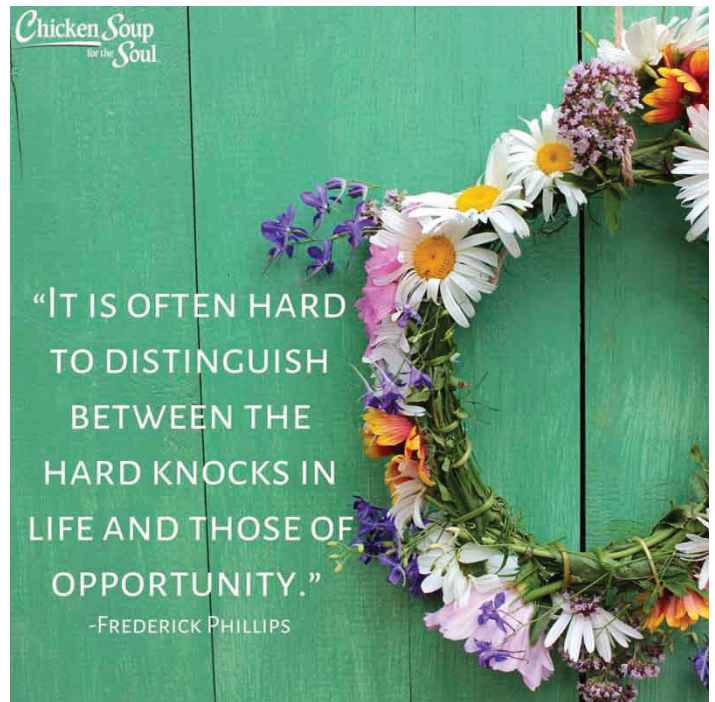


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MEMORIAL DAY
Honoring All Who Served

The Groton American Legion Post #39 will perform Military Honors at the following times and cemeteries:

7:30	Huffton
8:15	James
8:45	Verdon
9:15	Bates/Scotland
10:00	Ferney
11:00	Andover Protestant Cemetery
12:00	Groton

A program will be held at Groton starting at 12:00 with the speaker being a 1960 Groton graduate Brig. Gen. Ronald W Mielke (ret). After the Groton service a meal will be served at the Legion Post.



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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**Above: A silhouette of the twin towers in Groton early this morning.
Below: Fog rises off the pool this morning and temperatures dipped to 37 degrees.
(Photos by Paul Kosel)**



Groton Transit

FUNDRAISER

**Thursday, June 17, 2021
4 p.m. to 7 p.m.**

**Groton Community Transit
Downtown Groton**

*Tables will be set up outside
as in previous years!*

**We will be offering DRIVE-THRU
Service again on the
south side of the transit.**

*Please join us and help
support Groton Transit!*

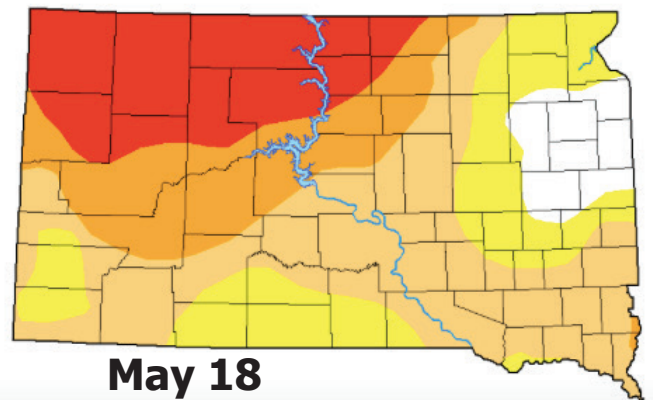
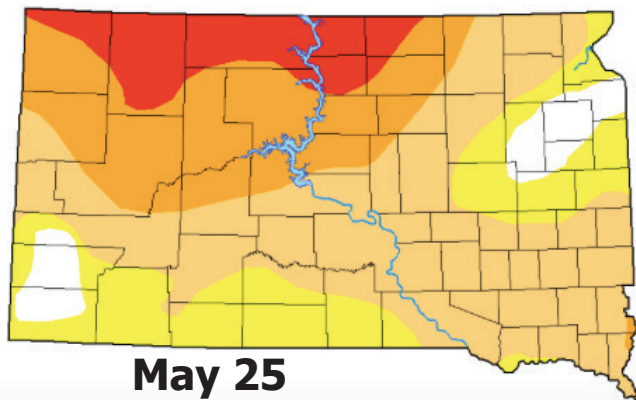
FREE WILL OFFERING!

*** Food * Fun * Door Prizes ***

Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



High Plains

In the High Plains Region, a swath of 1.5 to 3 inches (locally more) of rain fell from western North Dakota southward to eastern Colorado and northwestern Kansas. This resulted in reductions in D0 (abnormally dry) and D1 (moderate drought) coverage in western Nebraska and eastern Colorado, with additional 1-category improvements in the drought depiction across southeastern Colorado. In the Dakotas, where long-term moderate (D1) to exceptional (D4 – South Dakota) drought is entrenched, the heavy rainfall, although beneficial, was only enough for minor reductions in D1 (moderate drought) to D3 (extreme drought) coverage in the western areas. Reports indicate much of this week's heavy rains was immediately absorbed by the severely dry soils, with no runoff into empty dugouts or ponds. However, in some locations, the rain fell so quickly that it did not allow time for infiltration into the topsoils, resulting in erosion of topsoils. Furthermore, high wind events have increased the potential for evaporative loss of this moisture from the topsoils. Currently, very little vegetative matter is available for grazing, despite some isolated areas of green-up from recent rainfall. In eastern North Dakota, some D3 reduction was warranted in areas receiving more than 1.5 inches of rainfall, diminishing long-term deficits. However, in South Dakota, where above-normal temperatures (9°F to 12°F positive anomalies) and below-normal precipitation (less than 50 percent of normal precipitation), expansion of D0 (abnormally dry), D1 (moderate drought), and D2 (severe drought) coverage were warranted as 30-day SPIs have fallen to D3 to D4 equivalence and 30-day deficits (1 to 3 inches) continue to accumulate.

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**SOUTH DAKOTA
NEWS WATCH**

Inform. Enlighten. Illuminate.

Poll shows South Dakotans support ballot initiative process and oppose lawmaker interference

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

Many South Dakotans feel that democracy is not working very well in America right now, but those same people are highly supportive of their own right to make law directly from the voting booth.

According to a recent statewide poll, a wide majority of South Dakota residents supports the citizen-led ballot-initiative process as a way to make laws or change the state constitution, and a significant majority said they don't want the state Legislature to make the process more difficult.

The poll was conducted in late April through a partnership between South Dakota News Watch and the Chiesman Center for Democracy at the University of South Dakota.

In the telephone poll of 500 South Dakota residents from across the state, 74.8% of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed that "citizen ballot initiatives are an important part of the democratic process."

On a follow-up question, 62.6% of respondents said they disagreed or strongly disagreed that "the South Dakota Legislature should make it more difficult for citizen initiatives to get onto the ballot."

Those same respondents show strong dissatisfaction with democracy in America overall, with 64.9% reporting they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with how democracy is working in America right now.

The margin of error in the poll was plus or minus 4%; respondents were generally aligned with the overall population of the state in terms of age, gender and political party.

Compared with Republicans, Democrats and Independents were far more likely to support the ballot-initiative process, and people in the age range of 18-34 were more supportive than older respondents.

The same was true on the question regarding legislative interference in the process, with Democrats and Independents the most opposed to legislative action to make the process more difficult, and those in the 18-24 age range by far the most opposed to legislative interference.

The timing of the poll may have influenced the results. The survey was done six months after the November 2020 election in which South Dakotans voted for legalization of medical and recreational marijuana, but both measures have been challenged.

On medical marijuana, Gov. Kristi Noem pushed for a one-year delay of legalization and implementation, a proposal rejected by lawmakers. On recreational marijuana, Noem was the driving force behind a lawsuit challenging the legality of the measure now under consideration by the state Supreme Court.

Some users of social media have expressed deep disappointment that Noem and the Legislature have intervened to stall marijuana legalization, which passed with 70% of the vote for medical and 54% for recreational.

Amy Scott-Stoltz, president of the League of Women Voters of South Dakota, said poll respondents seemed to express their understanding that ballot initiatives are critical in a state like South Dakota, where one party has a supermajority over the legislative process.

Right now, the South Dakota Legislature is made up of 94 Republicans, 11 Democrats and no Independents.

The breakdown by chamber is 62 Republicans (89.6%) and 8 Democrats (11.4%) in the House of Representatives, and 32 Republicans (91.4%) and 3 Democrats (8.6%) in the Senate. This past session, three Senate committees — where the heavy lifting of the lawmaking process occurs — did not have a single

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DISPROPORTIONATE REPUBLICAN CONTROL OF THE LEGISLATURE

Members of the Republican Party have a supermajority in the state Legislature, but their level of party control does not match with the party affiliation of registered voters across South Dakota. Republicans make up about 90% of the legislative roster but only 48% of registered voters.

LEGISLATIVE PARTY REPRESENTATION

House: 62 Republicans, 8 Democrats — 88.6% GOP/11.4% DEM

Senate: 32 Republicans, 3 Democrats — 91.4% GOP/8.6% DEM

SOUTH DAKOTA VOTER REGISTRATION

Republicans — 48.0%

Democrats — 27.1%

Independent/NPA — 24.2%

Libertarian/other — 0.7%

Source: South Dakota Secretary of State

Democratic member, including the judiciary, taxation and military and veterans-affairs committees.

That level of Republican control is significantly disproportionate to the statewide breakdown of voter registration by party.

As of early May 2021, there were about 584,400 registered voters in South Dakota. Broken down by party affiliation, there were about 280,500 Republicans (48%), 158,200 Democrats (27%) and roughly 141,500 Independents or those with No Party Affiliation (24%).

The outsized level of Republican control of the Legislature does not allow for a variety of voices to be heard or new ideas to arise, Scott-Stoltz said.

Not only do non-Republican lawmakers have little power to propose or pass legislation, Republicans also have a hard time breaking away from the wishes of party leadership, Scott-Stoltz said.

"Right now, 50 percent of the population may not be represented in the Legislature," she said.

Supermajority GOP control makes the ballot-initiative process the only viable way for non-Republicans to bring forth new laws or constitutional amendments, she said.

"The ballot initiative gives the people a way to pass their own laws," Scott-Stoltz said. "The state motto is, 'Under God, the people rule,' and the ballot initiative the best way to live that motto."

Rich initiative history in South Dakota

South Dakota was an early adopter of the process known as "direct democracy," in which citizens or the state Legislature can place a proposed law or constitutional amendment on a statewide ballot and let voters directly decide its fate.

In 1890, South Dakota held its first statewide ballot, which included a measure to cap state debt at \$500,000, another to give women the right to vote, and a third to restrict voting rights of some Native Americans. All three measures were put on the ballot by the state Legislature and all three were defeated.

Since then, the state has undergone changes to allow citizen-led initiatives to provide a way for voters to make their own laws outside the legislative process.

From 1996-2018, a total of 74 ballot measures made it to the statewide ballot, and voters approved about 40% of them.

In the past decade or so, the process has been used to enact a statewide ban on indoor smoking, increase the minimum wage for workers, require a balanced state budget, and expand gambling in Deadwood.

Lawmakers have taken several steps in recent years to alter the petition-circulation and ballot-measure process, moves that supporters say make the process more fair but that opponents say are attempts to restrict access to the statewide-ballot process.

In November 2018, South Dakota voters approved Initiated Measure 24 that would ban out-of-state contributions to ballot-measure campaigns; a judge later ruled it unconstitutional.

Also in 2018, lawmakers referred a constitutional amendment to the statewide ballot to require a 55%

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Amy Scott-Stoltz

"The ballot initiative gives the people a way to pass their own laws ... the state motto is, 'Under God, the people rule,' and the ballot initiative the best way to live that motto."

-- Amy Scott-Stoltz, president of S.D. League of Women Voters

passage threshold for future initiatives, which voters defeated. A separate measure to require future ballot measures to contain only one topic was passed.

In the latest legislative session, lawmakers passed and the governor signed a law to create a registry of petition circulators, require them to wear badges, and make some of their personal details, including phone number and email address, public information. A judge recently ordered a stay on part of that legislation. Lawmakers last session also passed a law requiring ballot language on petitions to be printed in at least 14-point type size.

Former House Speaker Mark Mickelson, a Republican from Sioux Falls, was a primary supporter of IM 24 and the single-subject measure on the ballot in 2018.

In an email to News Watch, Mickelson said he felt then and still does that the South Dakota initiative and constitutional-amendment process is vulnerable to outside interests.

"The current ballot initiative measure [process] is not really being used by grass-root South Dakotans but rather has been co-opted by out-of-state, moneyed interests that use our inexpensive media markets and low signature gathering requirements as a way to test out their ideas," Mickelson wrote.

"I do think we should protect our constitution from this process as much as possible, which is hopefully what the 2018 single-subject constitutional amendment did. Any mistakes that are made in stat-

ute can more readily be considered for fine tuning," Mickelson added.

Senate President Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, said recent legislative action regarding ballot initiatives has been aimed at protecting the integrity of the initiative process.

Schoenbeck said he wasn't surprised by the poll responses that showed strong general support for the citizen-led ballot-initiative process.

Although he said he supports the right of citizens to bring measures to a statewide vote, Schoenbeck said the process has been hijacked by out-of-state groups that use South Dakota as a testing site for ballot measures that may eventually be brought forward in numerous other states.

Schoenbeck said the state's relatively inexpensive advertising rates in statewide media and a low signature-collection threshold have made the state vulnerable to national advocacy campaigns that seek to pass laws that state legislatures will not.

"South Dakota strongly supports its citizens' right to legislate at the ballot, but out-of-staters are using us because we're a cheap media market, and I don't like us being their petri dishes," Schoenbeck said.

Schoenbeck also told News Watch that he believes recent ballot measures have been too long and sometimes address more than one topic, making it hard for voters to know exactly what a measure will do and hard for them to make a fully informed decision. The 2020 Initiated Measure 26, which would legalize medical marijuana, contained 96 separate sections of information in its full form.

"These people are dragging out these ballot measure that are 25 pages long when you could do it in two paragraphs," he said. "The only reason you add volume is to confuse or to hide the full issues."

Schoenbeck backed a joint resolution in the last legislative session to put a measure on an upcoming statewide ballot that would require a 60% majority vote for some measures to pass instead of the 50% threshold now in place. That measure would apply to initiatives that create new taxes, raise taxes or cost

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Lee Schoenbeck

more than \$10 million if implemented. Schoenbeck drew criticism for successfully amending the resolution to put the measure on the next primary election ballot that is typically dominated by Republican voters.

Schoenbeck said the News Watch/Chiesman Center poll question about whether the Legislature should make it harder to get measures on the ballot had an inherent bias and was destined to have responses in strong disagreement.

He said a rephrased question about whether the Legislature should make the initiative process more fair and keep advocates from outside the state from hijacking the process would have been strongly supported.

"Fairness isn't easy to get," he said. "We can be lazy, disregard fair and make it really easy, but fair should mean that if you want me to sign the petition and put something on the ballot, you should have a readable version of what you're proposing."

National attacks on initiative process

Lawmakers, mostly Republicans, in other U.S. states have been increasingly proposing or passing laws to make it harder for citizen-led initiatives to get on the ballot or make it easier to alter or throw out the results, according to the progressive Ballot Initiative Strategy Center. The center is tracking 125 bills in 28 states that would make it harder to get initiatives on the ballot or for them to pass.

South Dakota lawmakers are part of a national increase in the frequency with which state legislatures alter or throw out completely ballot initiatives that have been passed by voters.

According to the election-tracking website ballotpedia.org, voters in U.S. states passed 43 statewide initiatives from 2010-2015 and legislatures altered 9, or about 21% of the total. From 2015-2018, state voters approved 56 initiatives, of which 19, or 34%, were altered by legislatures.

The South Dakota Legislature in 2017 voted to repeal Initiated Measure 22, a ballot initiative that would have created an ethics commission, implemented public funding of election campaigns and increased regulation of lobbying. The measure passed with about 52% of the vote, but lawmakers repealed the act and then-Gov. Dennis Daugaard signed the repeal.

One instance of out-of-state interests using the South Dakota initiative process to further their national goals came in 2018, when South Dakota became one of many states to vote in favor of the constitutional amendment known as Marsy's Law. The measure, proposed and backed by out-of-state interests, expanded notification efforts for crime victims and enhanced victim privacy rights, but has since created challenges for law enforcement, the courts and the news media in determining what criminal information can be made public.



Rick Weiland

Rick Weiland of Sioux Falls, a former Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, has led a number of ballot-initiative efforts and is now part of a group called Dakotans4health that is pushing a ballot measure to expand Medicaid eligibility.

