.

Authorities in Tatarstan ordered checks on all gun owners in the region.

Putin extended condolences to the families of the victims and ordered the government to give them all necessary assistance. Russian officials promised to pay families 1 million rubles (roughly \$13,500) each and give 200,000 to 400,000 rubles (\$2,700-\$5,400) to the wounded.

The Kremlin sent a plane with doctors and medical equipment to Kazan, and the country’s health and education ministers headed to the region.

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AP's Sally Buzbee named exec editor of The Washington Post

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Reenergized under owner Jeff Bezos, The Washington Post named Associated Press veteran Sally Buzbee as its executive editor Tuesday, making her the first woman in the paper's 144-year history to lead the newsroom.

She succeeds the retired Marty Baron in one of the most celebrated jobs in journalism, the same role held by the legendary Ben Bradlee when the Post helped break the Watergate scandal in the 1970s.

Buzbee, 55, has been with the AP since 1988 in jobs that included Washington bureau chief, and has been its senior vice president and executive editor since 2017.

The Post, bought from the Graham family by Amazon's Bezos in 2013, employs 1,000 journalists in 26 locations around the world, up from 12 places in 2013. Under Baron, who took over in 2013, it won 10 Pulitzer Prizes and was recognized for its hard-hitting coverage of Donald Trump.

In an interview, Buzbee stressed her commitment to diversity and to telling stories in a compelling way across many formats.

"The challenge of journalism everywhere is to meet audiences where they are and make our journalism as accessible and sharp and transparent as possible," she said. "The Post has an extraordinary team that is in many ways on the cutting edge of figuring out how to do this."

Fred Ryan, the Post's publisher and CEO, pointed to her achievements and experience in leading a global news organization.

"In an extensive search that included many of the best journalists in America, Sally stood out as the right person to lead the Post going forward," Ryan said. "She is widely admired for her absolute integrity, boundless energy and dedication to the essential role journalism plays in safeguarding our democracy."

Buzbee flew under the radar in the much-watched search for Baron's successor. In some ways that's due to the AP's standing in the business, both ubiquitous and somewhat invisible, since it sells its journalism to thousands of outlets that use it on their websites, front pages and broadcasts.

Yet with its 250 bureaus around the world and robust operations in video, text, audio and photography, running the AP is one of journalism's most complex jobs.

Buzbee directed AP's journalism through the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump's presidency, the #MeToo movement, Brexit and protests over racial injustice. She emphasized breaking news in all formats and deepened the AP's enterprise and investigative efforts.

Under her leadership, the AP won Pulitzer Prizes in feature photography and international reporting, and had six other Pulitzer finalists.

In an era when diversity in leadership is being closely watched, Buzbee's appointment comes shortly after Kevin Merida, a Black man who worked more than two decades at the Post, was hired as the top editor at the Los Angeles Times. ABC News and MSNBC hired Black leaders in the past few months.

Wesley Lowery, a former Post reporter now at CBS News, referred to Merida in tweeting Tuesday: "The overqualified black candidate not even getting a serious call about the job, only for it to go to a white lady and be framed as a win for diversity is the entire story of newsroom diversity efforts."

Buzbee said the AP made important strides in diversity and in opening paths to leadership while she was in charge.

"What I'm looking forward to is getting to know the (Post) staff and diving in and continuing that commitment to diversity and inclusiveness," she said. "I think it is one of the highest priorities for every news organization going forward, and it is very much mine."

The Post has made a sharp turnaround, particularly as a digital organization, since Bezos bought it. Its website has more than 80 million unique visits per month. But the Amazon founder's presence is closely watched; Trump continually pointed out the connection.

Buzbee said she has been impressed with how the Post has maintained its independence in the news pages.

Buzbee, originally from Olathe, Kansas, joined the AP as a reporter in Topeka. She was correspondent in San Diego, and then in 1995 joined the Washington bureau, where she eventually became assistant

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chief of bureau.

In 2004, Buzbee became AP's Middle East editor, based in Cairo, where she led coverage of the war in Iraq, the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, the Darfur crisis and the growth of terrorist cells in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and elsewhere.

In 2010, she was promoted to deputy managing editor at the agency's New York headquarters and led the founding of the Nerve Center, AP's now-integral hub for global news coordination and customer communication.

Later that year, she was named chief of the Washington bureau, where she oversaw coverage of the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, the White House, Congress, the Pentagon and the bureau's polling and investigative teams.

"AP is one of the most important news organizations in the whole world and it has truly been the complete honor and joy of my life to be connected to it," she said. "I have learned so much and I am truly grateful for every single day I've spent at the AP."

Gary Pruitt, AP president and CEO, said Buzbee has been "an exceptional leader" and while her hiring by the Post is bittersweet news, it also reflects well on the organization she left behind.

"It shows the AP is operating at the absolute highest levels of journalism," he said.

Pruitt said that the search for a new executive editor will begin immediately and that he expects it will take a few months. In the meantime, the executive editor duties will be shared by AP Vice President and Managing Editor Brian Carovillano, who will lead AP's news report, and AP Vice President and Managing Editor David Scott, who will handle operations.

Buzbee takes over at the Post on June 1.

Baron, her predecessor, was highly respected for the Post's turnaround and its role as watchdog of the Trump administration. Baron was portrayed by Liev Schreiber in the movie "Spotlight," from his days leading The Boston Globe as it investigated the sexual abuse of children by Roman Catholic priests.

"It inspires me," Buzbee said, "but it doesn't intimidate me."