Weiland said respondents in the News Watch/Chiesman poll support the initiated-measure process because they lack confidence in the state Legislature to enact sensible legislation on a variety of issues. Weiland said recent versions of the Legislature have spent an inordinate amount of time legislating on moral issues or, for example, trying to limit the rights of transgendered people.

"The Legislature is out of step with the voters, I think that's obvious," Weiland said. "Are these ideas that citizens are launching in the state of South Dakota bad for the state? No, but they just can't get them done in Pierre."

Weiland said he also is not surprised by poll results showing opposition

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Some South Dakotans are bothered that even though voters overwhelmingly supported legalization of medical marijuana via a statewide ballot initiative, the governor and some lawmakers tried to delay legalization by a year. Photo: News Watch file

ABOUT BART PFANKUCH



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

to legislative efforts to make the ballot-measure process more difficult. He said voters are fully aware and do not appreciate that lawmakers tried to reduce the minimum wage for some younger workers after voters had passed the higher pay rate, and that lawmakers tossed out the IM22 ethics commission and lobbying reforms.

"There's been an unrelenting attempt by the Legislature to undo the citizens-initiative process," Weiland said. "They'll say it's accountability but we just look at it as a suppression of democracy. They really don't like the voters taking this legislative power into their own hands when the Legislature fails to act."

The League of Women Voters of South Dakota is engaged in an effort to collect signatures to put a measure on the 2022 ballot that would create a redistricting commission that Scott-Stoltz said would reduce gerrymandering and restrict lawmaker influence over the critical process of drawing their own legislative boundaries.

Other ballot measures proposed for the 2022 election year include a proposal to expand Medicaid eligibility for more low-income residents and another that would open primary elections to non-affiliated candidates and voters.

Scott-Stoltz said the entire process to get a measure on the statewide ballot is difficult, time-consuming and expensive, and has been made more cumbersome in recent years by lawmakers.

"Doing a ballot measure right now is already complicated and difficult and has many roadblocks put up in front of us that seem to be roadblocks solely for roadblocking sake," she said. "Making it more difficult just seems counterproductive to the way South Dakota is supposed to be, where the people should have the strongest voice, not the party leaders."



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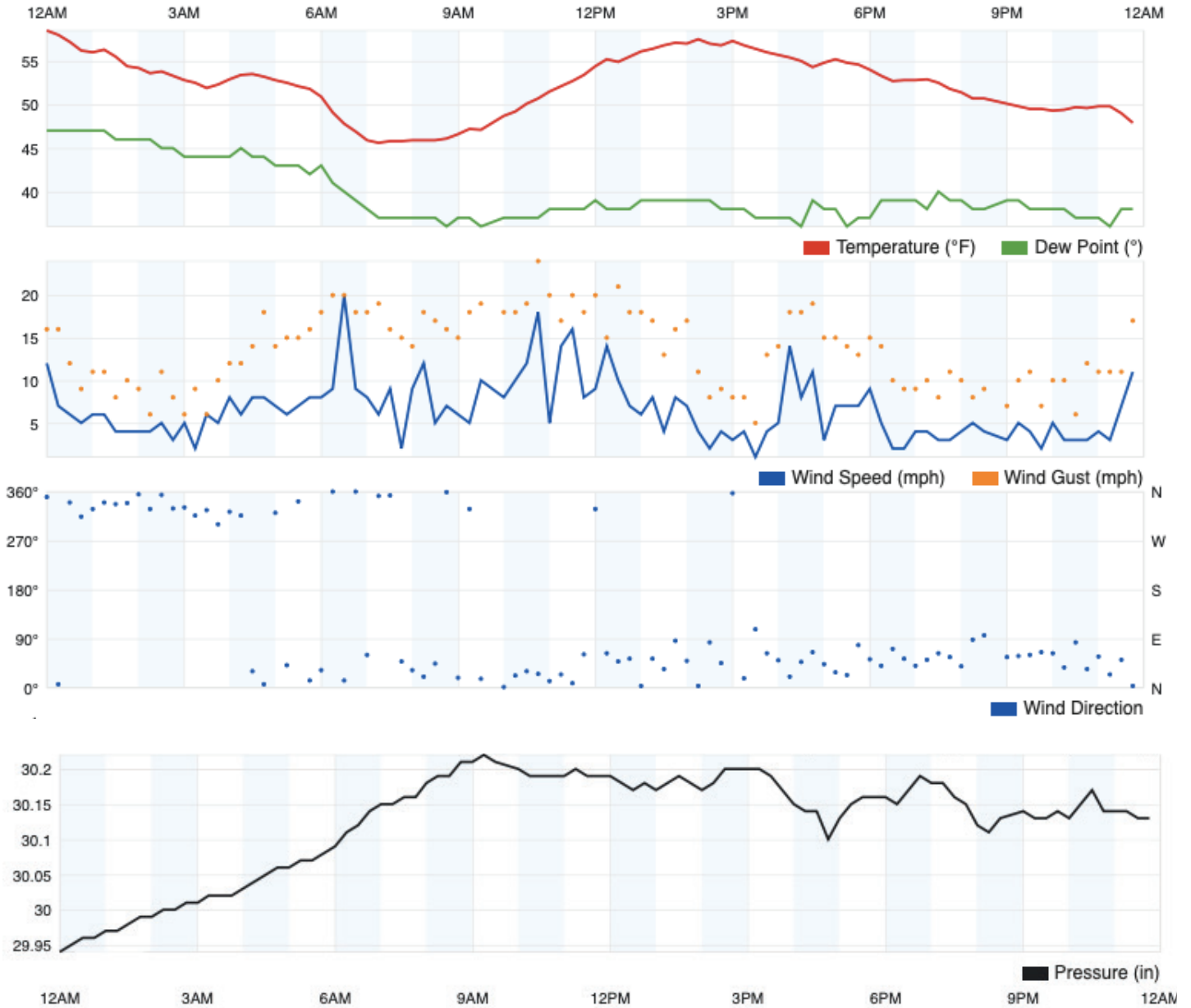
Britton



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Areas Frost and Patchy Fog then Sunny	Partly Cloudy	70% Showers Likely	10% Slight Chance Showers then Partly Cloudy	Sunny
High: 63 °F	Low: 42 °F	High: 59 °F	Low: 43 °F	High: 74 °F

 National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Dry & Warmer Today

Today
 **Low to mid 60s**
Decreasing Clouds

Tonight
 **38 to 46°**
Dry, except Showers and a few Thunderstorms moving into central SD overnight

Updated: 5/28/2021 3:50 AM Central

Clouds will be clearing and temperatures will rise into the low to mid 60s. While much of the region will remain dry through tonight, showers and a few thunderstorms will move into central South Dakota overnight.

Today is Don't Fry Day!



Today is Don't Fry Day! Learn more about skin cancer prevention from the national council on skin cancer prevention, <https://skincancerprevention.org/get-involved/dont-fry-day/> And more on other weather hazards related to heat here, <https://www.weather.gov/safety/heat>



Memorial Weekend Outlook

SATURDAY



58 to 70°

Rain Showers

SUNDAY



low 70s

Isolated
afternoon
Showers over
western SD

MONDAY



70s

Dry



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Today in Weather History

May 28, 1934: Watertown recorded a high temperature of 102 degrees, which is the earliest yearly date when Watertown reached 100 degrees.

May 28, 1965: Low temperatures were mostly for the mid to upper 20s across a broad area. The low temperatures set back some crops and caused light damage to others. Some low temperatures around the area include; 26 degrees in Andover; 27 in Ipswich; 28 in Britton, Leola and McLaughlin; and 29 in Clear Lake, Eureka, Gettysburg, and Pierre.

1880: An estimated F4 tornado hit Savoy, Texas. The storm killed 14 people, and 60 others were injured. It leveled the entire business and northeast residential sections. The tornado was described as "a funnel blazing with balls of fire."

1896 - A massive tornado struck Saint Louis, MO, killing 306 persons and causing thirteen million dollars damage. The tornado path was short, but cut across a densely populated area. It touched down six miles west of Eads Bridge in Saint Louis and widened to a mile as it crossed into East Saint Louis. The tornado was the most destructive of record in the U.S. up until that time. It pierced a five-eighths inch thick iron sheet with a two by four inch pine plank. A brilliant display of lightning accompanied the storm. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1973: An F3 tornado moved east and struck the northern portion of Athens, Georgia. Destruction was massive near Athens, with losses estimated at ten million dollars. Damage from the storm included 545 homes and 17 businesses. Hundreds of large trees more than 100 years old were destroyed.

1987 - Severe thunderstorms in West Texas produced baseball size hail at Crane, hail up to three and a half inches in diameter at Post, and grapefruit size hail south of Midland. Five days of flooding commenced in Oklahoma. Thunderstorms produced 7 to 9 inches of rain in central Oklahoma. Oklahoma City reported 4.33 inches of rain in six hours. Up to six inches of rain caused flooding in north central Texas. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Sunny and warm weather prevailed across much of the nation to kick off the Memorial Day weekend. Afternoon thunderstorms in southern Florida caused the mercury at Miami to dip to a record low reading of 69 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Unseasonably hot weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Ten cities reported record high temperatures for the date as readings soared into the 90s. Lakeland, FL, reported a record high of 99 degrees, and Biloxi, MS, reported a temperature of 90 degrees along with a relative humidity of 75 percent. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather from north central Texas to the Central Gulf Coast Region. Severe thunderstorms spawned four tornadoes, and there were eighty-one reports of large hail or damaging winds. Late afternoon thunderstorms over southeast Louisiana produced high winds which injured twenty-seven persons at an outdoor music concert in Baton Rouge, and high winds which gusted to 78 mph at the Lake Ponchartrain Causeway. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2015: Some parts of Oklahoma have seen more than a foot of rain during May 2015. Storms killed at least 17 people in Texas and Oklahoma, and more than a dozen are still missing. State climatologist Gary McManus from the Oklahoma Climatological Survey calculated the May rainfall total averaged over all Sooner State reporting stations through midday May 29 - 14.18 inches - was easily outpacing the previous record wet month, set in October 1941 (10.75 inches).

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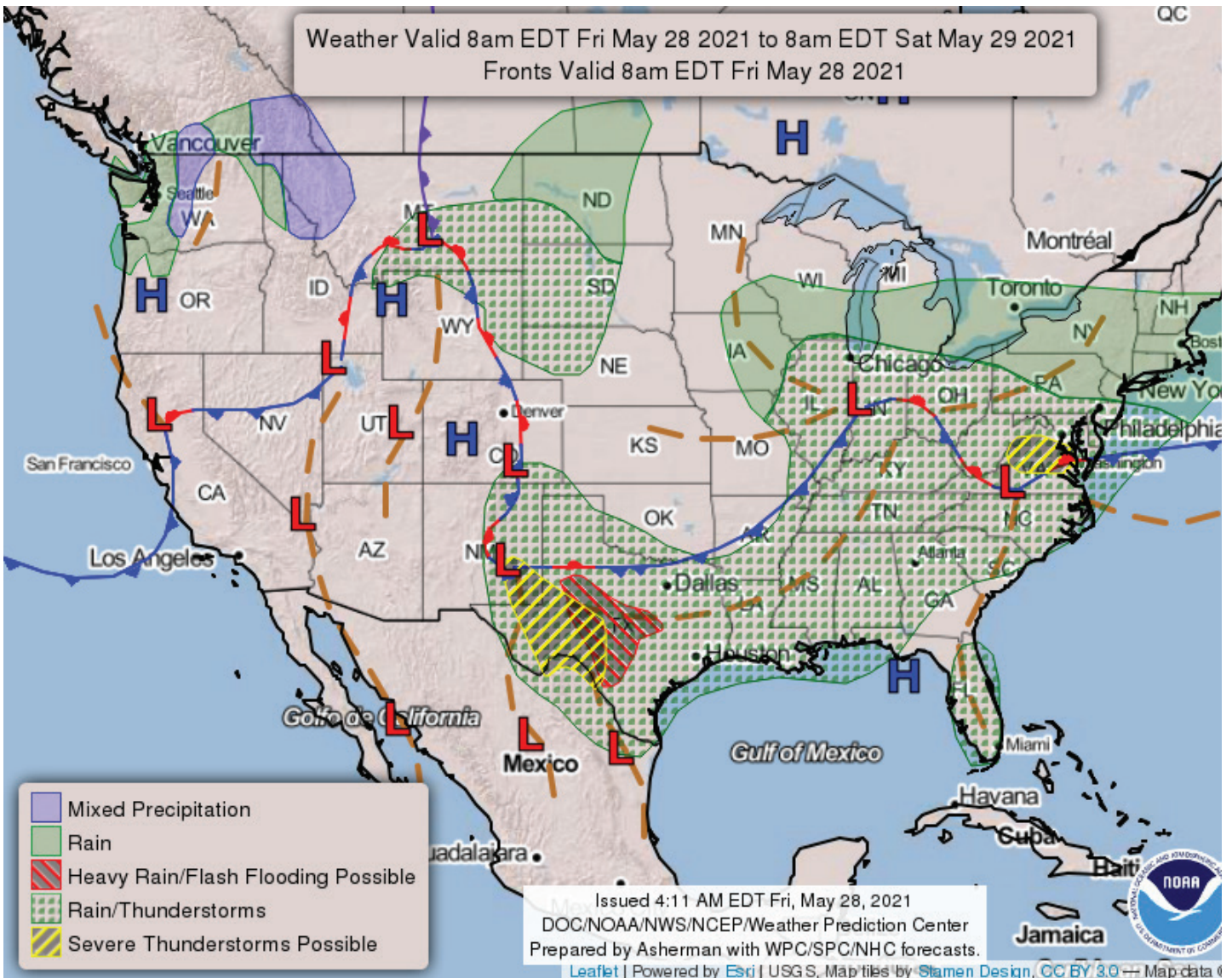
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 47.5 °F
Low Temp: 41.5 °F
Wind: 25 mph
Precip: .71

Today's Info

Record High: 102° in 1934
Record Low: 30° in 1965
Average High: 75°F
Average Low: 49°F
Average Precip in May.: 2.88
Precip to date in May.: 1.02
Average Precip to date: 6.85
Precip Year to Date: 3.79
Sunset Tonight: 9:12 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:50 a.m.



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WHY DOES GOD DO WHAT HE DOES FOR US?

Everything we do in life is the result of a choice or decision we make. Every choice has its consequence or outcome. There are times when we make a choice, and we are pleased with the outcome or result. Other times we make decisions that hurt or haunt us; bring results that embarrass us or bring our lives or our goals to a grinding halt. Sometimes the results of the choices we make force us to look carefully at what we have done with our lives. Every choice, however, contributes to the legacy that we will leave behind us.

David made some especially important decisions that caused him pain and suffering, grief and fear. He knew that he was often disobedient to the promises he made to God and knew that he had to face the consequences of his choices. With deep humility he recognized the poor decisions he made and said, "I am under vows to You, O God!" Making a commitment or decision to honor and serve God is serious. It is not to be made without considering the implications it will have on our lives and the lives of others. A vow to God can be the beginning of a chapter of righteous living.

We all know of the tragedies in David's life because he consciously broke his vows to God. With careful planning and deliberate choices, he committed crimes against both God and man. He knew what he deserved but went to God and repented, asked for and then received His forgiveness. The result? "You have delivered me from death...that I may walk before You in the light of life."

Prayer: We pray, Lord, that You will make us conscious of the choices we make and their consequences. May we seek Your power to walk in paths of righteousness that please You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I am under vows to you, my God; I will present my thank offerings to you. Psalm 56:12

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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
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/19/2021 Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

Sioux Falls inmate placed on escape status after leaving job

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A minimum security inmate from Sioux Falls has been placed on escape status, prison officials said Thursday.

Cameron Guenther left his community service job site in Sioux Falls without authorization, officials said. Guenther is serving sentences for distribution of marijuana and possession of a controlled substance from Minnehaha County, as well as for possession of marijuana from Yankton County.

Failure to return to custody following an assignment is a Class 5 felony, punishable by up to five years in prison.

Sheffield named new commander at Ellsworth Air Force Base

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota is getting a new leader.

Col. Joseph Sheffield has been named the next commander of the 28th Bomb Wing, the world's largest B-18 bomber combat unit, the base announced Thursday. He will replace Col. David Doss as base commander.

Sheffield is a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and is a command pilot with more than 3,600 flying hours, including 1,125 combat hours. He comes to Ellsworth from Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, where he served as the 36th Operations Group commander, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Sheffield previously served at Ellsworth as a squadron and wing weapons officer. He has been director of operations for the 34th Bomb Squadron "Thunderbirds," commander of the 37th Bomb Squadron "Tigers," and deputy commander of the 28th Operations Group.

Sheffield will take command during a special ceremony in June.

Doss has been assigned to another position at the U.S. Air Force Global Strike Command headquarters at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana.

Crews clearing tornado damage in Black Hills National Forest

CUSTER, S.D. (AP) — The U.S. Forest Service says crews are working to clear roads and trails in the southern Black Hills which are blocked by debris from weekend tornadoes.