100 days in power, Myanmar junta holds pretense of control

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — After Myanmar's military seized power by ousting the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, it couldn't even make the trains run on time. State railway workers were among the earliest organized opponents of the February takeover, and they went on strike.

Health workers who founded the civil disobedience movement against military rule stopped staffing government medical facilities. Many civil servants were no-shows at work, along with employees of government and private banks. Universities became hotbeds of resistance, and in recent weeks, primary and secondary education has begun to collapse as teachers, students and parents boycott state schools.

One hundred days after their takeover, Myanmar's ruling generals maintain just the pretense of control. The illusion is sustained mainly by its partially successful efforts to shut down independent media and to keep the streets clear of large demonstrations by employing lethal force. More than 750 protesters and bystanders have been killed by security forces, according to detailed independent tallies, and there have been numerous arrests and human rights violations.

"The junta might like people to think that things are going back to normal because they are not killing as many people as they were before and there weren't as many people on the streets as before, but ... the feeling we are getting from talking to people on the ground is that definitely the resistance has not yet subsided," said Thin Lei Win, a journalist now based in Rome who helped found the Myanmar Now online news service in 2015.

She says the main change is that dissent is no longer as visible as in the early days of the protests — before security forces began using live ammunition — when marches and rallies in major cities and towns could easily draw tens of thousands of people.

At the same time, said David Mathieson, an independent analyst who has been working on Myanmar

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issues for over 20 years, "Because of the very violent pacification of those protests, a lot of people are willing to become more violent."

"We are already starting to see signs of that. And with the right training, the right leadership and the right resources, what Myanmar could experience is an incredibly nasty destructive, internal armed conflict in multiple locations in urban areas."

The junta also faces a growing military challenge in the always restive border regions where ethnic minority groups exercise political power and maintain guerrilla armies. Two of the more battle-hardened groups, the Kachin in the north and the Karen in the east, have declared their support for the protest movement and stepped up their fighting, despite the government military, known as the Tatmadaw, hitting back with greater firepower, including airstrikes.

Even a month ago, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet was describing the situation as grim, saying Myanmar's "economy, education and health infrastructure have been brought to the brink of collapse, leaving millions of Myanmar people without livelihood, basic services and, increasingly, food security."

It was not surprising that The Economist magazine, in an April cover story, labeled Myanmar "Asia's next failed state" and opined it was heading in the direction of Afghanistan.

The U.N.'s Bachelet made a different comparison.

"There are clear echoes of Syria in 2011," she said. "There too, we saw peaceful protests met with unnecessary and clearly disproportionate force. The State's brutal, persistent repression of its own people led to some individuals taking up arms, followed by a downward and rapidly expanding spiral of violence all across the country."

A hundred days after its takeover, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday renewed his call on Myanmar's military "to respect the will of the people and act in the greater interest of peace and stability in the country," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Guterres also encouraged the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which includes Myanmar, to swiftly implement its commitments including a demand to immediately end violence and start a dialogue mediated by a special ASEAN envoy. And he urged the international community "to support regional efforts to bring an end to the repression by the military," Dujarric said.

Bill Richardson, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations with long experience working with Myanmar, said, "The most immediate step is for the government and the opposition to start a dialogue to end the violence and bloodshed. There has to be a negotiation on humanitarian access to keep the economy and ... health care system from collapsing."

Junta chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing has so far shunned all suggestions of talks from the United Nations as well as ASEAN.

He attended a specially called ASEAN summit meeting in Indonesia in April where leaders adopted a "five-point consensus". But within days of returning, Hlaing's junta brushed aside the initiative. He said Myanmar would "give careful consideration to constructive suggestions made by ASEAN Leaders when the situation returns to stability in the country since priorities at the moment were to maintain law and order and to restore community peace and tranquility."

Myanmar's resistance movement, meanwhile, has organized widely and swiftly underground.

Within days of the junta takeover, elected parliamentarians who were denied their seats convened their own self-styled Parliament. Its members have formed a shadow National Unity Government with guidelines for an interim constitution, and last week, a People's Defense Force as a precursor to a Federal Union Army. Many cities, towns and even neighborhoods had already formed local defense groups which in theory will now become part of the People's Defense Force.

Aside from being morale boosters, these actions serve a strategic purpose by endorsing a federal style of government, which has been sought for decades by the country's ethnic minorities to give them autonomous powers in the border areas where they predominate.

Promoting federalism, in which the center shares power with the regions, aligns the interests of the anti-military pro-democracy movement with the goals of the ethnic minorities. In theory, this could add a

real military component to a movement whose armaments are generally no deadlier than Molotov cocktails and air rifles — though homemade bombs have been added to its arsenals in recent weeks.

In practice, at least for the time being, the guerrilla armies of the Kachin in the north and the Karen in the east will fight as they always have, to protect their own territory. They can give military training to the thousands of activists that are claimed to have fled the cities to their zones, but are still overmatched by the government's forces. But on their home ground they hold an advantage against what their populations consider an occupying army. That may be enough.

"The only thing that the military is really threatened by is when all of these disparate voices and communities around the country actually start working against it, not as a unified monolith, but all working against the military's interests," said the analyst, Mathieson. "And I think that's the best that we can hope for moving forward, that the people recognize that all efforts have to go against the military. And if that means fighting up in the hills and doing peaceful protests and other forms of striking back against the military in the towns and the cities, then so be it."

It's hard to gauge if the army has a breaking point.