The National Weather Services in Rapid City has confirmed two tornadoes traveled across many jurisdictions Sunday, including the National Forest.

According to the weather service, the first tornado was reported south of Custer and traveled 6.5 miles (10.4 kilometers). The second tornado touched down northeast of Custer and traveled 5.4 miles (8.6 kilometers).

The Forest Service is asking the public to refrain from cutting firewood in the impacted areas. It's still assessing damaged areas for timber salvage operations.

Pursuit follows assault, attempted abduction in Parker

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A high-speed pursuit that ended in Sioux Falls began with an assault and abduction attempt at a convenience store in Parker, according to sheriff's officials.

Turner County sheriff's deputies responded to the Get N' Go about 10 p.m. Wednesday and encountered the suspect's SUV. Officials said a woman was able to get out of the vehicle before the driver fled.

Authorities say spike strips were laid on the road three different times as the pursuit reached speeds of 100 mph.

The driver was finally stopped and arrested after a brief foot chase in Sioux Falls, some 30 miles from where the pursuit began.

Lincoln County sheriff's deputies, the South Dakota Highway Patrol and Sioux Falls police assisted with

the pursuit and arrest of the suspect whose identify was not disclosed.

Plague of ravenous, destructive mice tormenting Australians

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

BOGAN GATE, Australia (AP) — At night, the floors of sheds vanish beneath carpets of scampering mice. Ceilings come alive with the sounds of scratching. One family blamed mice chewing electrical wires for their house burning down.

Vast tracts of land in Australia's New South Wales state are being threatened by a mouse plague that the state government describes as "absolutely unprecedented." Just how many millions of rodents have infested the agricultural plains across the state is guesswork.

"We're at a critical point now where if we don't significantly reduce the number of mice that are in plague proportions by spring, we are facing an absolute economic and social crisis in rural and regional New South Wales," Agriculture Minister Adam Marshall said this month.

Bruce Barnes said he is taking a gamble by planting crops on his family farm near the central New South Wales town of Bogan Gate.

"We just sow and hope," he said.

The risk is that the mice will maintain their numbers through the Southern Hemisphere winter and devour the wheat, barley and canola before it can be harvested.

NSW Farmers, the state's top agricultural association, predicts the plague will wipe more than 1 billion Australian dollars (\$775 million) from the value of the winter crop.

The state government has ordered 5,000 liters (1,320 gallons) of the banned poison Bromadiolone from India. The federal government regulator has yet to approve emergency applications to use the poison on the perimeters of crops. Critics fear the poison will kill not only mice but also animals that feed on them, including wedge-tail eagles and family pets.

"We're having to go down this path because we need something that is super strength, the equivalent of napalm to just blast these mice into oblivion," Marshall said.

The plague is a cruel blow to farmers in Australia's most populous state who have been battered by fires, floods and pandemic disruptions in recent years, only to face the new scourge of the introduced house mouse, or *Mus musculus*.

The same government-commissioned advisers who have helped farmers cope with the drought, fire and floods are returning to help people deal with the stresses of mice.

The worst comes after dark, when millions of mice that had been hiding and dormant during the day become active.

By day, the crisis is less apparent. Patches of road are dotted with squashed mice from the previous night, but birds soon take the carcasses away. Haystacks are disintegrating due to ravenous rodents that have burrowed deep inside. Upending a sheet of scrap metal lying in a paddock will send a dozen mice scurrying. The sidewalks are strewn with dead mice that have eaten poisonous bait.

But a constant, both day and night, is the stench of mice urine and decaying flesh. The smell is people's greatest gripe.

"You deal with it all day. You're out baiting, trying your best to manage the situation, then come home and just the stench of dead mice," said Jason Conn, a fifth generation farmer near Wellington in central New South Wales.

"They're in the roof cavity of your house. If your house is not well sealed, they're in bed with you. People are getting bitten in bed," Conn said. "It doesn't relent, that's for sure."

Colin Tink estimated he drowned 7,500 mice in a single night last week in a trap he set with a cattle feeding bowl full of water at his farm outside Dubbo.

"I thought I might get a couple of hundred. I didn't think I'd get 7,500," Tink said.

Barnes said mouse carcasses and excrement in roofs were polluting farmers' water tanks.

"People are getting sick from the water," he said.

The mice are already in Barnes' hay bales. He's battling them with zinc phosphide baits, the only legal chemical control for mice used in broad-scale agriculture in Australia. He's hoping that winter frosts will help contain the numbers.

Farmers like Barnes endured four lean years of drought before 2020 brought a good season as well as the worst flooding that some parts of New South Wales have seen in at least 50 years. But the pandemic brought a labor drought. Fruit was left to rot on trees because foreign backpackers who provide the seasonal workforce were absent.

Plagues seemingly appear from nowhere and often vanish just as fast.

Disease and a shortage of food are thought to trigger a dramatic population crash as mice feed on themselves, devouring the sick, weak and their own offspring.

Government researcher Steve Henry, whose agency is developing strategies to reduce the impact of mice on agriculture, said it is too early to predict what damage will occur by spring.

He travels across the state holding community meetings, sometimes twice a day, to discuss the mice problem.

"People are fatigued from dealing with the mice," Henry said.



Mice scurry around stored grain on a farm near Tottenham, Australia on May 19, 2021. Vast tracts of land in Australia's New South Wales state are being threatened by a mouse plague that the state government describes as "absolutely unprecedented." Just how many millions of rodents have infested the agricultural plains across the state is guesswork. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

After delays, GOP poised to block bipartisan 1/6 riot probe

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republicans are poised to block the creation of a special commission to study the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, dashing hopes for a bipartisan panel amid a GOP push to put the violent insurrection by Donald Trump's supporters behind them.

Broad Republican opposition was expected in what would be the first successful Senate filibuster of the Biden presidency, even as the family of a Capitol Police officer who collapsed and died after the siege and other officers who battled rioters went office to office asking GOP senators to support the commission. The insurrection was the worst attack on the Capitol in 200 years and interrupted the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's win over Trump.

A vote on the procedural motion was bumped to Friday after delays on an unrelated bill to boost scientific research and development pushed back the schedule.

Though the Jan. 6 commission bill passed the House earlier this month with the support of almost three dozen Republicans, GOP senators said they believe the commission would eventually be used against them politically. And former President Trump, who still has a firm hold on the party, has called it a "Democrat trap."

The expected vote is emblematic of the profound mistrust between the two parties since the siege, which has sowed deeper divisions on Capitol Hill even though lawmakers in the two parties fled together

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from the rioters that day. The events of Jan. 6 have become an increasingly fraught topic among Republicans as some in the party have downplayed the violence and defended the rioters who supported Trump and his false insistence that the election was stolen from him.

While initially saying he was open to the idea of the commission, which would be modeled after an investigation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell turned firmly against it in recent days. He has said he believes the panel's investigation would be partisan despite the even split among party members.

McConnell, who once said Trump was responsible for provoking the mob attack on the Capitol, said of Democrats, "They'd like to continue to litigate the former president, into the future."

Still, a handful of Republicans — if not enough to save it — were expected to vote to move forward with the bill. Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski has said she will support the legislation because she needs to know more about what happened that day and why.

"Truth is hard stuff, but we've got a responsibility to it," she told reporters Thursday evening. "We just can't pretend that nothing bad happened, or that people just got too excitable. Something bad happened. And it's important to lay that out."

Of her colleagues opposing the commission, Murkowski said some are concerned that "we don't want to rock the boat."

The Republican opposition to the bipartisan panel has revived Democratic pressure to do away with the filibuster, a time-honored Senate tradition that requires a vote by 60 of the 100 senators to cut off debate and advance a bill. With the Senate evenly split 50-50, Democrats need support of 10 Republicans to move to the commission bill, sparking fresh debate over whether the time has come to change the rules and lower the threshold to 51 votes to take up legislation.

The Republicans' political arguments over the violent siege — which is still raw for many in the Capitol, almost five months later — have frustrated not only Democrats but also those who fought off the rioters.

Michael Fanone, a Metropolitan Police Department officer who responded to the attack, said between meetings with Republican senators that a commission is "necessary for us to heal as a nation from the trauma that we all experienced that day." Fanone has described being dragged down the Capitol steps by rioters who shocked him with a stun gun and beat him.

Sandra Garza, the girlfriend of Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, who collapsed and died after battling the rioters, said of the Republican senators, "You know they are here today and with their families and comfortable because of the actions of law enforcement that day."



Gladys Sicknick, center, mother of Brian Sicknick, the Capitol Police officer who died from injuries sustained during the Jan. 6 mob attack on Congress, leaves a meeting with Republican Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin after advocating for creation of an independent commission to investigate the assault, at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday, May 27, 2021. She is escorted by Harry Dunn, left, a U.S. Capitol Police officer who faced the rioters on Jan. 6. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

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"So I don't understand why they would resist getting to the bottom of what happened that day and fully understanding how to prevent it. Just boggles my mind," she said.

Video of the rioting shows two men spraying Sicknick and another officer with a chemical, but the Washington medical examiner said he suffered a stroke and died from natural causes.

Garza attended the meetings with Sicknick's mother, Gladys Sicknick. In a statement Wednesday, Mrs. Sicknick suggested the opponents of the commission "visit my son's grave in Arlington National Cemetery and, while there, think about what their hurtful decisions will do to those officers who will be there for them going forward."

Dozens of other police officers were injured as the rioters pushed past them, breaking through windows and doors and hunting for lawmakers. The protesters constructed a mock gallows in front of the Capitol and called for the hanging of Vice President Mike Pence, who was overseeing the certification of the presidential vote. Four protesters died, including a woman who was shot and killed by police as she tried to break into the House chamber with lawmakers still inside.

"We have a mob overtake the Capitol, and we can't get the Republicans to join us in making historic record of that event? That is sad," said Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Senate Democrat. "That tells you what's wrong with the Senate and what's wrong with the filibuster."

Many Democrats are warning that if Republicans are willing to use the filibuster to stop an arguably popular measure, it shows the limits of trying to broker compromises, particularly on bills related to election reforms or other aspects of the Democrats' agenda.

For now, though, Democrats don't have the votes to change the rule. West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin and Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, both moderate Democrats, have said they want to preserve the filibuster.

Biden, asked about the commission at a stop in Cleveland, said Thursday, "I can't imagine anyone voting against" it.

Republican Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who once supported the idea of the commission, said he now believes Democrats are trying to use it as a political tool.

"I don't think this is the only way to get to the bottom of what happened," Cornyn said, noting that Senate committees are also looking at the siege.

South Africa starts jabs for elderly as virus surge looms

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

ORANGE FARM, South Africa (AP) — Spry and gray-haired, many dressed in their Sunday best or colorful African prints — and all sporting masks — dozens of South Africans aged 60 and over gathered at a government health clinic outside Johannesburg to get their COVID-19 shots.

Some looked at vaccine notifications on their mobile phones, others clutched pieces of paper, as the line moved along at a good pace. Eight at a time, they were ushered into a tent where they took seats distanced from each other.

"You are about to receive a vaccine to protect against COVID-19. It is the Pfizer vaccine and it requires two doses," said a nurse, speaking the Zulu language to the group at the Orange Farm township clinic, about 30 miles (45 kilometers) south of Johannesburg. She described what they should do about possible side effects.

"Amen," she said in closing, and the vaccine recipients murmured the same response, as if in church.

South Africa is in a race against time to vaccinate as many people as possible amid signs the virus may be surging again with the approach of winter in the Southern Hemisphere, when people spend more time indoors, typically allowing for more spread of disease. It is also a critical front in the fight against the virus in Africa, with South Africa recording 40% of the continent's COVID-19 deaths.

Since January, South Africa has vaccinated nearly 500,000 of its 1.2 million health care workers and now is adding its older citizens to the campaign. In the past two weeks nearly 200,000 have received the Pfizer jabs with instructions to come back in six weeks to get their second dose.

"I am getting the vaccine because I want to be alive," 76-year-old Elizabeth Mokwena said. "I know it's

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the best thing for me to do against this COVID.”

After a plateau of the disease that lasted a few months, South Africa’s new cases, hospitalizations and deaths are trending up. The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases has risen over the past two weeks from 3.33 per 100,000 people on May 12 to 3.97 per 100,000 on Wednesday, according to Johns Hopkins University. The seven-day rolling average of deaths is also on the rise: from 0.10 deaths per 100,000 people to 0.11 per 100,000 over the same period.

The increase may seem small, but experts warn it may be the start of a resurgence as the country enters the colder winter months, which start in June.

The national coronavirus task force met this week and President Cyril Ramaphosa’s government is pondering the possibility of re-imposing restrictions, such as reducing the hours that liquor can be sold and limiting the number of people at gatherings.

South Africa has by far the heaviest burden of the disease in Africa. With more than 1.6 million confirmed cases, including 55,976 deaths, the country has more than 30% of the cases and 40% of the deaths recorded by all of Africa’s 54 countries, according to the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The continent of 1.3 billion people has reported 4.7 million cases, including 129,000 deaths, according to the Africa CDC.

South Africa has set a goal of vaccinating 5 million seniors by the end of June, so the new campaign’s slow start must quickly ramp up speed.

“We’re under pressure to reach higher levels of vaccination,” Mosa Moshabela, professor of public health at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, told The Associated Press.

“New vaccination centers are opening every day and the numbers being given shots should quickly go from 20,000 elderly per day to 50,000 and then 100,000 per day,” he said. “By June we should reach 200,000 per day. We need to have that kind of volume to get close to vaccinating 5 million elderly by the end of June.”

South Africa’s overall goal is to vaccinate 67% of its 60 million people by February. To achieve that it has purchased 30 million Pfizer doses, of which 1.3 million have been delivered so far and 4.5 million are expected by the end of June.

The country has also ordered 31 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which have not yet arrived. An initial delivery of 500,000 doses was used to vaccinate health care workers.

Both the J&J and Pfizer vaccines are effective against the COVID-19 variant dominant in South Africa, according to studies. Earlier this year South Africa received 1 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from the United Nations-backed COVAX initiative but scrapped their use because a preliminary, small study showed it did not give effective protection against the variant.

“It was a good move for South Africa to purchase the Pfizer and J&J vaccines on its own,” said Moshabela, who is also acting deputy vice chancellor for research and innovation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. “Many other African countries are now stuck because COVAX deliveries of the (AstraZeneca) vaccines from India have been delayed.”

“We are off to a slow start, but it will speed up and we will have an adequate supply of vaccines. It’s a good thing we purchased those directly,” he said.

The rest of Africa’s reliance on COVAX for supplies of AstraZeneca vaccine has led to problems now that India, beset by a deadly surge, has halted exports of the shots until it vaccinates an adequate amount of its 1.4 billion people.

The World Health Organization announced Thursday that Africa needs at least 20 million AstraZeneca doses in the next six weeks to give second shots to all those who have received a first dose.

In addition, another 200 million doses of approved vaccines are needed to enable the continent to vaccinate 10% of its population by September, WHO said.

So far just 28 million doses of vaccines have been administered in Africa, representing less than 2% of the continent’s population. Globally, 1.5 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered.

“Africa needs vaccines now. Any pause in our vaccination campaigns will lead to lost lives and lost hope,” Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, said Thursday.

"It's too soon to tell if Africa is on the cusp of a third wave. However, we know that cases are rising, and the clock is ticking so we urgently appeal to countries that have vaccinated their high-risk groups to speed up the dose-sharing to fully protect the most vulnerable people."

At the Orange Farm clinic in South Africa, where nearly 200 people were vaccinated daily this week, Freedman Zikhali said he was pleased to have gotten his first dose.

"Getting this vaccine was the right thing to do," the 76-year-old said in the Zulu language.

"I'd ask myself while watching TV, 'Why haven't I received the vaccine while other people around the world are being vaccinated?' So I think what I have done here is the right thing to do."

Senate eyes R&D bill to counter China, bolster manufacturing

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — What started as a pragmatic effort to boost scientific research and development has morphed into a sweeping Senate bill aimed at making the U.S. more competitive with China and other countries, including \$50 billion in emergency funds to shore up domestic computer chip manufacturing.

The American Innovation and Competition Act is key to President Joe Biden's infrastructure plans and was heading toward final passage despite some glitches late Thursday. It's also a test of whether the split 50-50 Senate can accomplish bipartisan achievements when there's pressure on Democrats to change the rules to push past obstruction and gridlock.

Senators slogged through days of debates and amendments, but proceedings came to a standstill late Thursday. One Republican, Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, protested the rush to finish and insisted on more changes to the sprawling package. A few other Republicans joined him.

By midnight senators huddled in the



Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., an ally of former President Donald Trump, arrives as senators go to the chamber for votes ahead of the approaching Memorial Day recess, at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday, May 27, 2021. Senate Republicans are ready to deploy the filibuster to block a commission on the Jan. 6 insurrection, shattering chances for a bipartisan probe of the deadly assault on the U.S. Capitol and reviving pressure to do away with the procedural tactic that critics say has lost its purpose.

(AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

chamber to discuss next steps. Passage was still expected, but debate dragged into early Friday before a recess until later in the morning.

Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., the Commerce Committee chairwoman managing the action for Democrats, reminded colleagues that the bill has been through lengthy committee hearings with input and changes from all sides.

"I actually think we have gotten more mindshare with people about why this is important, right, because we had an open debate process," she said earlier in the week.

The emerging final product has enjoyed broad, bipartisan support and would be one of the more comprehensive investments in U.S. research and development in recent years as the country tries to bolster

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and rebuild home-state industries that have shifted overseas during the era of globalization.

A top Republican author, Sen. Todd Young of Indiana, characterized his underlying proposal — the Endless Frontier Act he co-authored with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer — as part of the country's history of innovation, like the moon landing or launch of the internet, that Washington needs to foster if America is to remain competitive.

"It's not about beating China," Young said in a speech Thursday. He said it's about rising to the challenge posed by China "to be a better version of ourselves."

Biden had included elements of the legislation as part of his big infrastructure plan, the American Jobs Act, making a similar case that the U.S. needs to increase its investments to stay competitive with rivals, particularly China.

During a virtual meeting with CEOs last month over the global computer chip shortage that has been disrupting supplies and sales of everyday goods -- from cellphones to new cars — Biden explained his plan to "build the infrastructure of today."

But the bill became weighted down by the sheer scope of the effort. Actually a collection of bills, it swelled to more than 2,400 pages and a final package of some three dozen amendments from senators of both parties submitted late Thursday caused the opponents to hit the brakes.

Johnson stacked up the bill at his desk bemoaning the towering size, even as he said the legislative process to bring the bill to this point had been better than most over the past decade.

"We haven't had time to read this — no one has," said Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., joining Johnson's protest.

The last round of amendments was shelved by the objection. But Johnson seized the floor to push other priorities, including his concerns over another topic — illegal immigration and his interest in secure fencing along the southern border with Mexico.

The centerpiece of the bill is a \$50 billion emergency allotment to the Commerce Department to stand up semiconductor development and manufacturing through research and development and incentive programs previously authorized by Congress. They focus on the military, automakers and other critical industries reliant on computer chips.

The U.S. once manufactured far more chips than today, which some senators said put the U.S. at risk of fluctuations in the global supply chain, as happened over the past year with shortages.

The Endless Frontier provision would authorize funding for the National Science Foundation, including the establishment of a Directorate for Technology and Innovation, as well as research and development funds and scholarships for students focused on science, technology, engineering and math programs.

Senators have tried to strike a balance in raising awareness about China's growing influence without fanning divisive anti-Asian rhetoric, mindful that hate crimes against Asian Americans have spiked during the coronavirus pandemic.

Other measures spell out national security concerns and target money laundering schemes or cyber-attacks by entities on behalf of the government of China. There are also "buy America" provisions for infrastructure projects in the U.S.

At the same time, senators agreed to tack on amendments showing shifting attitudes over China's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak. One would prevent federal funds for the Wuhan Institute of Virology amid fresh investigation into the origins of the virus and possible connections to the lab's research. The city registered some of the first virus cases.

Taken together, the innovation act has been a priority for Schumer, the Democratic leader who has long advocated a tougher approach to China. He and Young struck up a conversation about teaming up on a bill during workouts at the Senate gym, lawmakers said.

It's unclear whether the measure would find support in the Democratic-led House.

Horror, heroism mark deadly shooting at California rail yard

By TERENCE CHEA and JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Taptejdeep Singh died trying to save others from a gunman. Kirk Bertolet saw

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some of his coworkers take their last breaths.

And friends, family and survivors were left to mourn after nine men died this week when a disgruntled coworker hauling a duffle bag full of guns and ammunition opened fire at a Northern California rail yard complex, apparently choosing his targets and sparing others.

Samuel Cassidy, 57, turned the gun on himself Wednesday morning as sheriff's deputies rushed in at the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority in San Jose.

Investigators were still trying to determine Friday what might have set off Cassidy, who for years apparently held a grudge against the workplace he detested.

The victims were Alex Ward Fritch, 49; Paul Delacruz Megia, 42; Taptejdeep Singh, 36; Adrian Balleza, 29; Jose Dejesus Hernandez, 35; Timothy Michael Romo, 49; Michael



Family members of shooting victim Timothy Romo embrace during a vigil at City Hall in San Jose, Calif., Thursday, May 27, 2021, in honor of the multiple people killed when a gunman opened fire at a rail yard the day before. (AP Photo/

Nic Coury)

Joseph Rudometkin, 40; Abdolvahab Alaghmandan, 63; and Lars Kepler Lane, 63.

The minutes-long attack was marked by both horror and heroism.

Singh, the father of a 3-year-old son and a 1-year-old daughter, was on an early shift as a light rail operator when the shooting began.

He called another transit employee to warn him, saying he needed to get out or hide.

"From what I've heard, he spent the last moments of his life making sure that others — in the building and elsewhere — would be able to stay safe," co-worker Sukhvair Singh, who is not related to Taptejdeep Singh, said in a statement.

Singh's brother, Bagga Singh, said he was told that his brother "put a lady in a control room to hide," the San Jose Mercury News reported. "He saved her and rushed down the stairway."

Singh's brother-in-law, P.J. Bath, said he was told Singh was killed after encountering the gunman in a stairwell.

"He just happened to be in the way, I guess," Bath told the paper.

Kirk Bertolet, 64, was just starting his shift when shots rang out, along with screams. As he and his coworkers threw a table in front of their door, Bertolet called the control center.

Then there was silence.

Cautiously, Bertolet left the barricaded office, hoping he could offer first aid. He couldn't.

Bertolet, a signal maintenance worker who worked in a separate unit from Cassidy, said he is convinced Cassidy targeted his victims because he didn't hurt some people he encountered.

"He was pissed off at certain people. He was angry, and he took his vengeance out on very specific people. He shot people. He let others live," he said. "It was very personal."

Glenn Hendricks, chair of the VTA's board of directors, said he had no information about any tensions between Cassidy and the coworkers he shot.

Cassidy fired a total of 39 bullets. Camera footage showed him calmly walking from one building to

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another with his duffle bag to complete the slaughter, authorities said.

"It appears to us at this point that he said to one of the people there: 'I'm not going to shoot you,'" Santa Clara County Sheriff Laurie Smith said. "And then he shot other people. So I imagine there was some kind of thought on who he wanted to shoot."

Cassidy's ex-wife said he had talked about killing people at work more than a decade ago. Cecilia Nelms told The Associated Press that he used to come home from work resentful and angry over what he perceived as unfair assignments.

The shooter spoke of hating his workplace when customs officers detained him after a 2016 trip to the Philippines, a Biden administration official told The Associated Press.

A Department of Homeland Security memo said Cassidy also had notes on how he hated the Valley Transportation Authority, according to the official. The official saw the memo and detailed its contents to the AP but was not authorized to speak publicly about the ongoing investigation.

The Wall Street Journal first reported the memo.

It doesn't say why he was stopped by customs officers. It said he had books about "terrorism and fear and manifestos" but when he was asked whether he had issues with people at work, he said no. The memo notes that Cassidy had a "minor criminal history," citing a 1983 arrest in San Jose and charges of "misdemeanor obstruction/resisting a peace officer."

Neighbors, acquaintances and an ex-girlfriend described him as a loner, unfriendly, and prone at times to fits of anger.

Documents show he had worked at the transit authority since at least 2012. Bertolet said Cassidy worked regularly with the victims but he always seemed to be an outsider and perhaps couldn't take the rough humor of colleagues.

"He was never in the group. He was never accepted by anybody there. He was always that guy that was never partaking in anything that the people were doing," Bertolet said.

"I know some of those guys, they'll keep joking with you and they'll keep hammering you about stuff. And if you're thin-skinned and you can't take it ... I see that is the main cause of what's going on," Bertolet said.

Sheriff's officials said the three 9 mm handguns Cassidy brought to the rail yard appear to be legal. Authorities do not yet know how he obtained them.

He also had 32 high-capacity magazines, some with 12 rounds. In California, it is illegal to buy magazines that hold more than 10 rounds. However, if Cassidy obtained them before Jan. 1, 2000, he would have been allowed to have them unless he was otherwise prohibited from possessing firearms.

The sheriff said authorities found explosives at the gunman's home, where investigators believe he had set a timer or slow-burn device so that a fire would occur at the same time as the shooting. Flames were reported minutes after the first 911 calls came in from the rail facility.

At 26, Belarus journalist has spent a decade in opposition

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Raman Pratasevich has been part of the Belarus political opposition for over a decade and has long feared the authorities would try to abduct him, even though he was living abroad. The 26-year-old dissident journalist couldn't imagine, however, just how far they would go.

Pratasevich, who ran a channel on a messaging app used to organize demonstrations against the iron-fisted rule of President Alexander Lukashenko, left his homeland in 2019 to try to escape the reach of the Belarusian KGB and ended up in Lithuania. He was charged in absentia for inciting riots, which carries a sentence of 15 years in prison.

As he was returning Sunday to the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, from Greece with his girlfriend aboard a Ryanair jet, Belarusian flight controllers told the crew to divert to Minsk, citing a bomb threat. Lukashenko scrambled a fighter jet to escort the plane.

When it became apparent where the plane was going, a clearly shaken Pratasevich told fellow pas-

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FILE - In this March 25, 2012, file photo, dissident journalist Raman Pratasevich attends an opposition rally against Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk, Belarus. Pratasevich has been part of the Belarus political opposition for over a decade and he has long feared the authorities would try to abduct him even though he was living abroad. Pratasevich, who lived in Lithuania, was arrested after the jetliner he was on was diverted to Minsk on Sunday, May 23, 2021, by Belarusian flight controllers who said there was a bomb threat against the plane. (AP Photo/File)

Union barred Belarusian airlines from its airspace and airports, and advised its carriers to skirt Belarus. It is weighing other sanctions that could target top Belarusian companies.

On Friday, the mayor of a district in Romania's capital of Bucharest announced support for a proposal to rename a street where the Belarus Embassy is located for the young Pratasevich.

When he was 16, Pratasevich became a member of the Young Front, a youth organization that helped organize anti-Lukashenko's protests after the 2010 election. He was detained by police several times and eventually expelled from his high school in Minsk.

As a journalism student, he worked for the Belarusian service of the U.S.-funded broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and other outlets.

Pratasevich joined the protests in neighboring Ukraine in 2014 that ousted its Moscow-leaning president, sustaining an injury in a clash with police. He was wounded again the next year during fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Lukashenko and other Belarusian officials alleged Pratasevich fought as a "mercenary" in eastern Ukraine, but Andriy Biletskiy, who led the Azov volunteer battalion in the region, insisted Pratasevich was working as a journalist there.

Pratasevich was expelled from Belarusian State University in 2018 as punishment for his cooperation with independent media, and he left the country the next year amid growing official pressure.

He shot to fame in 2020 when he and another young journalist, Stsiapan Putsila, set up a channel on the Telegram messaging app called Nexta, which sounds like the word for "somebody" in Belarusian.

sengers that he feared execution in Belarus, which still carries out capital punishment.

Pratasevich was put on a list of people that Belarus considers terrorists, which could bring the death penalty. He had even joked about it before his arrest, using morbid humor on his Twitter account to describe himself as "the first journalist-terrorist in history."

Belarus was known as a sleepy place dating back to Soviet times, with few demonstrations and a population that endured Lukashenko's repressive rule for more than a quarter-century.

But Pratasevich and other dissidents of his generation sought to change that.

"He has succeeded in waking up Belarusians, connecting the discontent that was smoldering within the society with the new technologies, which led to unprecedented rallies and provoked the dictator's anger," said Franak Viachorka, a longtime friend.

After the plane diversion, which outraged leaders abroad described as akin to air piracy, the European

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It became immensely popular as massive protests swept Belarus after Lukashenko's reelection to a sixth term in the August balloting that was widely seen as fraudulent.

The Nexta channel boasted nearly 2 million subscribers in the nation of 9.3 million, and was an important tool in mounting the demonstrations, the largest of which drew up to 200,000 people. It would provide information about the location of the protest, give directions for bypassing security cordons, and carried photos, video and other content from users about the police crackdown.

"We have become a voice for every Belarusian," Pratasevich said at the time. He said Nexta had only four employees who worked 20 hours a day.

Viachorka said that even in the most desperate situations, Pratasevich "would tell Belarusians not to give up. Lukashenko targeted him because he was so visible, brave and bright."

Infuriated Belarus authorities labeled Nexta as "extremist," a designation that carries criminal charges against anyone who shares its materials on the internet. Pratasevich and Putsila were charged with inciting mass disturbances and fanning social hatred.

In an interview in Warsaw with The Associated Press, Putsila said this week that there have been "thousands of threats that our office will be blown up, that all of us will be shot."

After leaving Nexta last fall, Pratasevich moved to Lithuania and launched another Telegram channel called Brain Belarus. His 23-year-old Russian girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, who was arrested Sunday with him, was studying at a Vilnius university.

Pratasevich knew the risks of his activism, even living abroad. Fearing abduction, he frequently changed his residence and tried to avoid walking alone late at night.

Despite the threats and concerns about the Belarusian authorities, Putsila still said he was shocked by Lukashenko's move to divert the plane. "The regime has started doing unthinkable things that are against law and logic," he said.

In a speech Wednesday, Lukashenko accused Pratasevich of fomenting a "bloody rebellion" in Belarus, in conjunction with foreign spy agencies.

Pratasevich appeared after his arrest in a video from detention that was broadcast on Belarusian state TV. Speaking rapidly and in a monotone, he said he was confessing to staging mass disturbances.

Watching from Poland, where they now live, his parents said the confession seemed to be coerced. His mother, Natalia Pratasevich said her son's nose appeared to have been broken and it looked like makeup had been applied to cover facial bruises.

"I want you to hear my cry, the cry of my soul," she told reporters in an emotional appeal Thursday. "I am begging you, help me free my son!"

Earlier this month, the government retaliated against Pratasevich's father, a retired military officer, stripping him of his rank along with dozens of other opposition-minded officers.

The dissident journalist's friend, Viachorka, said Pratasevich "feared getting into the KGB's hands," and once they even talked about a scenario in which the security force commandeered an aircraft but quickly dismissed it.

"We were joking once, discussing what we would do if the KGB gets us," Viachorka said. "For example, if they hijack a plane. But he couldn't believe that such thing could happen, dismissing it as the stuff from movies, from Hollywood."

'Our season': Eritrean troops kill, rape, loot in Tigray

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA Associated Press

MEKELE, Ethiopia (AP) — Women who make it to the clinic for sex abuse survivors in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray usually struggle to describe their injuries. But when they can't take a seat and quietly touch their bottoms, the nurses know it's an unspeakable kind of suffering.

So it was one afternoon with a dazed, barely conscious 40-year-old woman wrapped in bloodied towels, who had been repeatedly gang-raped anally and vaginally over a week by 15 Eritrean soldiers. Bleeding profusely from her rectum, she collapsed in the street in her village of Azerber, and a group of priests

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put her on a bus to Mekele.

The woman recently broke down in tears as she recounted her ordeal in January at the hands of Eritrean troops, who have taken over parts of the war-torn region in neighboring Ethiopia. The Eritreans often sodomize their victims, according to the nursing staff, a practice that is deeply taboo in the Orthodox Christian religion of Tigray.

"They talked to each other. Some of them: 'We kill her.' Some of them: 'No, no. Rape is enough for her,'" the woman recalled in Mekele, Tigray's capital. She said one of the soldiers told her: "This season is our season, not your season. This is the time for us."

Despite claims by both Ethiopia and Eritrea that they were leaving, Eritrean soldiers are in fact more firmly entrenched than ever in Tigray, where they are brutally gang-raping women, killing civilians, looting hospitals and blocking food and medical aid, The Associated Press has found. A reporter was stopped at five check-

points manned by sometimes hostile Eritrean soldiers dressed in their beige camouflage uniforms, most armed, as gun shots rang out nearby. And the AP saw dozens of Eritrean troops lining the roads and milling around in at least two villages.

Multiple witnesses, survivors of rape, officials and aid workers said Eritrean soldiers have been spotted far from the border, deep in eastern and even southern Tigray, sometimes clad in faded Ethiopian army fatigues. Rather than leaving, witnesses say, the Eritrean soldiers now control key roads and access to some communities and have even turned away Ethiopian authorities at times. Their terrified victims identify the Eritreans by the tribal incisions on their cheeks or their accents when speaking Tigrinya, the language of the Tigrayan people.

This story was funded by a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

Almost all Tigrayans interviewed by the AP insisted there can be no peace unless the Eritreans leave. They see the Eritreans' menace everywhere: the sacked homes, the murdered sons, the violated daughters, even the dried turds deposited in everything from cooking utensils to the floor of an X-ray room in one vandalized hospital.