Mathieson said he's seen no signs the junta was willing to negotiate or concede anything. The Tatmadaw is "remarkably resilient. And they recognize that this is an almost existential threat to their survival."

EXPLAINER: Why Broadway is waiting until fall to reopen

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Broadway shows are tripping over themselves to announce that tickets are once more available. But don't get dressed up just yet: The curtains won't rise for most until September or October.

"Hamilton," "The Lion King" and "Wicked" return Sept. 14, as does "Chicago." "Ain't Too Proud – The Life and Times of the Temptations" restarts Oct. 16, "The Phantom of the Opera" on Oct. 22, "Jagged Little Pill" on Oct. 21 and "Come From Away on Sept. 21. "Six," which had planned to open officially on the day of the 2020 shutdown, will restart Sept. 17, as will David Byrne's "American Utopia." "Mrs. Doubtfire" will return Oct. 21. More are expected to announce new dates soon — for the fall.

WHY THE FOUR MONTH WAIT?

Selling tickets now allows producers to gauge interest in their shows, like putting a big toe in the water to check the temperature. Is there thunderous demand or is it more tepid? How enduring is the interest? Once producers get answers — and much-needed cash from interested theater-goers — they can plan. Shows that find a lukewarm response may need to invest in more advertising or change it up.

Broadway shows thrive on tourists — who were roughly two-thirds of the people in the seats before the pandemic struck — and producers are banking that visitor numbers will be up by fall. The hope is that theater lovers — both tourists and New Yorkers — will loudly cheer the return. It will be a big occasion.

"The moment those theater lights go down and the stage lights come up is probably going to be one of the most emotional moments in theater in New York. And I can't wait to be standing in my spot in the back of the theater," says Stacey Mindich, the lead producer of "Dear Evan Hansen."

WHAT WILL HAPPEN OVER THE NEXT MONTHS?

Broadway shows can't just restart like flipping a light switch, especially big musicals. Cast members may have left, requiring new hiring. Orchestras and ensembles must re-learn their parts, choreographers need the cast in the room to synchronize and costumers need to check fittings. Producers say the task is like opening a show from scratch all over again.

The pandemic also has added new safety fears for everything from handling props to theater cleaning. Broadway seats are very close together, and the venues are not particularly airy or spacious. Just getting inside before the pandemic required standing in a long line and cramming into entrances. It's no surprise that the first report of COVID-19 invading Broadway was when a part-time usher and security guard tested positive.

So questions need to be addressed: Will temperature checks be enough? Must actors be vaccinated? Will audiences have to show vaccination cards? Will masks be required? Some theater owners have installed

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new air filters and some have updated bathrooms. Is that enough? Might shows eliminate intermission and bar service to curb people from mingling? Producers and union leaders must reach agreements on all these issues before shows open.

Audiences are also going to have to adjust. Actor Katharine McPhee wondered about small things, like folks coughing during a show. That used to be annoying; now it may be triggering. "I feel like it's going to take a long time for people to not have some trauma connected to us all being fearful," she said.

WHO IS IN BETTER SHAPE?

Those shows likely to fare best, at least initially, have legions of fans and histories as a tested entertainment source — think "Hamilton," "The Lion King" and "Wicked." Those in the most precarious positions are new plays or musicals that few know about, but are bravely opening post-pandemic. Initially, after 18 months of pent-up demand, theater lovers are expected to make a point of buying tickets and cheering the return. But the months after those die-hard fans have come and gone will be the trickiest. Theater actors certainly are hopeful.

"I think it has, for me, reset my passion for theater," says Jesse Tyler Ferguson, who is waiting for his revival of "Take Me Out" to restart. "I think for a lot of people, it's been something that we've taken for granted. And I think when we do get back to being able to commune and join together and watch live theater together, I'm going to have that same feeling in my heart and in my soul as when I first sat down to see my first Broadway show at 17 years old."

WHY IT HAS TO BE ALL OR NOTHING

Away from the Great White Way, shows have already opened with socially distanced audiences, but that's not possible for the 41 Broadway theaters. The financial demands simply don't favor keeping many seats purposefully empty.

The average operating costs for a play are about \$300,000 per week, while weekly costs run \$600,000 for musicals. Conventional wisdom is that many shows need to sell at least 80% of tickets just to break even. Figuring out ticket pricing will also be a headache: Should there be regular prices initially and then deep discounts later in the fall to attract more wary customers? Disney is luring customers by promising to pay all Ticketmaster fees and offering skittish ticket buyers the freedom to exchange or even cancel tickets at no charge. There's going to be a lot of number-crunching from now until fall.

CHANGE, CHANGE, CHANGE

Financials aside, the existing theater community is going through a reflective and turbulent period as it comes under criticism from people — inside and outside the business — demanding racial justice, inclusion, fair wages, accountability and representation.

Spurred on by the protests over the police-involved death of George Floyd, marchers have taken to the streets to denounce the labor union Actors Equity Association and have successfully forced producer Scott Rudin to step aside in the face of bullying allegations. The voices are calling for wholesale changes from a system that has been static for decades. Working out what a more inclusive Broadway will take time.

"I think that we are at a point now where people are listening and people are willing to make changes," Vanessa Williams, a leader in the new group Black Theatre United, said in March. "It's almost like a reset button now: 'OK, now we're listening and now we're going to make changes.'"

New survey of US Jews reveals worries, strengths, divisions

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

A comprehensive new survey of Jewish Americans finds them increasingly worried about antisemitism, proud of their cultural heritage and sharply divided about the importance of religious observance in their lives.

The survey, released Tuesday by the Pew Research Center, estimated the total Jewish population in the country at 7.5 million — about 2.3% of the national population.

The survey of 4,178 Jewish Americans was conducted between November 2019 and June 2020 — long before the current escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the findings reflected skepticism

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among U.S. Jews regarding that conflict — only one-third said the Israeli government was sincere in seeking peace; just 12% said Palestinian leaders were sincere in that regard.

Compared with Americans overall, Jewish Americans, on average, are older, have higher levels of education and income and are more geographically concentrated in the Northeast, according to Pew.

Yet even as the Jewish population is thriving in many ways, concerns about antisemitism rose amid the deadly attacks in 2018 and 2019 on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh; the Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, California; and a kosher grocery store in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Three-quarters of Jewish Americans say there is more antisemitism in the U.S. than five years ago, and 53% say they feel less safe. Jews who wear distinctive religious attire such as head coverings are particularly likely to feel less safe.

The impact of such worries on people's behavior seems limited: Pew reported that the vast majority of American Jews — including those who feel less safe — say concern about antisemitism hasn't deterred them from participating in Jewish observances and events.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union of Reform Judaism, said American Jews believe they are being singled out for attacks and vitriol, yet also see antisemitism as part of a broader national problem of bigotry and intolerance.

"We have to get a lid on the tolerance of intolerance in the United States," he told The Associated Press. "Hatred and bigotry existed before five or six years ago, but in recent years it has become OK to do it in a very public, unrestrained way."

According to Pew's criteria, Jews are notably less religious than American adults as a whole. For example, 21% said religion is very important in their lives, compared with 41% of U.S. adults overall. A majority of U.S. adults say they believe in God "as described in the Bible," compared with 26% of Jews. And 12% of Jewish Americans say they attend religious services at least weekly, versus 27% of the general public.

Orthodox Jews stand apart in this regard. They are among the most religious groups in U.S. society in terms of the share — 86% — who say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 78% of Black Protestants and 76% of white evangelicals.

According to Pew, 9% of U.S. Jews describe themselves as Orthodox. Far more belong to the two long-dominant branches of American Judaism: 37% identify as Reform and 17% as Conservative. More than one in four don't identify with any particular branch yet consider themselves to be Jewish ethnically, culturally or by family background.

Interfaith marriage is commonplace: 42% of married Jewish adults said they had a non-Jewish spouse, according to Pew.

Jacobs said he wants Reform congregations to embrace this phenomenon rather than view it as a sign of demise.

"Intermarriage can expand who's part of the Jewish community," he said. "You see Black, brown, Asian families choosing to be a part of Jewish life."

Pew found evidence that the U.S. Jewish population is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Overall, 92% of Jewish adults identify as non-Hispanic white, and 8% identify with all other categories combined. But among Jews ages 18 to 29, that figure rises to 15%.

Pew's survey suggests other generational changes are unfolding. For example, among Jews ages 18 to 29, 17% self-identify as Orthodox, compared with just 3% of those 65 and older. And among Jewish adults under 30, 37% identify with either Reform or Conservative Judaism, compared with about 70% of those 65 and older.

Politically, U.S. Jews on the whole tend to support the Democratic Party. In the survey, which was conducted months before the 2020 election, 71% said they were Democrats or leaned Democratic.

But Orthodox Jews have moved in the opposite direction: 75% of them said they were Republicans or leaned Republican, compared with 57% in 2013. And 86% of them rated Donald Trump's handling of policy toward Israel as "excellent" or "good," while a majority of all U.S. Jews described it as "only fair" or "poor."

While there are signs of political polarization among U.S. Jews, the survey also found areas of consensus.

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For instance, more than 80% say they feel at least some sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and three-quarters say "being Jewish" is very or somewhat important to them.

Pew asked respondents which of various causes and activities are "essential," "important but not essential" or "not important" to what being Jewish means to them. More than 70% said remembering the Holocaust and leading a moral and ethical life are essential, and 59% cited working for social justice.

Rabbi Noah Farkas of Valley Beth Shalom, a Conservative synagogue in Encino, California, said he hopes Jewish Americans can maintain solidarity even as their ranks diversify and many forego religious observance.

"It is our imperative to find ways to be nimble and compelling enough for the Jews to want to invest their time and resources in the broader community," he said via email. "So the struggle for me is not the identity, but the practice of Jewish life and how we hold a community together when others are trying to tear us apart."

Rabbi Motti Seligson, media director of the Hasidic organization Chabad-Lubavitch, expressed pride and optimism as the ranks of young Orthodox Jews remain robust. Yet he commended other young adults who don't identify as religious but still embrace Jewish culture and traditions.

"They are eschewing the old construct of denominational affiliation and choosing a Jewish lifestyle that is uniquely their own yet ultimately connected to their people and heritage," he said.

Pew's survey was conducted online and by mail; the margin of error for questions posed to all respondents was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

US job openings soar to highest level on record

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. employers posted a record number of available jobs in March, illustrating starkly the desperation of businesses trying to find new workers as the country emerges from the pandemic and the economy expands.

Yet total job gains increased only modestly, according to a Labor Department report issued Tuesday. The figures follow an April jobs report last week that was far weaker than expected, largely because companies appear unable to find the workers they need, even with the unemployment rate elevated at 6.1%.