Yet the Eritreans show no signs of withdrawing, residents said. And after first tacitly allowing them in to fight a mutual enemy in the former leaders of Tigray, the Ethiopian government now appears incapable of enforcing discipline. Two sources with ties to the government told the AP that Eritrea is in charge in parts of Tigray, and there is fear that it is dealing directly with ethnic Amhara militias and bypassing federal authorities altogether.



A 40-year-old woman who says she was held captive and repeatedly raped by 15 Eritrean soldiers over a period of a week in a remote village near the Eritrea border, speaks during an interview at a hospital in Mekele, in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, on Friday, May 14, 2021. "They talked to each other. Some of them: 'We kill her.' Some of them: 'No, no. Rape is enough for her,'" she recalls. She said one of the soldiers told her: "This season is our season, not your season. This is the time for us." (AP

Photo/Ben Curtis)

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"They are still here," said Abebe Gebrehiwot, a Tigrayan who serves as the federally appointed deputy CEO of Tigray, sounding frustrated in his office.

The continuing presence of Eritrean soldiers "has brought more crisis to the region," he warned. "The government is negotiating.... I am not happy."

The violence has already sent families fleeing to places like the camp for the internally displaced in Mekele that Smret Kalayu shares with thousands of others, mostly women and children. The 25-year-old, who once owned a coffee stall in the town of Dengelat, reflected on her escape in April while Eritrean forces searched houses and "watched each other" raping women of all ages. They also peed in cooking materials, she said.

"If there are still Eritreans there, I don't have a plan to go back home," she said, her voice catching with rage. "What can I say? They are worse than beasts. I can't say they are human beings."

Ethiopia and Eritrea were deadly enemies for decades, with Tigray's then-powerful rulers, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, taking leading roles in a divisive border conflict. That started to change in 2018, after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office and made peace with Eritrea, for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Abiy also marginalized the Tigrayan leaders, who fought back by questioning his authority. In early November the Ethiopian government accused Tigrayan troops of attacking federal ones. Tigrayan leaders later fired rockets into the Eritrean capital of Asmara, including some that appeared to target the airport there.

Abiy sent federal troops to Tigray to arrest its defiant leaders, and a war broke out that has dragged on for six months and displaced more than 2 million of the region's 6 million people. United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken has referred to "ethnic cleansing" in western Tigray, a term for forcing a population from a region through violence, often including killings and rapes.

All sides have been accused of human rights abuses. But most of the atrocities are blamed on Ethiopian government forces, the Amhara militias allied with them and, notably, the shadowy fighters from Eritrea.

An Eritrean artillery bombardment lasting about 13 hours killed 150 people in Tirhas Fishaye's village in the Zalambessa area in mid-November, she said. After that, she added, the Eritrean army moved in and started killing people in the streets.

"We hid in a cave for two months with 200 other people," she said. "Then the Eritrean army found us and murdered 18 people."

Tirhas, who is now displaced in Mekele, said the soldiers searched for young people, whom they shot as they ran away.

Another Tigrayan, Haileselassie Gebremariam, 75, was shot in front of a church in early January in his village in the Gulomakeda district. He said he counted the bodies of 38 people massacred by Eritrean troops inside the Medhane-Alem church during a religious festival. Several of his relatives were killed.

"When the Eritreans arrived, they shot everyone they found," said Haileselassie, still nursing his ugly wound at Mekele's Ayder Hospital. "They burnt our crops and took everything else."

The Eritreans are acting out of a deep-rooted animosity against Tigrayan leaders after the border war, even though the people share a similar culture, according to Berhane Kidanemariam, an Ethiopian diplomat and Tigrayan who resigned his post earlier this year in protest. Eritrea's longtime president, Isaias Afwerki, seeks a buffer zone along the border to foil any attempts by Tigray's now-fugitive leaders to make a comeback, especially by resupplying their arsenal through Sudan, Berhane said.

"The mastermind of the situation in Ethiopia is Isaias," Berhane said by phone from Washington, where until March he served as the deputy chief of Ethiopia's mission. "Basically, Abiy is the poorer one in this. The head is Isaias.... The war, at the moment, is life or death for Isaias."

For months, both Ethiopia and Eritrea denied the presence of Eritrean soldiers in Tigray. But evidence of Eritrea's involvement grew, with the AP reporting the first detailed witness accounts in January, sparking a U.S. call for their withdrawal.

Abiy acknowledged in March that Eritrean troops were "causing damages to our people." In early April Ethiopia's foreign ministry reported that Eritrean troops had "started to evacuate."

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But the U.S. has said it still sees no sign of that happening, and has demanded a verifiable exit of Eritrean soldiers from Tigray. The U.S. this week announced sanctions, including visa restrictions, against Eritrean or Ethiopian officials blocking a resolution in Tigray, which the Ethiopian government called "misguided" and "regrettable." The government has repeatedly warned of outside attempts to meddle in the country's internal affairs.

Much of Tigray is still cut off from access, with no communications, leaving the displaced to describe what is happening. Tedros Abadi, a 38-year-old shopkeeper from Samre now in Mekele, said Eritrean troops arrived in his village as recently as April. After being ambushed by Tigrayan guerrillas, they gunned down priests walking home after service on a Sunday afternoon and burned about 20 houses, he said.

"Nothing is left there," said Tedros, who does not know where his family is. "I left home because they were targeting all civilians, not only priests."

He said dead bodies lay in the village for days afterward, eaten by vultures, because those who remained were too afraid to bury them. He added that Eritrean soldiers told Tigrayan elders that this was revenge for the border war.

Yonas Hailu, a 37-year-old tour guide in Mekele, is glad his father, a retired army lieutenant, died of natural causes before the Eritreans invaded. He sees no signs of the war ending.

"They will never give up fighting," he said. "The Ethiopian troops – they would never stay here for three days without the Eritreans."

Representatives of the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments did not respond to requests for comment.

The Eritreans seem bent on doing as much damage as they can, inserting sand into water pumps to disable them and even ferreting away such apparently useless items as old mattresses, witnesses said.

"You can literally see nothing left in the houses," said one humanitarian worker with access to some remote areas of Tigray. She recalled seeing Eritrean soldiers smiling for selfies by a lorry with looted items near the town of Samre.

She requested anonymity to protect her organization from retaliation.

The Eritrean soldiers also have destroyed hospitals and sometimes set up camp in them. At the Hawzen Primary Hospital, walls were smeared with the blood of the chickens the Eritreans had slaughtered in the corridors. Soiled patient files were strewn on the ground, and the intensive care nursery for babies was trashed, with missing incubators and toppled little beds.

They have also looted and burned sacks of grain and killed livestock, witnesses told the AP.

Gebremeskel Hagos, a mournful-looking man in a Mekele camp for the displaced, recalled how Eritrean and Ethiopian troops sang as they entered the ancestral home of a former Tigrayan leader in a village near Adigrat in January. The soldiers fired rounds into the air and sent young and old scampering for safety. They killed people and livestock, and one referred to revenge for the border war.

"I don't have hope," said Gebremeskel, a 52-year-old farmer who is separated from five of his seven children. "They want to destroy us. I don't think they will leave us."

For all the damage the Eritreans have done, the gang rapes are among the worst.

The Mekele clinic for rape survivors is full to overflowing with women, sometimes raped by Ethiopian soldiers but often by Eritreans, according to Mulu Mesfin, the head nurse. Some women were held in camps by the Eritreans and gang-raped by dozens of soldiers for weeks, she said.

Her clinic has looked after about 400 survivors since November. Between 100 and 150 were sodomized, she said. She described survivors of anal rape who can't sit down for the pain and are so ashamed that they simply lack words.

"They say, something, something," recounted Mulu, a slender, wiry woman whose voice fell when she talked of the sodomy. "The victims are psychologically disturbed."

In further humiliation, Mulu said, some survivors reported being sodomized because their attackers wanted to avoid any contact "with their TPLF husbands."

She cried when she heard what had happened to the woman from Azerber, who was barely able to walk when she arrived. At first, Mulu recalled, she muttered to herself as if she was still in the presence

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of the Eritrean soldiers.

"She was saying, 'Eritreans, go back. Close the door. You are a soldier. Don't touch me,'" Mulu said.

The AP doesn't name people who have been sexually abused, but an AP team looked at the notes in the woman's medical file.

The woman said she was detained for a week at the Eritreans' camp, where she saw about 10 more girls and women, including a 70-year-old. The soldiers mocked her when she asked them to let her go.

The attackers sometimes raised their guns and hit the back of her head. As they raped her, she said, one told her, "You are crying for a long period of time. This is not enough for you?" They also said they wanted to infect her with HIV.

The woman won her freedom one day when the Eritreans had to relocate. She now lives in a safe house for rape survivors at Mekele's Ayder Hospital, along with about 40 others. She isn't certain if her two children, ages 6 and 11, are still alive somewhere in northern Tigray because the phone network there is disabled.

Another woman from the town of Wukro was raped anally, and an Eritrean soldier inserted his arm in her vagina, according to Yeheyis Berhane, a researcher with the Tigray Institute of Policy Studies. He was furious that his team had been stopped from going into the remote areas north of Mekele to investigate sex and other crimes.

"They killed women, men, children," he said. "But they don't want us to go there because we are going to expose to them to the public."

Tag: Other AP journalists in Mekele also contributed to this report.

In Iraq's iconic marshlands, a quest for endangered otters

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press
CHIBAISH, Iraq (AP) — "Don't move a muscle." His command cut across the reeds rustling in the wind. On a moonlit embankment several kilometers from shore in Iraq's celebrated southern marshes, everyone stood still.

Omar al-Sheikhly shined a flashlight across a muddy patch. "Nothing," he said, shaking his head. His team of five exhaled in unison.

The environmentalist spearheaded this midnight expedition through the marshes of Chibaish. It is the latest in a quixotic mission that has spanned nearly two decades: to find any sign of Maxwell's smooth-coated otter, a severely endangered species endemic to Iraq whose precarious existence is vital to the iconic wetlands.

Most of al-Sheikhly's pursuits have been in vain; the quick-witted otter has always been one step ahead. But as climate change looms, finding evidence they still exist assumes new importance. Al-Sheikhly is among the



Environmentalist Omar al-Sheikhly leads a team into the marshes in search of endangered animals, in Chibayish, Iraq, Saturday, May, 1, 2021. Deep within Iraq's celebrated marsh lands, conservationists are sounding alarm bells and issuing a stark warning: Without quick action, the UNESCO protected site could all but wither away. (AP Photo/Anmar Khalil)

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conservationists issuing a stark warning: Without quick action to protect the otters, the delicate underwater ecology of the UNESCO protected site will be disrupted, and could all but wither away, putting at risk the centuries-old Iraqi marsh communities that depend on it.

At stake is everything: "We stand to lose our Iraqi heritage," said al-Sheikhly, who is the technical director at Iraqi Green Climate Organization.

Studies indicate there are between 200-900 smooth-coated otters left in the marshlands. Dangerously unpredictable water levels, illegal fishing and neglect are driving their demise.

This year, Iraq is set to face an insufferable summer, with Turkish dam projects on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers compounding a year of low rainfall. "There is a real crisis," Water Resources Minister Mahdi Rasheed al-Hamdani said this month.

Water rates from both rivers are half what they were last year, he said.

The Associated Press accompanied al-Sheikhly and his team on a 12-hour mission over two days in early May. At 8 a.m. on the second morning, al-Sheikhly was off again.

In long wooden canoes — called mashuf — they traversed narrow waterways lined with dense reedbeds crisscrossing the heart of the wetlands.

Jumping fish left ripples in their wake. Water buffalos languidly chewed grass. A kingfisher dove head-first to catch unsuspecting prey.

As dragonflies chased his water-borne convoy, al-Sheikhly named whatever animal crossed his path as though they were acquaintances. "Marbled duck," he pointed. "Squacco heron." He has been studying them for 18 years.

Finding the evasive smooth-coated otter is the equivalent of winning the lottery. Since their discovery in 1956 by Scottish naturalist Gavin Maxwell, the otter, distinguished by its sleek dark fur and flattened tail, has only been photographed twice: when it was first found, and 60 years later, by al-Sheikhly.

Locals had tipped him off that otters were seen in the part of the marshes close to the Iran border. There, on the remnants of an old military road forged by Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, he waited for six hours. He saw the otter for only a few seconds.

Because research efforts are so poorly funded and otters themselves are so hard to find, studies about the species have relied on their dead skins for signs of life.

In January 2006, the fresh skin of an adult male was obtained from a local fisherman — it was among the first indications that the otter still thrived.

On this mission al-Sheikhly watched for signs they leave behind: footprints, discarded fish heads, local sightings. He goes to areas they prefer, such as lakes lined with reedbeds and muddy shores.

In the central marshes of Dhi Qar province, his team happened upon two fishermen unloading the day's catch. Al-Sheikhly stopped and asked them when they had last seen an otter — local observations are a main part of survey efforts.

"Maybe one year ago," said one, piling mullets, catfish and carp onto a pickup.

Al-Sheikhly furrowed his brow.

"That is a big concern, if the local community sees them rarely it means something has happened," he explained.

Their importance can't be underestimated. To environmentalists, otters are known as "bio-indicators," species used to assess the health of an entire ecosystem. Because they are on top of the food chain in Iraq's marshes, eating fish and sometimes birds, their presence ensures balance.

There was a time when the otters were abundant.

British explorer Wilfred Thesiger, a contemporary of Maxwell, wrote in his travel book *Marsh Arabs* about one occasion when he spotted two otters playing a hundred yards away. "They appeared upright in the water, eyeing us for a few seconds, before they dived and disappeared."

In that moment, his Iraqi escort reached for a gun. "Their skins were worth a dinar a piece," he wrote. The durable otter skins were popular among smugglers who used them to transport illicit goods.

Hunting is on the decline, but electric pulse fishing, illegal but widely practiced in the south, is partly to blame. The electric pulse paralyzes the otter. Most die.

The fishermen who were questioned earlier each had electrocution devices on their boats, visible despite attempts to disguise them with carpets.

Al-Sheikhly said this might account for why otters are hard to spot. "Otters are smart, they know they are under threat and change their behaviors."

Adaptability served them well throughout Iraq's tumultuous history. The otters were feared extinct when Saddam drained the marshes in the 1990s to flush out hiding Shiite rebels. Since 2003, they have had to navigate a new Iraq where growing urban sprawl and industrialization has taken precedence.

As a result, Iraqi marsh communities are increasingly losing touch with the wetlands they dwell in.

On an island grazing ground for water buffalos, a marsh Arab boy tended to the animals. In the background, oil flares shot plumes of acrid smoke into the air — a ubiquitous sight in crude-rich southern Iraq.

But the greatest enemy to Iraq's endemic otter species is an incalculable one: Water.

Cruising through a wide waterway, al-Sheikhly said that just last year the entire channel had been dry. Flooding re-filled it, but little rainfall this year threatens levels again. Experts said it is already decreasing by one centimeter a day.

One local woman, Um Muntadhar, said when the water dries up, the birds migrate and her livestock dies. "It is not livable here anymore," she said.

The U.N. estimates at least 250 square kilometers (96 square miles) of fertile land in Iraq is lost annually to desertification. Rising salinity will likely drive out if not wipe away endemic species.

Iraqis largely blame Turkey's Ilisu dam project for shortages. Turkish officials said Iraq's request that Ankara release a set amount of water per year is impossible in the age of climate change.

"So much is unpredictable, we suffer," said one Turkish official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

In an open lake at the cusp of the Hammar marshes, al-Sheikhly halted the boat and quickly removed his shoes.

He appeared from a distance like a marshland messiah: knee-deep in water, curly hair dancing in the wind, anchored by a wooden stick.

Threatened from all sides, environmentalists say it will take a miracle to push for conservation of the area. But al-Sheikhly was absorbed in something unseen. "Listen, listen," he said.

3 officers face arraignment in Black man's restraint death

By GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Five weeks after ex-Minneapolis policeman Derek Chauvin was convicted of murdering George Floyd, three Washington state officers have been charged in the death of Manuel Ellis: another Black man who pleaded for breath under an officer's knee.

Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson charged officers Christopher Burbank and Matthew Collins, who are both white, with second-degree murder Thursday after witnesses reported that they attacked Ellis without provocation.

Timothy Rankine, who is Asian, faces a charge of first-degree manslaughter. He is accused of kneeling on Ellis' back and shoulder as he died from a lack of oxygen, according to a probable cause statement filed in Pierce County Superior Court.

All three were in custody by Thursday evening and were scheduled to be arraigned Friday. Their attorneys did not respond to messages seeking comment.

Ellis, 33, died on March 3, 2020 — Tasered, handcuffed and hogtied, with his face covered by a spit hood — just weeks before George Floyd's death triggered a nationwide reckoning on race and policing.

The Pierce County medical examiner called Ellis' death a homicide due to a lack of oxygen caused by restraint, with an enlarged heart and methamphetamine intoxication as contributing factors.

The death made Ellis' name synonymous with pleas for justice at protests in the Pacific Northwest. His final words — "I can't breathe, sir!" — were captured by a home security camera, as was the retort from one of the officers: "Shut the (expletive) up, man."