Job openings rose nearly 8%, to 8.1 million in March, the most on records dating back to December 2000, the government said. Yet overall hiring that month rose less than 4% to 6 million. The hiring number is a gross figure, while the government's jobs report — which said 770,000 jobs were added in March — uses a net total. Tuesday's report is known as the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, or JOLTS.

A separate survey of small businesses by the National Federation of Independent Business found that 44% had jobs they couldn't fill, also a record high.

The NFIB and JOLTS "add to evidence from the April employment report that labor shortages are widespread, pushing up prices and potentially acting as a brake on the recovery," said Michael Pearce, an economist at Capital Economics.

Job postings rose in most industries, including restaurants, bars and hotels; manufacturing; construction; and retail. They fell in health care and transportation and warehousing.

The enormous number of openings will likely add fuel to a political dispute about whether the extra \$300 in weekly federal unemployment aid, on top of a state payment that averages about \$320, is discouraging those out of work from seeking new jobs. Many Republicans in Congress have argued that it is, and several states have threatened to cut off the \$300 payments, with Georgia the latest state to consider such a move.

President Joe Biden, who included the extra money in his \$1.9 trillion rescue package approved in March, disputed that the \$300 supplemental payment is to blame Monday. But he also urged the Labor Department to work with states on renewing requirements that those receiving aid must search for jobs and take a position if offered. The job search rule was suspended during the pandemic, when many businesses were closed.

"Anyone collecting unemployment, who is offered a suitable job must take the job or lose their unem-

ployment benefits," Biden said.

Many people out of work are also reluctant to take jobs in service industries that require contact with the public for fear of contracting COVID-19. And many women aren't searching for jobs because they haven't found child care for children that are still at home taking online classes for at least part of the week.

Scores of dead bodies found floating in India's Ganges River

NEW DELHI (AP) — Scores of dead bodies have been found floating down the Ganges River in eastern India as the country battles a ferocious surge in coronavirus infections. Authorities said Tuesday they haven't yet determined the cause of death.

Health officials working through the night Monday retrieved 71 bodies, officials in Bihar state said.

Images on social media of the bodies floating in the river prompted outrage and speculation that they died from COVID-19. Authorities performed post mortems on Tuesday but said they could not confirm the cause of death due to the decomposition of the bodies.

More corpses were found floating in the river on Tuesday, washing up in Ghazipur district in neighboring Uttar Pradesh state. Police and villagers were at the site, about 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Monday's incident.

"We are trying to find out where did these dead bodies come from? How did they get here?" said Mangla Prasad Singh, a local official.

Surinder, a resident of Ghazipur who uses one name, said villagers didn't have enough wood to cremate their dead on land.

"Due to the shortage of wood, the dead are being buried in the water," he said. "Bodies from around 12-13 villages have been buried in the water."

Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are experiencing rising COVID-19 cases as infections in India grow faster than anywhere else in the world.

On Tuesday, the country confirmed nearly 390,000 new cases, including 3,876 more deaths. Overall, India has had the second highest number of confirmed cases after the U.S. with nearly 23 million and over 240,000 deaths. All of the figures are almost certainly a vast undercount, experts say.

US schools fight to keep students amid fear of dropout surge

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (AP) — U.S. educators are doing everything they can to track down high school students who stopped showing up to classes and to help them get the credits needed to graduate, amid an anticipated surge in the country's dropout rate during the coronavirus pandemic.

There isn't data available yet on how the pandemic has affected the nation's overall dropout rate — 2019 is the last year for which it is available — and many school officials say it's too early to know how many students who stopped logging on for distance learning don't plan to return. But soaring numbers of students who are failing classes or are chronically absent have experts fearing the worst, and schools have been busy tracking down wayward seniors through social media, knocking on their doors, assigning staff to help them make up for lost time and, in some cases, even relaxing graduation requirements.

"When students drop out, they typically look for an out, an opportunity to leave. And this has provided that, unfortunately," Sandy Addis, chairman of the National Dropout Prevention Center, said recently, referring to the pandemic. His group believes the dropout rate has spiked this year and will remain high for years.

At one high school in Kansas City, Kansas, staff members have made thousands of calls to the families of at-risk students, said Troy Pitsch, who supervises high school principals in the city.

"If we lose a student, it is going to be after kicking and screaming and fighting tooth and nail for them," Pitsch said.

Many districts were forgiving last spring when schools shut down abruptly, freezing grades unless students wanted to improve them. That made this year the first for which schools would feel the full effects

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of the pandemic on student performance and engagement.

The early signs aren't encouraging. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization warned that the pandemic had put 24 million children worldwide at risk of dropping out of school. And the pandemic's effects could erase gains the U.S. made in reducing its dropout rate, which fell from 9.3% in 2007 to 5.1% in 2019, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Not finishing high school significantly hurts a person's earning potential, with dropouts bringing home an average of \$150 less per week than graduates, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

To keep students on track, some local governments and school systems have waived certain testing requirements for graduation or changed grading policies so that missed assignments aren't as damaging. But such leniency carries the risk of watering down academic standards, said Russell Rumberger, a professor emeritus of education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who has written about dropouts.

"If they let you pass with a D and you don't have to do very much to do it, maybe technically you are getting a diploma, but you are not getting the same type of diploma you may have gotten prior to the pandemic, when the standards were higher," he said.

A National Dropout Prevention Center report predicted a doubling or tripling of the number of students who were at risk of falling behind academically and not graduating.

Among them for much of this school year was Jose Solano-Hernandez, a 17-year-old senior at Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas. In January, when he was at his lowest point following the deaths of one grandparent from COVID-19 and another from cancer in the same week, he estimated that he had missed eight assignments in each of his classes.

"I wouldn't make my parents proud," he recalled thinking as he struggled to learn virtually at night while working by day at a mechanic's shop.

Solano-Hernandez has been slowly chipping away at his backlog of work since his school brought back him and other struggling seniors for extra in-person help more than a month before the rest of the student body returned at the end of March. He said the change brought "relief" and he's now hopeful he'll graduate.

Mary Stewart, the school's principal, said there was "radio silence" from hundreds of students in the fall. But the number who weren't accounted for shrank to about 40 by the spring after staff hunted down siblings and scrolled through Facebook searching for clues to their whereabouts.

"I went to a house of a young man the day before Thanksgiving and found that he had self-isolated in his room because of a mental health issue," she said. "That is very common. Whatever happens in the community and in the world, we are a micro-system of that."

The pandemic also has taken a toll on students at North Grand High School in Chicago.

Principal Emily Feltes said some of her students took on jobs to support their families and others fell ill. Her students returned for part-time in-person instruction in April, but she's worried that dropout numbers will rise.

"We have done everything that we think that we can to try to re-engage kids — to try to help them. And I know that my colleagues are all working really hard too," she said. "But the reality is that this has been a worldwide and a national trauma."

Persuading reluctant students to return isn't easy. At Orange County Public Schools in the Orlando, Florida, area, substitute teacher Patrice Pullen was assigned in December to oversee a group of 13 seniors who fell behind during virtual learning. She said it became clear on her first day that her most important job would be "rebranding" the students, who had come to see themselves as failures.

"You have kids — and I'm not exaggerating — they had zeros. They had not turned in anything since August, since school started," she said. Now, eleven are on track to graduate and the other two are close to being on track.

At Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, the 185,000-student district saw the percentage of middle school and high school students earning F's in at least two classes jump by 83% in the fall.

The spring numbers returned to more normal levels as the district made several changes, including dropping the minimum number of assignments per quarter from nine to six and allowing teachers to accept

late work on major assignments with minimal penalties, said district spokeswoman Lucy Caldwell. Still, she said, it is hard to say how many students disappeared or what will happen with dropouts.

"The pandemic was extraordinarily difficult on families — emotionally, economically, and physically," Caldwell said.

Poll: Most in US who remain unvaccinated need convincing

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

Fewer Americans are reluctant to get a COVID-19 vaccine than just a few months ago, but questions about side effects and how the shots were tested still hold some back, according to a new poll that highlights the challenges at a pivotal moment in the U.S. vaccination campaign.

Just 11% of people who remain unvaccinated say they definitely will get the shot, while 34% say they definitely won't, according to the poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

That leaves a large swath of Americans in the middle who might still roll up their sleeves — including 27% who say they probably will and 27% who say they probably won't — if someone credible addressed their concerns. That's where National Institutes of Health immunologist Kizzmekia Corbett comes in.

Corbett helped lead development of the Moderna shot, and she spends hours giving plain-spoken answers to questions from Americans — especially Black Americans like her — to counter misinformation about the three vaccines used in the U.S.

No, COVID-19 vaccines won't cause infertility: "Whoever started that rumor, shame on you."

No, the shots' speedy development doesn't mean corners were cut: "We worked our butts off for the last six years" hunting vaccines for earlier cousins of COVID-19 — a head start that made the difference, Corbett recently told the AP.

Getting as many people vaccinated as fast as possible is critical to returning the country to normal. More than 150 million people — about 58% of all adults — have received at least one dose, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As that number grows, reluctance is inching down. Overall, the AP-NORC poll found about 1 in 5 American adults say they probably or definitely won't get vaccinated, compared to about a third in January, when the shots were just rolling out.

Black Americans likewise are becoming more open to the shots, with 26% now saying they definitely or probably won't get vaccinated compared with 41% in January. That's similar to the 22% of Hispanic Americans and white Americans the poll found unlikely to get vaccinated. Among Asian Americans, just 9% say they definitely or probably won't get the shots.

Holdouts are from all over American society — fueling experts' advice that there is no one-size-fits-all vaccine message and that people need to hear from trusted sources, whether that's scientists like Corbett or their own doctors. Adults under 45, rural Americans and Republicans are especially likely to say they will avoid vaccination, the poll found. But again, attitudes are changing: 32% of Republicans now say they probably or definitely won't get vaccinated, down from 44% in January.

About three-fourths of those who say they are unlikely to get vaccinated have little to no confidence that the vaccines were properly tested, and 55% are very concerned about side effects, the poll found. Even among those who say they will probably get vaccinated but have not done so yet, concerns about proper testing are elevated compared with people who have received their shots already.

In forums hosted by colleges, Black pastors, doctors and even basketball great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Corbett says the best way to overcome distrust is to put the science in understandable terms for strangers just like she does for family. Later this spring, she's moving from the NIH to Harvard's School of Public Health to continue both her vaccine research and that outreach to communities, the school plans to announce on Tuesday.

The vaccines' speedy development "is historic and it is brag-worthy," said Corbett, whose NIH team was able to customize a shot that matched the new virus after spending six years developing vaccines against other dangerous coronaviruses such as MERS.

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But “really, we should have started the conversations very early about what went into it,” she said, so the public understood that no steps were skipped.