"Ellis was not fighting back," the probable cause statement said, citing video recorded by three witnesses.

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The case marks the first time the attorney general's office has charged police officers with unlawful use of deadly force.

Five Tacoma officers have been on paid home leave pending the charging decision, and Ferguson said the investigation is continuing.

The Tacoma Police Union called the decision "a politically motivated witch hunt."

"An unbiased jury will not allow these fine public servants to be sacrificed at the altar of public sentiment," the union said in a statement.

Burbank and Collins reported the encounter began after they saw Ellis trying to get into occupied cars at a red light. Ellis, recently back from church, had walked to a convenience store to get a late-night snack: powdered, raspberry-filled donuts.

The officers cast Ellis as the aggressor, saying he punched the window of their cruiser and attacked them as they got out, according to statements from other officers cited in the charging documents.

But two witnesses came forward with identical stories, saying the police attacked. An officer in the passenger side of a patrol car slammed his door into Ellis, knocking him down, and started beating him, they said.

The witnesses "described seeing a casual interaction between the officers and Ellis before Burbank struck Ellis with his car door — there was no sudden, random attack by Ellis as the officers described that night to others," the probable cause statement said.

Pierce County Sheriff Ed Troyer, who was then a detective and the spokesman for the sheriff's office, said after Ellis' death that none of the officers placed a knee on his neck or head. But witness video that later surfaced appeared to depict just that; the charging documents said Rankine knelt on the base of Ellis' neck.

The sheriff's office botched the initial investigation by failing to disclose for three months that one of its deputies had been involved in restraining Ellis; state law requires independent investigations. The Washington State Patrol took over, and the Attorney General's Office reviewed its evidence and conducted its own additional investigation.

In a statement, interim Tacoma Police Chief Mike Ake said the department would review the case for any discipline, training or policy changes that might be warranted.

"We realize we must reduce outcomes that cause pain and diminish trust within our community," he said.

Ellis had a history of mental illness and addiction. In September 2019, he was found naked after trying to rob a fast food restaurant. A sheriff's deputy subdued him with a Taser after he refused to remain down on the ground and charged toward law enforcement.

His landlords at the sober housing where he was staying told The Seattle Times he had been doing



Marcia Carter-Patterson, right, the mother of Manuel "Manny" Ellis, stands with her son and Ellis' brother Matthew, left, as she speaks Thursday, May 27, 2021, at a news conference in Tacoma, Wash., south of Seattle. Ellis died on March 3, 2020 after he was restrained by police officers. Earlier in the day Thursday, Washington state attorney general filed criminal charges against three police officers in the death of Ellis. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

well in recent months after embracing mental health care for his schizophrenia. He had been frequently attending church, where he was a drummer in a worship band.

At a news conference Thursday, Ellis' family welcomed the charges but called for more work to overhaul the criminal justice system. The family is seeking \$30 million in a lawsuit against the city.

"The criminal system needs to be made over, from the head — just take it all off," said Ellis' mother, Marcia Carter-Patterson. She added: "This is about Manuel Elijah Ellis. This is his work. So help us with it."

Ellis' death, Pierce County's botched investigation, and the national outcry for racial justice inspired Gov. Jay Inslee to convene a task force to suggest ways to guarantee independent reviews of police use of deadly force.

Last week, Inslee signed one of the nation's most ambitious packages of police accountability legislation, including outright bans on police use of chokeholds, neck restraints and no-knock warrants. The legislation also makes it easier to decertify police — and creates an independent office to review deadly force cases.

The charged officers could face up to life in prison if convicted, but the standard sentencing range is 10 to 18 years for second-degree murder with no prior criminal history, and 6.5 to 8.5 years for manslaughter.

All three previously served in the Army, the attorney general's office said, and as police officers all had taken training on crisis intervention. Collins, 38, and Burbank, 35, had each been an officer for four years by March 2020 after serving eight years in the Army. Rankine, 32, joined the department in 2018 after six years in the Army and two as a security contractor for the U.S. State Department.

Police reform activists have long bemoaned the prevalence of former soldiers in civilian departments, saying they tend to be more aggressive than called for.

Disgruntled worker who killed 9 appeared to target victims

By TERENCE CHEA, JANIE HAR, STEFANIE DAZIO and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — A gunman who killed nine people at a California rail yard where he worked appeared to target some of the victims, a sheriff told The Associated Press on Thursday, while a Biden administration official said the shooter spoke of hating his workplace when customs officers detained him after a 2016 trip to the Philippines.

Samuel Cassidy, 57, arrived at the light rail facility for the Valley Transportation Authority in San Jose around 6 a.m. Wednesday with a duffel bag filled with semi-automatic handguns and high-capacity magazines, Santa Clara County Sheriff Laurie Smith said.

"It appears to us at this point that he said to one of the people there: 'I'm not going to shoot you,'" Smith said. "And then he shot other people. So I imagine there was some kind of thought on who he wanted to shoot."

While there are no cameras inside the rail yard's two buildings, Smith said footage captured him moving from one location to the next. It took deputies six minutes from the first 911 calls to find Cassidy on the third floor of one of the buildings, Smith said.

Cassidy, who fired a total of 39 bullets, killed himself as deputies closed in on the facility serving the county of more than 1 million people in the heart of Silicon Valley. More than 100 people were there at the time, and authorities found five victims in one building and two in another, Smith said.

Kirk Bertolet, 64, was just starting his shift when shots rang out. He said Thursday that Cassidy worked regularly with the victims. He called them "a good bunch of blue-collar people" but said Cassidy stuck out as a loner and outsider.

"I know some of those guys, they'll keep joking with you and they'll keep hammering you about stuff. And if you're thin-skinned and you can't take it ... I see that is the main cause of what's going on," Bertolet said.

Sheriff's officials described Cassidy as "a highly disgruntled VTA employee for many years," saying that may have contributed to him targeting the workers. Documents show he had worked at the transit authority since at least 2012.

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Bertolet, a signal maintenance worker who worked in a separate unit from Cassidy, said he is convinced Cassidy targeted his victims because he didn't hurt people he encountered on the way to the second building, where more shots were fired.

"Sam made sure he killed all who he wanted. He made sure they were dead," Bertolet said. "I watched some of my coworkers breathe their last breaths, and they were all gone. Seven of them were just gone."

After being detained by customs officers in 2016, Cassidy spoke of hating his workplace and he was found to have a memo book with notes on how he hated the Valley Transportation Authority, according to a Biden administration official who described a Department of Homeland Security memo laying out Cassidy's statements. The official saw the memo and detailed its contents to the AP but was not authorized to speak publicly about the ongoing investigation.

The Wall Street Journal first reported the memo.

It doesn't say why he was stopped by customs officers. It said he had books about "terrorism and fear and manifestos" but when he was asked whether he had issues with people at work, he said no. The memo notes that Cassidy had a "minor criminal history," citing a 1983 arrest in San Jose and charges of "misdemeanor obstruction/resisting a peace officer."

Cassidy's ex-wife said he had talked about killing people at work more than a decade ago.

"I never believed him, and it never happened. Until now," a tearful Cecilia Nelms told the AP on Wednesday.

She said he used to come home from work resentful and angry over what he perceived as unfair assignments.

"He could dwell on things," she said. The two were married for about 10 years until a 2005 divorce filing, and she had not been in touch with Cassidy for about 13 years, Nelms said.

An ex-girlfriend described Cassidy as volatile and violent in court documents filed in 2009, with major mood swings because of bipolar disorder that became worse when he drank heavily. Several times while he was drunk, Cassidy forced himself on her sexually despite her refusals, pinning her arms with his body, the woman said in a sworn statement filed after Cassidy sought a restraining order against her. The documents were obtained by the San Francisco Chronicle.

Sheriff's officials said the three 9 mm handguns Cassidy brought to the rail yard appear to be legal. Authorities do not yet know how he obtained them.

He also had 32 high-capacity magazines, some with 12 rounds. In California, it is illegal to buy magazines that hold more than 10 rounds. However, if Cassidy obtained them before Jan. 1, 2000, he would have been allowed to have them unless he was otherwise prohibited from possessing firearms.

The sheriff said authorities found explosives at the gunman's home, where investigators believe he had set a timer or slow-burn device so that a fire would occur at the same time as the shooting. Flames were reported minutes after the first 911 calls came in from the rail facility.

The attack was the 15th mass killing in the U.S. this year, all shootings that claimed at least four lives each for a total of 87 deaths, according to a database compiled by The Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University.

President Joe Biden urged Congress to act on legislation to curb gun violence, saying, "Every life that is taken by a bullet pierces the soul of our nation. We can, and we must, do more."

Several long-time employees were killed, many of whom worked together.

"Whatever happened yesterday, it shows the character of these guys, how they tried to save others while going through that chaotic situation," light rail superintendent Naunihal Singh said.

The victims were Alex Ward Fritch, 49; Paul Delacruz Megia, 42; Taptejdeep Singh, 36; Adrian Balleza, 29; Jose Dejesus Hernandez, 35; Timothy Michael Romo, 49; Michael Joseph Rudometkin, 40; Abdolvahab Alaghmandan, 63; and Lars Kepler Lane, 63.

Family and friends remembered Taptejdeep Singh as a hero. He called another transit employee to warn him about Cassidy, saying he needed to get out or hide.

"He told me he was with Paul, another victim, at the time," co-worker Sukhvir Singh, who is not related to Taptejdeep Singh, said in a statement. "From what I've heard, he spent the last moments of his life

making sure that others — in the building and elsewhere — would be able to stay safe.”

Karman Singh said Thursday that his older brother had “a lion’s heart.”

At an evening vigil that drew 1,000 people to City Hall, Singh said his brother “died fighting for others, and trying to save his community, his VTA community.”

Annette Romo, wife of Timothy Romo, told the crowd: “I only have a few words to say: Never leave home without giving your loved one a kiss goodbye. Because that was the last I got.”

EXPLAINER: What’s the Senate filibuster and why change it?

BY ALAN FRAM and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republicans are poised to use a filibuster to derail Democrats’ effort to launch a bipartisan probe of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. The showdown will be the first vote this year when the GOP has used the delaying tactic to try killing major legislation.

Yet while the GOP seemed certain to succeed Thursday, their victory may prod Democrats closer to curbing or eliminating a legislative tactic that’s been the bane of Senate majorities since the Founding Fathers.

Here’s a look at the filibuster, how it works and the current political firestorm over it.

WHAT’S A FILIBUSTER?

Unlike the House, the Senate places few constraints on lawmakers’ right to speak. Senators can also easily use the chamber’s rules to hinder or block votes. Collectively these procedural delays are called filibusters.

Senate records say the term began appearing in the mid-19th century. The word comes from a Dutch term for “freebooter” and the Spanish “filibusteros” that were used to describe pirates.

Filibusters were emblazoned in the public’s mind in part by the 1939 film, “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” in which Jimmy Stewart portrayed a senator who spoke on the chamber’s floor until exhaustion. In a real-life version of that, Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., stood continuously by his desk for 24 hours and 18 minutes speaking against the 1957 Civil Rights Act, the longest Senate speech by a single senator for which there are records of speaking length.

Those days are mostly gone. Senators usually tell Senate leaders or announce publicly that they will filibuster a bill, with no lengthy speeches required. Their impact usually flows not from delaying Senate business but from the need to get a supermajority of votes to end them.

HOW DO FILIBUSTERS END?

Records from the first Congress in 1789 show senators complaining about long speeches blocking leg-



FILE - In this Aug. 29, 1957, file photo, Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., waves as he leaves the Senate chamber at end of his 24 hour, 18 minute filibuster against the Civil rights Act. Senate Republicans are poised to use a filibuster to derail Democrats’ effort to launch a bipartisan probe of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. The showdown will be the first time this year the GOP has used the delaying tactic to try killing major legislation, Thurmond talked on the Senate floor in the longest Senate speech by a single senator for which there are records of speaking length. (AP Photo)

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isolation. Frustration grew and in 1917, the Senate voted to let senators end filibusters with a two-thirds majority vote.

In 1975, the Senate lowered that margin to the current three-fifths majority, which in the 100-member chamber is 60 votes. That margin is needed to end filibusters against nearly all types of legislation, but no longer applies to nominations.

Democrats controlling the Senate in 2013, angered by GOP delays on then-President Barack Obama's picks, reduced the margin for ending filibusters against most appointees to a simple majority, exempting Supreme Court nominees. In 2017, Republicans running the chamber, eager to add conservative justices under then-President Donald Trump, lowered the threshold to a simple majority for Supreme Court picks as well.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Democrats emerged from the 2020 elections controlling the White House, Senate and House. They had pent-up pressure to enact an agenda that includes spending trillions to bolster the economy and battle the pandemic, expanding voting rights and helping millions of immigrants in the U.S. illegally become citizens.

But Democrats have a slender House majority and control the 50-50 Senate only because of the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Kamala Harris. That means that to overcome a filibuster, Democrats need support from at least 10 Republicans, a heavy lift in a time of intense partisanship.

That's frustrated progressive senators and outside liberal groups, who've pressured Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., to eliminate filibusters — even as their use has become increasingly common by whichever party is in the minority.

According to Senate records dating back to World War I, the number of votes to end filibusters in any two-year Congress never reached 100 until the 2007-2008 sessions. It hit a high of 298 in the 2019-2020 Congress, mostly on Trump appointees that Republicans running the Senate were pushing to confirmation.

In this year's first five months as of this week, there were already 41 votes to end filibusters, mostly on President Joe Biden's nominees.

WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS DO?

It takes a simple majority, 51 votes, to change how the Senate cuts off filibusters. GOP support for retaining them is solid, with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., saying Democrats want to end them in a quest for "raw power."

But with Democrats eager to enact their priorities before they lose their fragile majority, their support for discarding filibusters has grown. Biden, who's influential despite having no vote on the matter, has said the tactic is "being abused in a gigantic way."

Yet Democrats lack the votes to do that. Their two most conservative senators, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Arizona's Kyrsten Sinema, have opposed a change, arguing the country is better served when Congress can find bipartisan solutions to its problems.

WHAT IMPACT MIGHT THE JAN. 6 COMMISSION VOTE HAVE ON FILIBUSTERS?

Democrats consider creating a commission to examine the violent attack on the Capitol by Trump supporters just one of many issues they're pushing that the public supports. Others in that category include House-passed measures easing voting access, expanding citizenship opportunities for immigrants and curbing gun rights.

So far, Schumer hasn't forced Senate votes on many such bills. But advocates of eliminating filibusters hope Thursday's vote on the Jan. 6 commission, a top Democratic priority, will build pressure on Schumer, Manchin and Sinema to eliminate the delays.

Schumer hasn't overtly tipped his hand on what he'll do but has consistently kept the door open. The Senate spent much of this week debating a bipartisan bill aimed at strengthening the U.S.'s ability to compete economically with China, which some saw as demonstrating that Democrats work with Republicans when they can.

"We hope to move forward with Republicans, but we're not going to let them saying no stand in our way," Schumer said this week.

Democrats used special budget procedures to push Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package through the Senate with just a simple majority in March. They may try the same with Biden's huge infrastructure bill, but Senate rules limit the ability to use that route.

Social spending, business tax hike drive \$6T Biden budget

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's \$6 trillion budget proposal for next year would run a \$1.8 trillion federal government deficit despite a raft of new tax increases on corporations and high-income people designed to pay for his ambitious spending plans.

Biden had already announced his major budget initiatives, but during a rollout Friday he will release them as a single proposal to incorporate them into the government's existing budget framework, including Social Security and Medicare. That provides a fuller view of the administration's fiscal posture.

Democratic aides disclosed key elements of the Biden plan, speaking on condition of anonymity because the document is not yet public.

The whopping deficit projections reflect a government whose steadily

accumulating pile of debt has topped \$28 trillion after well more than \$5 trillion in COVID-19 relief. The government's structural deficit remains unchecked, and Biden uses tax hikes on businesses and the wealthy to power huge new social programs like universal prekindergarten and large subsidies for child care.

The budget incorporates the administration's eight-year, \$2.3 trillion infrastructure proposal and its \$1.8 trillion American Families Plan and adds details on his \$1.5 trillion request for annual operating appropriations for the Pentagon and domestic agencies.

It is sure to give Republicans fresh ammunition for their criticisms of the new Democratic administration as bent on a "tax and spend" agenda with resulting deficits that would damage the economy and impose a crushing debt burden on younger Americans. Huge deficits have yet to drive up interest rates as many fiscal hawks have feared, however, and anti-deficit sentiment among Democrats has mostly vanished.

"Now is the time to build (upon) the foundation that we've laid to make bold investments in our families and our communities and our nation," Biden said Thursday in an appearance in Cleveland to tout his economic plans. "We know from history that these kinds of investments raise both the floor and the ceiling over the economy for everybody."

The unusual timing of the budget rollout — the Friday afternoon before Memorial Day weekend — indicates that the White House isn't eager to trumpet the bad deficit news. Typically, lawmakers host an immediate round of hearings on the budget, but those will have to wait until Congress returns from a weeklong recess.