A combination of huge studies and real-world data show the main side effects of the U.S. vaccines are temporary fevers or aches as the immune system revs up. The shots are undergoing unprecedented safety monitoring, which last month led to a temporary pause in Johnson & Johnson vaccinations to determine how to handle an incredibly rare risk of blood clots.

Even after that pause, overall confidence in the vaccines is up slightly compared with a few months ago, with 45% of all adults now very or extremely confident that the shots were properly tested for safety and effectiveness, compared with 39% in an AP-NORC poll in February.

But side effect myths persist. Corbett calls the fertility concern “completely absurd,” and in forum after forum explains why it’s biologically impossible for the vaccines to alter anyone’s DNA.

The repetition is OK: “People need to hear things multiple times,” she said.

Plus, many Americans have some of the same questions scientists are still trying to answer, such as whether or when people might need a booster dose.

“Those are things that even I can’t even answer. But what I can say is that we’re doing everything we can to make sure we can answer it as soon as possible,” Corbett said.

Signs of optimism as NYC sees rise in tourism, bit by bit

By DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The once-deserted steps outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art are filling up with visitors again. Hotel lobbies are losing their desolate feel. Downtown, people are back to taking selfies with the Charging Bull statue near Wall Street.

Tourists who vanished from New York City’s museums, hotels and cultural attractions when the coronavirus pandemic hit a year ago are trickling back in as restrictions loosen.

There’s still a long way to go before the still-closed theater district is mobbed with international travelers again.

But lately, indicators like hotel occupancy and museum attendance have ticked up, thanks to domestic travelers and day trippers who don’t mind seeing the city operating at less than its usual hectic pace.

“I’ve always wanted to come to New York, just because I’ve watched the movies,” said Chazmin Fuhrer, 26, a first-time visitor from Concord, California, who came into the city for a handful of days recently to celebrate a friend’s birthday.

Lounging at a table in Times Square as three street performers started their dance moves nearby, Fuhrer said she knew it wasn’t anywhere near as busy as usual. But she was OK with that.

“It’s kind of nice without a lot of people out,” she said, noting that the pre-pandemic crush of people would probably now make her nervous, with the virus still circulating.

City officials are optimistic, even in the wake of an incident in Times Square on Saturday, when three people — including a child — were injured by stray bullets when a dispute led to gunfire.

“In the end, people want to come to this city,” Mayor Bill de Blasio said Monday. “It is an overwhelmingly safe city, when you look at New York City compared to cities around the country, around the world.”

In 2019, an estimated 67 million people visited the city. In 2020, that plummeted to slightly more than 22 million, mostly those who came before the pandemic began rampaging in New York in March.

Restaurants and stores were forced to close, as were some hotels, bringing the city’s available rooms from 124,000 to 88,000, according to city tourism officials.

On top of that, unrest over racial injustice in late spring led to two days of property destruction and stealing. While the damage was limited and cleanup quick, the city suffered through months of bad press as then-President Donald Trump, eager to bash his Democrat-run hometown, publicly smeared it as having succumbed to anarchy.

The daytime Times Square shooting brought a fresh round of handwringing.

But after a moribund year, things are looking up. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, has

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reached 9,000 visitors on some recent days. That's still far less than the swarms of 25,000 who once packed in on the busiest days pre-pandemic, but far more than the museum was seeing when it reopened in late August.

Ridership is up on the ferries that take visitors from the southern tip of Manhattan to the Statue of Liberty, where the grounds and a museum are open even as the statue's interior remains off limits.

Rafael Abreu, vice president for marketing at Statue Cruises, said it had been "fairly slow" through February, but ridership had risen in March and April to about 25-30% of pre-pandemic times.

Hotel occupancy, which had been running in the 30% range, has been in the 50% range over the last few weeks, said Fred Dixon, president and CEO of NYC & Company, the city's tourism agency.

New hotels are opening, and the number of rooms is expected to reach 118,000 by year's end.

"It's just really wonderful," Dixon said of the city's cautious reawakening. "And so, it's given us a lot of hope."

The agency is predicting just over 31 million visitors in 2021.

City and state officials in recent weeks have been making moves to open the city up as much as possible.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced the city's subway system would return to 24-hour service in mid-May. Capacity restrictions on businesses are being lifted, although 6 feet (2 meters) of space between patrons will still be required.

The Yankees and Mets have been allowed to boost crowd capacity at games, with no restrictions at all on people who can show they have been vaccinated.

De Blasio last month announced a \$30 million tourism marketing campaign that NYC & Company will launch in June.

The city and state are also setting up vaccination stations offering free shots to tourists.

"We think this is a positive message to tourists. Come here. It's safe. It's a great place to be and we're going to take care of you," said de Blasio, a Democrat.

In a city where multitudes are dependent on tourism for their livelihoods, things can't get better quickly enough.

Michael Keane, an owner of O'Hara's Restaurant and Pub near the World Trade Center site, said things have been looking up.

"It's been a slow crawl but we're seeing more and more tourists every week come in the area," he said, noting that he's keeping a nervous eye on how the virus has continued to ravage some other countries. "I can't imagine going through that again."

Limitations remain. Broadway shows won't start running again until September. Some attractions require timed reservations to keep crowds down. Others are still closed.

But even with things moving slower, Fuhrer said she was "definitely not disappointed" with her trip.

Back home, "I feel like people are still a little bit cautious out there with COVID," she said. Meanwhile, in New York, "I feel like everybody out here is trying to get their life going."

She and girlfriend Gabbi Allen, 23, both vaccinated, felt like they got to experience some of that New York vibe.