Under Biden's plan, the debt held by the public would exceed the size of the economy and soon eclipse record levels of debt relative to gross domestic product that have stood since World War II. That's despite more than \$3 trillion in proposed tax increases over the decade, including an increase in the corporate



President Joe Biden delivers remarks on the economy at the Cuyahoga Community College Metropolitan Campus, Thursday, May 27, 2021, in Cleveland. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

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tax rate from 21% to 28%, increased capital gains rates on top earners, and returning the top personal income tax bracket to 39.6%.

Like all presidential budgets, Biden's plan is simply a proposal. It's up to Congress to implement it through tax and spending legislation and annual agency budget bills. With Democrats in control of Capitol Hill, albeit barely, the president has the ability to implement many of his tax and spending plans, though his hopes for awarding greater budget increases to domestic agencies than promised for the Pentagon are sure to hit a roadblock with Republicans. Some Democrats, however, are already balking at Biden's full menu of tax increases.

The Biden plan comes as the White House is seeking an agreement with Senate Republicans over infrastructure spending. There are growing expectations that he may have to go it alone and pass his plans by relying on support from his narrow Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate.

The flood of new spending includes \$200 billion over 10 years to provide free preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds and \$109 billion to offer two years of free community college to all Americans. Also, \$225 billion would subsidize child care to allow many to pay a maximum of 7% of their income for all children under age 5. And another \$225 billion over the next decade would create a national family and medical leave program, while \$200 billion would make recently enacted subsidy increases under the Obama health care law permanent.

It also calls for a major boost to Title I, a federal funding program for schools with large concentrations of low-income students. The proposal would provide \$36.5 billion for the program, an increase of \$20 billion over current levels. The new funding would be used to increase teacher pay, expand access to preschool, decrease inequities in education and increase access to rigorous coursework, according to a congressional aide briefed on the budget who spoke on condition of anonymity ahead of the official release.

Such increases would drive federal spending to about 25% of the GDP, while the tax increases would mean revenues approaching 20% of the size of the economy once implemented.

Last year's \$3.1 trillion budget deficit under President Donald Trump was more than double the previous record, as the coronavirus pandemic shrank revenues and sent spending soaring.

Speaking from Air Force One, White House press secretary Jen Psaki noted that Biden inherited deficits already swelled by COVID-19 relief and promised that the administration's initiatives "will put us on better financial footing over time."

And the Biden team says public sentiment is on its side, citing recent opinion polls that show the public largely approves of ideas like boosting spending for roads and bridges and better broadband, as well as its plans to raise taxes on corporations and upper bracket earners.

"The President's Jobs Plan and Families Plan represent once-in-a-generation investments in our economy, and they put forward a blue collar blueprint to ensure that prosperity is shared by all Americans," longtime Biden adviser Mike Donilon said in a statement.

Republicans expressed horror at the Biden budget numbers.

"So far this administration has recommended we spend 7 trillion additional dollars this year. That would be more than we spent in adjusted inflation dollars to win World War II," Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Thursday on CNBC. "So they have huge spending desire and ... a great desire to add in \$3.6 trillion in additional taxes on top of it."

Biden's budget assumes the economy will grow by 5.2% this year and 4.3% next year before settling to about 2% growth thereafter.

GOP poised to block bipartisan probe of Jan. 6 insurrection

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republicans are poised to block the creation of a special commission to study the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, dashing hopes for a bipartisan panel amid a GOP push to put the violent insurrection by Donald Trump's supporters behind them.

Broad Republican opposition was expected in what would be the first successful Senate filibuster of the Biden presidency, even as the family of a Capitol Police officer who collapsed and died after the siege

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and other officers who battled rioters went office to office asking GOP senators to support the commission. The insurrection was the worst attack on the Capitol in 200 years and interrupted the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's win over Trump.

A vote on the procedural motion was expected Friday, potentially in the overnight hours, after delays on an unrelated bill to boost scientific research and development pushed back the schedule.

Though the bill passed the House earlier this month with the support of almost three dozen Republicans, GOP senators said they believe the commission would eventually be used against them politically. And former President Trump, who still has a firm hold on the party, has called it a "Democrat trap."

The expected vote is emblematic of the profound mistrust between the two parties since the siege, which has sowed deeper divisions on Capitol Hill even though lawmakers in the two parties fled together from the rioters that day. The events of Jan. 6 have become an increasingly fraught topic among Republicans as some in the party have downplayed the violence and defended the rioters who supported Trump and his false insistence that the election was stolen from him.

While initially saying he was open to the idea of the commission, which would be modeled after an investigation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell turned firmly against it in recent days. He has said he believes the panel's investigation would be partisan despite the even split among party members.

McConnell, who once said Trump was responsible for "provoking" the mob attack on the Capitol, said of Democrats, "They'd like to continue to litigate the former president, into the future."

Still, a handful of Republicans — if not enough to save it — were expected to vote to move forward with the bill. Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski has said she will support the legislation because she needs to know more about what happened that day and why.

"Truth is hard stuff, but we've got a responsibility to it," she told reporters Thursday evening. "We just can't pretend that nothing bad happened, or that people just got too excitable. Something bad happened. And it's important to lay that out."

Of her colleagues opposing the commission, Murkowski said some are concerned that "we don't want to rock the boat."

The Republican opposition to the bipartisan panel has revived Democratic pressure to do away with the filibuster, a time-honored Senate tradition that requires a vote by 60 of the 100 senators to cut off debate and advance a bill. With the Senate evenly split 50-50, Democrats need support of 10 Republicans



Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., a crucial 50th vote for Democrats on President Joe Biden's proposals, walks with reporters as senators go to the chamber for votes ahead of the approaching Memorial Day recess, at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday, May 27, 2021. Senate Republicans are ready to deploy the filibuster to block a commission on the Jan. 6 insurrection, shattering chances for a bipartisan probe of the deadly assault on the U.S. Capitol and reviving pressure to do away with the procedural tactic that critics say has lost its purpose. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

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to move to the commission bill, sparking fresh debate over whether the time has come to change the rules and lower the threshold to 51 votes to take up legislation.

The Republicans' political arguments over the violent siege — which is still raw for many in the Capitol, almost five months later — have frustrated not only Democrats but also those who fought off the rioters.

Michael Fanone, a Metropolitan Police Department officer who responded to the attack, said between meetings with Republican senators that a commission is "necessary for us to heal as a nation from the trauma that we all experienced that day." Fanone has described being dragged down the Capitol steps by rioters who shocked him with a stun gun and beat him.

Sandra Garza, the girlfriend of Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, who collapsed and died after battling the rioters, said of the Republican senators, "You know they are here today and with their families and comfortable because of the actions of law enforcement that day."

"So I don't understand why they would resist getting to the bottom of what happened that day and fully understanding how to prevent it. Just boggles my mind," she said.

Video of the rioting shows two men spraying Sicknick and another officer with a chemical, but the Washington medical examiner said he suffered a stroke and died from natural causes.

Garza attended the meetings with Sicknick's mother, Gladys Sicknick. In a statement Wednesday, Mrs. Sicknick suggested the opponents of the commission "visit my son's grave in Arlington National Cemetery and, while there, think about what their hurtful decisions will do to those officers who will be there for them going forward."

Dozens of other police officers were injured as the rioters pushed past them, breaking through windows and doors and hunting for lawmakers. The protesters constructed a mock gallows in front of the Capitol and called for the hanging of Vice President Mike Pence, who was overseeing the certification of the presidential vote. Four protesters died, including a woman who was shot and killed by police as she tried to break into the House chamber with lawmakers still inside.

"We have a mob overtake the Capitol, and we can't get the Republicans to join us in making historic record of that event? That is sad," said Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Senate Democrat. "That tells you what's wrong with the Senate and what's wrong with the filibuster."

Many Democrats are warning that if Republicans are willing to use the filibuster to stop an arguably popular measure, it shows the limits of trying to broker compromises, particularly on bills related to election reforms or other aspects of the Democrats' agenda.

For now, though, Democrats don't have the votes to change the rule. West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin and Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, both moderate Democrats, have said they want to preserve the filibuster.

The commission has received support from government officials outside Congress, as well. On Thursday, four former secretaries of Homeland Security who served under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama — Tom Ridge, Michael Chertoff, Janet Napolitano and Jeh Johnson — issued a statement saying a commission is necessary to "ensure the peaceful transfer of power in our country is never so threatened again."

Biden, asked about the commission at a stop in Cleveland, said Thursday, "I can't imagine anyone voting against" it.

In a last-ditch effort to persuade some of her Republican colleagues to save the bill, Maine Sen. Susan Collins drafted an amendment this week that would ensure that commission staff were hired on a bipartisan basis and that the panel was disbanded at the beginning of 2022, before the election cycle is fully underway. But her effort failed to win over many colleagues.

Republican Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who once supported the idea of the commission, said he now believes Democrats are trying to use it as a political tool.

"I don't think this is the only way to get to the bottom of what happened," Cornyn said, noting that Senate committees are also looking at the siege.

Victims of shooting recalled as loving, kind-hearted, heroic

The nine people who were killed in a shooting at a California rail yard were remembered by their families, colleagues and friends as loving, kind-hearted and heroic.

Paul Delacruz Megia enthusiastically embraced challenges in his job at the Valley Transportation Authority, his supervisor said. Taptejdeep Singh led people to safety during the shooting. Adrian Balleza was fun to work with, and Alex Fritch was the rock of his family.

"He was stolen from us," Megan Staker said of her boyfriend's father, Abdolvahab Alaghmandan. "Our hearts are broken forever."



This combo of images provided by the Valley Transportation Authority shows the nine victims of a shooting at a VTA rail yard on Wednesday, May 26, 2021, in San Jose, Calif. Top row, from left, Abdolvahab Alaghmandan, Adrian Balleza, Alex Fritch, Jesus Hernandez III. Bottom row, from left, Lars Lane, Paul Megia, Timothy Romo, Michael Rudometkin and Taptejdeep Singh. (Valley Transportation Authority via AP)

JOSE DEJESUS HERNANDEZ III:

Jose Dejesus Hernandez III, 35, could fix anything, loved his hobbies and lived life with zest, according to his family.

The Dublin, California, resident was a substation maintainer who had been partnered with Samuel Cassidy, the man who authorities say gunned down Hernandez and eight others, said his father, Jose Dejesus Hernandez II, a retired Valley Transportation Authority employee. He said he was not aware of issues Cassidy may have had with his son or others.

"He was somebody who was so fair. A very, very fair person and always leaning to the right side of things, always looking for the right thing to do," said Hernandez, crying at times in an interview Thursday with The Associated Press. "He was a really good guy, a great kid, and now he's gone."

"I feel really sorry for all those families, because these things aren't supposed to happen. I feel sorry for the family of even the person who did this thing," he said.

Jesus Hernandez's former wife, Sarah, said waiting to find out what happened Wednesday was torturous. She tried to channel her former husband's logic and calm.

"I just tried to be very logical and think, 'Thousands of people work there, there's no way, let's just wait to hear and not get worked up, I'm sure he's fine, I'm sure he's on scene and he can't have his phone,'" Sarah Hernandez said.

TAPTEJDEEP SINGH:

Taptejdeep Singh, 36, called another Valley Transportation Authority employee to warn him about Samuel Cassidy, saying he needed to get out or hide.

"He told me he was with Paul (Delacruz Megia), another victim, at the time," coworker Sukhvir Singh, who is not related to him, said in a statement. "From what I've heard, he spent the last moments of his life making sure that others — in the building and elsewhere — would be able to stay safe."

Singh's co-workers also told his family that he left his office where people were hiding to warn others. He was shot when he ran into the gunman in a stairwell, his uncle Sukhwant Dhillon told local media outlets. Karman Singh said his older brother had "a lion's heart" and that he "died fighting for others, and trying

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to save his community, his VTA community.”

Annette Romo, wife of Timothy Romo, told the crowd: “I only have a few words to say: Never leave home without giving your loved one a kiss goodbye. Because that was the last I got.”

Bagga Singh said his cousin lived in Union City, California, and had a wife, two small children and many family members. He joined the VTA in 2014 as a bus operator trainee and later became a light-rail operator. Singh said he has no idea why the gunman targeted his cousin.

Family members waited for hours at a Red Cross center Wednesday, hoping to learn Singh had survived. Eventually, someone from the sheriff’s department delivered the sad news.

“It’s unbelievable,” Singh said.

PAUL DELACRUZ MEGIA:

Paul Delacruz Megia, 42, always had a smile on his face, no matter what was thrown his way, a colleague at the transit agency told a news conference Thursday.

Light rail superintendent Naunihal Singh said he shared an office with Megia, an assistant superintendent who started with the agency in 2002.

“Even if he disagrees with you, he’ll take it with a smile,” Singh recalled. “Sometimes my demands could be unreasonable, but Paul always accepted it with a smile.”

Megia had two sons, a daughter and a stepson and had planned to leave Thursday for a family trip to Disneyland, his father Leonard Megia told The New York Times. He said his son left home at 4:30 a.m. to commute from his home near Tracy to work, but made sure to call his children every single morning to check in on them before they started school.

“He was a wonderful dad,” he said. “He’s my son and my best friend.”

ADRIAN BALLEZA:

Adrian Balleza, 29, was kind-hearted and the type of colleague who tried to make work fun for his co-workers, a Valley Transportation Authority colleague told a news conference Thursday.

Balleza joined the VTA in 2014 as a bus operator trainee and then became a maintenance worker and light-rail operator, said Glenn Hendricks, chair of the authority’s board.

He is survived by his wife, Heather Balleza, and 2-year-old son.

“He was so happy to drive the bus. He was so happy that he got a new schedule. He started at four in the morning so he could come home and spend time with his family in the evening,” friend Beatrice Trotter told NBC-owned KNTV in San Jose.

ALEX FRITCH:

Alex Fritch, 49, died at a hospital late Wednesday, surrounded by his children and parents, said his wife, Terra Fritch of San Jose.

“He was our rock, my safe place to fall. He was the love of my life,” Fritch told KTVU-TV.

The couple got married after having known each other for just six months and had been together 20 years. They were supposed to travel to Hawaii next September to renew their vows, she said.

“He always tried to look on the bright side of things. He loved Mr. Rogers. He watched him all the time. He loved the documentaries. He loved movies,” she said.

Fritch said she raced to the hospital after learning he had been shot. She said hospital staff moved him over in his bed so she could lie down with him.

“Alex was really fighting hard. He didn’t want to go anywhere, and I didn’t want him to go,” Fritch told the station.

ABDOLVAHAB ALAGHMANDAN:

Abdolvahab Alaghmandan, 63, had been with the Valley Transportation Authority for 20 years and was dedicated to his job, his son Soheil Alaghmandan, 33, told the Mercury News in San Jose.

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"He worked overtime. He worked through the entire pandemic," Soheil said of his father. "He's a tinkerer. He can fix anything."

When Megan Staker moved to San Francisco from Des Moines in 2018 with her boyfriend Soheil, he took her home to meet his parents, Alaghmandan and Firoozeh Davallou, at their Castro Valley home, she told the San Francisco Chronicle.

Right away Abdi, as Alaghmandan was known, "became like a second father to me," Staker told the Chronicle. "He brought so much joy and laughter to our lives."

MICHAEL JOSEPH RUDOMETKIN:

San Jose Supervisor Raul Peralez said he and his father were already planning another golfing outing with their longtime friend, Michael Joseph Rudometkin, 40.

"Now that will never happen again," Peralez posted on Facebook. "My family and I have lost a long time great friend and there are no words to describe the heartache we are feeling right now, especially for his family. Eight families are feeling this same sense of loss tonight and our entire community is mourning as well."

LARS KEPLER LANE:

Lars Kepler Lane, 63, was her "soul mate" and the love of her life, said his wife, Vicki Lane.

Lane said her husband knew the shooter and described him as quiet.

"Why he had to shoot him I don't know," she said in an interview with San Francisco's KGO-TV. "This just doesn't seem real."

Her world shattered Wednesday night when she learned her husband of 22 years was one of the victims. He leaves behind four children and a dog he doted on, she said.

Lars Lane joined the Valley Transportation Authority in 2001 as an electro mechanic and then became an overhead line worker, said Glenn Hendricks, chair of the VTA's board.

TIMOTHY MICHAEL ROMO:

Timothy Michael Romo, 49, was an overhead line worker at the Valley Transportation Authority for 20 years, said Glenn Hendricks, chair of the VTA's board.

He grew up in the Central Coast town of Greenfield, California, where his father, Mike Romo, was the mayor and police chief, for many years.

The father of three was remembered by his children as smart, funny and someone who could fix anything, from a personal problem to a busted truck.

"He was my hero, my idol, everything I've ever wanted to be as a man and he led by example," said his son, Scott. "He was my Superman."

His wife, Annette, told the evening crowd: "I only have a few words to say: Never leave home without giving your loved one a kiss goodbye. Because that was the last I got."