"All the sirens, all the honking," Allen said.

"People yelling at each other in the middle of the street," Fuhrer added.

The lower-key New York City has actually been wonderful, said Stephanie Piefke, 24, of Atlanta, a frequent visitor out recently for some touristy activities with her friend, first-time visitor Danielle Jenkins.

The women, both vaccinated, said at the Empire State Building there were maybe a few dozen people cruising through a waiting area set up to handle what Piefke said would have been a "miserable" snaking line.

She didn't think the quieter New York City would last, though, once the city fully reopens.

"Y'all are gonna be like, 'Oh God, they're here,'" she said, "and it'll be like a tsunami of tourists that have been wanting to come."

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, May 12, the 132nd day of 2021. There are 233 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On May 12, 1949, the Soviet Union lifted the Berlin Blockade, which the Western powers had succeeded in circumventing with their Berlin Airlift.

On this date:

In 1780, during the Revolutionary War, the besieged city of Charleston, South Carolina, surrendered to British forces.

In 1937, Britain's King George VI was crowned at Westminster Abbey; his wife, Elizabeth, was crowned as queen consort.

In 1943, during World War II, Axis forces in North Africa surrendered. The two-week Trident Conference, headed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, opened in Washington.

In 1955, Manhattan's last elevated rail line, the Third Avenue El, ceased operation.

In 1958, the United States and Canada signed an agreement to create the North American Air Defense Command (later the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD).

In 1970, the Senate voted unanimously to confirm Harry A. Blackmun as a Supreme Court justice.

In 1975, the White House announced the new Cambodian government had seized an American merchant ship, the Mayaguez, in international waters. (U.S. Marines gained control of the ship three days after its seizure, not knowing the 39 civilian members of the crew had already been released by Cambodia.)

In 1982, in Fatima, Portugal, security guards overpowered a Spanish priest armed with a bayonet who attacked Pope John Paul II. (In 2008, the pope's longtime private secretary revealed that the pontiff was slightly wounded in the assault.)

In 1997, Australian Susie Maroney became the first woman to swim from Cuba to Florida, covering the 118-mile distance in 24 1/2 hours.

In 2002, Jimmy Carter arrived in Cuba, becoming the first U.S. president in or out of office to visit since the 1959 revolution that put Fidel Castro in power.

In 2008, a devastating 7.9 magnitude earthquake in China's Sichuan province left more than 87,000 people dead or missing.

In 2009, five Miami men were convicted in a plot to blow up FBI buildings and Chicago's Sears Tower; one man was acquitted. Suspected Nazi death camp guard John Demjanjuk (dem-YAHN'-yuk) was deported from the United States to Germany.

Ten years ago: CEOs of the five largest oil companies went before the Senate Finance Committee, where Democrats challenged the executives to justify tax breaks at a time when people were paying \$4 a gallon for gas. A German court convicted retired U.S. autoworker John Demjanjuk of being an accessory to the murder of tens of thousands of Jews as a Nazi death camp guard. (Demjanjuk, who maintained his innocence, died in March 2012 at age 91.)

Five years ago: A divided U.S. Supreme Court blocked the execution of an Alabama inmate so that a lower court could review claims that strokes and dementia had rendered him incompetent to understand his looming death sentence. (A federal appeals court ruled in March 2017 that Vernon Madison was incompetent, and could not be executed.)

One year ago: House Democrats unveiled a coronavirus aid package totaling more than \$3 trillion, including nearly \$1 trillion for states and cities to avert layoffs and a fresh round of direct cash aid to American households. (The measure won House approval but Senate Republicans and the White House rejected it as too costly.) Dr. Anthony Fauci warned a Senate panel that cities and states could "turn back the clock" and see more COVID-19 deaths and economic damage if they lifted stay-at-home orders too quickly. German photographer Astrid Kirchherr, who shot some of the earliest and most striking images of the Beatles

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and helped shape their visual style, died at age 81 in her native Hamburg.

Today's Birthdays: Composer Burt Bacharach is 93. Actor Millie Perkins is 85. R&B singer Jayotis Washington is 80. Country singer Billy Swan is 79. Actor Linda Dano is 78. Actor Lindsay Crouse is 73. Singer-musician Steve Winwood is 73. Actor Gabriel Byrne is 71. Actor Bruce Boxleitner is 71. Singer Billy Squier is 71. Blues singer-musician Guy Davis is 69. Country singer Kix Brooks is 66. Actor Kim Greist is 63. Rock musician Eric Singer (KISS) is 63. Actor Ving Rhames is 62. Rock musician Billy Duffy is 60. Actor Emilio Estevez is 59. Actor April Grace is 59. Actor Vanessa A. Williams is 58. TV personality/chef Carla Hall is 57. Actor Stephen Baldwin is 55. Actor Scott Schwartz is 53. Actor Kim Fields is 52. Actor Samantha Mathis is 51. Actor Jamie Luner is 50. Actor Christian Campbell is 49. Actor Rhea Seehorn is 49. Actor Mackenzie Astin is 48. Country musician Matt Mangano (The Zac Brown Band) is 45. Actor Rebecca Herbst is 44. Actor Malin (MAH'-lin) Akerman is 43. Actor Jason Biggs is 43. Actor Rami Malek (RAH'-mee MA'-lihk) is 40. Actor-singer Clare Bowen is 37. Actor Emily VanCamp is 35. Actor Malcolm David Kelley is 29. Actor Sullivan Sweeten is 26.