Review: A gauzy, tear-filled reunion for 'Friends' actors

By DAVID BAUDER AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Toward the end of HBO Max's "Friends" reunion special, host James Corden asks the six actors to imagine what their characters' lives would be like today.

Chandler and Monica would be married. So would Ross and Rachel. With kids, of course. Same with Phoebe. The only mystery was Joey, which actor Matt LeBlanc answered with a joke.

"He probably opened up a sandwich shop in Venice Beach," he said.

That's when the disappointment of "Friends: The Reunion," which premieres Thursday on the streaming service, hits you. How cool would it have been to take that journey?

It is what ultimately matters when anybody reunites with friends so close they felt like family during the early adult years. How has everyone turned out? Were dreams fulfilled? Did life's inevitable disappointments

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This image provided by HBO Max shows Matt LeBlanc, from left, Matthew Perry, Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox and Lisa Kudrow in a scene from the "Friends" reunion special. (Terence Patrick/HBO Max via AP)

cut you down or make you stronger? Can you still be friends?

There are probably many reasons why the people involved didn't try to advance those stories. It would have been hard. Surely not everyone would have been on the same page. There's always the possibility of failure. You want to remember the magic of "Friends," not the slog of the spinoff "Joey."

Actress Lisa Kudrow noted the show's creators, Marta Kauffman and David Crane, have said they worked hard to give every character a satisfying ending when the NBC sitcom went off the air in 2004. She hasn't considered revisiting Phoebe.

"I don't want anyone's happy ending to be unraveled," she said.

Instead, the characters remain frozen in time, forever as they appear on reruns available on, yes, HBO Max.

The streamed reunion was delayed

for a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the actors reportedly received \$2.5 million to appear in the special, according to Variety. Viewers were told it was only the second time that Kudrow, LeBlanc, Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox, Matthew Perry and David Schwimmer had been in a room together since filming the series finale.

It has an enormously effective opening. A door opens at an empty Warner Brothers soundstage where the old "Friends" set was in place. Schwimmer walks in alone, shaking his head at what he sees.

He's followed, one at a time, by Kudrow, Aniston, LeBlanc, Cox and, finally, Perry. Tissue is produced for Aniston and Cox's tears, and it wouldn't be the last time.

"Does Courteney still have her lines written on the table?" LeBlanc said, revealing a co-star's secret.

Thus begins nearly two hours of reminiscences, helped along by generous clips and appearances by some of the people who had been on the show. Maggie Wheeler, who played Janice, still has that grating laugh and explains how Perry inspired it.

Corden asked whether any of the young, attractive actors had carried a flame for one another. Aniston explained how she and Schwimmer had a mutual crush in the first season that wasn't consummated. She feared that their first kiss would be onstage in a scene — and that's exactly what happened.

"We just channeled all of our adoration and love for each other into Ross and Rachel," she said.

In an inspired way, the show intersperses the present-day actors reading their lines from the coffee shop scene where that kiss happened, with what was seen on the air at the time.

Corden is, predictably, a little too enthusiastic, a little too reverent.

"I can't tell you how incredible it is to be here with all of you now," he said. "We are shooting here in front of the iconic fountain where you shot the opening credits."

No jumping in the water this time, though.

While the show offers some laughs, smiles and warm, fuzzy feelings, that ultimately grows tedious. By the time Justin Bieber walks out wearing the potato costume that Schwimmer had for a Halloween episode, the nadir is reached.

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It's when you realize that for all the talent involved, "Friends: The Reunion" doesn't offer much more than television anniversary specials you've seen — and forgotten about — before.

"We're not going to be doing this again in 15 years," Cox says, trying to emphasize the uniqueness of the reunion, before addressing her former castmates. "But we're not going to wait this long to have a dinner." Now that's something we wouldn't mind being a part of.

Boorish fans: 76ers, Knicks, Jazz issue bans after incidents

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

The New York Knicks, Philadelphia 76ers and Utah Jazz banned a total of five fans from their respective arenas and issued apologies Thursday for incidents during playoff games, and the NBA said that rules surrounding fan behavior will be "vigorously enforced" going forward.

All three incidents took place during playoff games Wednesday. The Knicks said they banned a fan from Madison Square Garden for spitting on Atlanta guard Trae Young, the 76ers banned a fan who threw popcorn on Washington guard Russell Westbrook, and the Jazz said three of their fans were banned indefinitely following a verbal altercation during their game with Memphis.

The Jazz did not reveal specifics of the incident, but Grizzlies guard Ja Morant — who had family at the game — said the three people who were banned "just went too far."

"We're just living in a society where people don't have respect anymore," Hawks coach Nate McMillan said Thursday. "In no way should that be allowed, or should that happen, at a sporting event or really any event. ... I think New York did what it should have done in that situation. It's uncalled for."

The 76ers went even further than the Knicks could, because the fan involved in the Westbrook incident was a season-ticket holder. Those tickets have been revoked, and he was banned from all events at their arena.

None of the three teams released the names of the fans who were involved. The Knicks said they forwarded information to authorities.

"We investigated the matter and determined that this patron, who is not a season-ticket holder, did indeed spit on Trae Young, and for that reason, he is now banned from The Garden indefinitely," the Knicks said. "We apologize to Trae and the entire Atlanta Hawks organization for this fan's behavior."

Video showed that someone spit on Young while he was preparing to inbound the basketball in the fourth quarter of New York's win over Atlanta at Madison Square Garden. Young did not mention it in his postgame interviews and McMillan said he was unaware of the incident until Thursday morning.

Young was the subject of profane chants from some fans in that arena throughout the first two games of the series; the Hawks' guard taunted them right back after his shot with less than a second left gave Atlanta a win in Game 1. Even New York Mayor Bill de Blasio weighed in this week on Young's penchant for trying to draw fouls, both in a news conference and on his office's Twitter page.

"There's obviously a line," Brooklyn forward Blake Griffin said Thursday. "I think what happened to Russ is obviously far behind that line."

Westbrook was leaving the Wizards' game in Philadelphia with an ankle injury when someone sitting over the tunnel that leads from the floor threw the popcorn on him.

"We apologize to Russell Westbrook and the Washington Wizards for being subjected to this type of unacceptable and disrespectful behavior," the 76ers said in a statement announcing the ban. "There is no place for it in our sport or arena."

At Salt Lake City on Wednesday, security was involved in a matter involving at least one fan in seats relatively close to the the Memphis bench during Game 2, but it was not known if that was the incident in question.

Morant tweeted out the hashtag "protectourplayers" not long after that game. And on Thursday, Morant tweeted again, saying that his family members at the game "felt the love" from many Jazz fans around them at Game 2 but added that "those 3 just went too far."

"The Utah Jazz have zero tolerance for offensive or disruptive behavior," the team said Thursday. "An

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incident occurred last night involving a verbal altercation during Game 2. Arena security staff intervened, and the investigation resulted in the removal and banning of three Jazz fans indefinitely. We apologize to all who were impacted by this unfortunate incident and condemn unacceptable fan behavior."

The National Basketball Players Association said "true fans ... honor and respect the dignity of our players. No true fan would seek to harm them or violate their personal space." And the NBA said its rules on fan behavior will be "vigorously enforced in order to ensure a safe and respectful environment for all involved."

"The return of more NBA fans to our arenas has brought great excitement and energy to the start of the playoffs, but it is critical that we all show respect for players, officials and our fellow fans," the NBA said Thursday.

NBA buildings are welcoming their largest crowds of the season for the playoffs, after a regular season where attendance was severely limited because of policies put in place to keep players and others safe during the pandemic.

It has not been without problems, and players are again airing concerns about behavior.

"I'm sick and tired of it, honestly," Westbrook said.

He's not alone. Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James — who chimed in on Twitter shortly after the Westbrook incident Wednesday — has said in the past that fan behavior is an issue, and clearly still does.

Brooklyn guard Kyrie Irving — in advance of Game 3 of the Nets' series at Boston — said he hoped the scene there on Friday night "is strictly basketball, there's no belligerence or any racism going on, subtle racism, people yelling (expletive) from the crowd."

"We go into a hostile environment and we welcome it, we enjoy it, we want the vitriol — as long as it's not over the line," Brooklyn coach Steve Nash said. "We want to face some adversity. That noise and that energy coming from the opposing fans is something that can spur your team on, a challenge to help you lock in and be more focused."

Westbrook has been part of high-profile incidents involving fans before, including one where a fan in Utah was alleged to have directed racial taunts his way. The fan was banned by the Jazz and Westbrook was fined \$25,000 for his reactions to that incident, one in which Utah guard Donovan Mitchell even came to his defense.

"These arenas, they've got to start protecting the players. We'll see what the NBA does," Westbrook said Wednesday night. "I've been in a lot of incidents where fans, they say whatever, and the consequences for me are a lot more detrimental to those people in the stands because they feel like they're untouchable."

After the Westbrook incident in Utah two years ago, the league changed and toughened its code of conduct for fans, including putting those in closest proximity to the players and the court on alert that anything over the line will lead to ejections and possibly more.

Ex-Speaker Ryan to GOP: Reject Trump, '2nd-rate imitations'

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

Emerging from two years of relative silence, former House Speaker Paul Ryan joined the fight against Donald Trump on Thursday, urging fellow conservatives to reject the former president's divisive politics and those Republican leaders who emulate him.

Ryan made his remarks during an evening address at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California. He was critical of both Republicans and Democrats, though he saved his sharpest barbs for Trump, who is by most measures the leader of the modern-day Republican Party.

"It was horrifying to see a presidency come to such a dishonorable and disgraceful end," Ryan said, referring to the deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol that Trump inspired on Jan. 6.

"Once again, we conservatives find ourselves at a crossroads," Ryan continued. "And here's the reality that we have to face: If the conservative cause depends on the populist appeal of one personality, or on second-rate imitations, then we're not going anywhere. Voters looking for Republican leaders want to see independence and mettle. They will not be impressed by the sight of yes-men and flatterers flocking to Mar-a-Lago."

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It's unclear how much impact Ryan's words will have in the broader fight for the future of the GOP, if any. Ryan, the 2012 Republican vice presidential nominee, was among the most respected Republicans in the nation's capital before Trump's rise, but two years out of office, his open contempt for Trump is not in line with the vast majority of Republican voters and elected officials.

A tiny but growing group of anti-Trump Republicans has struggled to steer the party in a new direction, even as Trump continues to promote the same false claims — that he would have won the 2020 election if not for mass voter fraud — that inspired the Capitol insurrection. At the same time, Trump is openly contemplating another presidential run in 2024.

One of Trump's most vocal allies on Capitol Hill, Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo., lashed out at Ryan on Twitter ahead of the speech.

"It really is amazing that Paul Ryan, who is the reason the GOP lost the House in 2018, is going to come out today and blame Trump for the problems in the GOP," she said, adding a shot at another Trump critic, Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo. "Paul, the problem is you and your pal Liz."

Ryan spoke Thursday as the opening speaker for the Reagan library's "Time for Choosing" series, which will later feature 2024 Republican presidential prospects such as former Vice President Mike Pence, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Those close to Ryan, 51, do not expect him to run for public office again, but they suggest he is paying close attention and remains concerned about the future of the party. The Wisconsin Republican also sits on the board of Fox Corp., which owns Fox News.

In his remarks, Ryan described President Joe Biden's agenda as "more leftist than any president in my lifetime" and warned of exploding federal spending under the Democrats who control Washington. He lamented the GOP's interest in culture wars and "identity politics" at the expense of conservative principles.

"Culture matters, absolutely yes, but our party must be defined by more than a tussle over the latest grievance or perceived slight," he said. "We must not let them take priority over solutions — grounded in principle — to improve people's lives."

The Republican Party has an opportunity to win elections and address critical policy challenges, as long as they don't get in their own way, Ryan continued.

"If we fail this test, it will be because the progressive left will have won by default," he said. "It will be because the conservative cause ... lost its way and followed the left into the trap of identity politics, defining itself by resentments instead of by ideals. It will be because we mistake reactionary skirmishes in the culture wars with a coherent agenda. It will be because we gave too much allegiance to one passing political figure and weren't loyal enough to our principles."

Officers face charges in restraint death of Black man

By GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — The Washington state attorney general on Thursday charged two Tacoma police officers with murder and another with manslaughter in the death of Manuel Ellis, a Black man who died after repeatedly telling them he couldn't breathe as he was being restrained.

Attorney General Bob Ferguson filed charges of second-degree murder against Christopher Burbank and Matthew Collins, and first-degree manslaughter against Timothy Rankine. The three were in custody by Thursday evening, Ferguson's office said, with their arraignments set for Friday.

Witnesses reported seeing Burbank and Collins, who are both white, attack Ellis without provocation, according to a probable cause statement filed in Pierce County Superior Court. Rankine, who is described as Asian in court documents, is accused of putting pressure on Ellis' back as he said he couldn't breathe.

Ellis, 33, died on March 3, 2020 — Tasered, handcuffed and hogtied, with his face covered by a spit hood — just weeks before George Floyd's death under the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer triggered a nationwide reckoning on race and policing.

The Pierce County medical examiner called Ellis' death a homicide and attributed it to lack of oxygen from being restrained, with an enlarged heart and methamphetamine intoxication as contributing factors.

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The death made Ellis' name synonymous with pleas for justice at protests in the Pacific Northwest. His final words — "I can't breathe, sir!" — were captured by a home security camera, as was the retort from one of the officers: "Shut the (expletive) up, man."

"Ellis was not fighting back," the probable cause statement said. "All three civilian witnesses at the intersection ... state that they never saw Ellis strike at the officers."

The case marks the first time the attorney general's office has charged police officers with unlawful use of deadly force, Ferguson said.

Five Tacoma officers have been on paid home leave pending the charging decision, and Ferguson said the investigation is continuing. Attorneys for the defendants did not immediately return messages seeking comment.

"We are disappointed the facts were ignored in favor of what appears to be a politically motivated witch hunt," the Tacoma Police Union said in a written statement. "An unbiased jury will not allow these fine public servants to be sacrificed at the altar of public sentiment."

The encounter began after Burbank and Collins reported seeing Ellis trying to get into occupied cars at a red light. Ellis, recently back from church, had walked to a convenience store to get a late-night snack: powdered, raspberry-filled donuts.

The officers cast Ellis as the aggressor, saying he punched the window of their cruiser and attacked them as they got out, according to statements from other officers cited in the charging documents.

But two witnesses who recorded parts of the fatal interaction came forward with identical stories, saying the police attacked without provocation. An officer in the passenger side of a patrol car slammed his door into Ellis, knocking him down, and then jumped on him and started beating him, they said.

The witnesses "described seeing a casual interaction between the officers and Ellis before Burbank struck Ellis with his car door — there was no sudden, random attack by Ellis as the officers described that night to others," the probable cause statement said.

The video the witnesses recorded corroborated that Ellis did not attempt to strike the officers, though at times he resisted their efforts to restrain him, the statement said.

Pierce County Sheriff Ed Troyer, who was then a detective and the spokesman for the sheriff's office, said after Ellis' death that none of the officers placed a knee on his neck or head. But one of the witness videos that later surfaced depicts just that.

The Pierce County Sheriff's Office botched the initial investigation into Ellis' death by failing to disclose for three months that one of its deputies had been involved in restraining Ellis; state law requires independent investigations. The Washington State Patrol took over, and the Attorney General's Office conducted its review based on evidence gathered by the patrol as well as its own additional investigation.

In a written statement, interim Tacoma Police Chief Mike Ake said the department would now begin an internal review of the death and make determinations regarding any discipline or additional training or policy changes that might be warranted.

"We realize we must reduce outcomes that cause pain and diminish trust within our community," he said. "We are committed to upholding accountability of individual officers who violate their oath to protect and serve."

Ellis had a history of mental illness and addiction. In September 2019, he was found naked after trying to rob a fast food restaurant. A sheriff's deputy subdued him with a Taser after he refused to remain down on the ground and charged toward law enforcement.

His landlords at the sober housing where he was staying told The Seattle Times he had been doing well in recent months after embracing mental health care for his schizophrenia. He had been attending church frequently, where he was a drummer in a worship band.

At a news conference Thursday, Ellis' family welcomed the charges but called for more work to overhaul the criminal justice system. The family is seeking \$30 million in a lawsuit against the city.

"The criminal system needs to be made over, from the head — just take it all off," said Ellis' mother, Marcia Carter-Patterson. She added: "This is about Manuel Elijah Ellis. This is his work. So help us with it."

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Ellis' death, Pierce County's botched investigation into it, and the national outcry for racial justice helped inspire Gov. Jay Inslee to convene a task force to suggest ways to guarantee independent reviews of police use of deadly force.

Last week, Inslee signed one of the nation's most ambitious packages of police accountability legislation, including outright bans on police use of chokeholds, neck restraints and no-knock warrants. The legislation also makes it easier to decertify police for bad acts — and creates an independent office to review deadly force cases.

The charged officers could face up to life in prison if convicted, but the standard sentencing range is 10 to 18 years for second-degree murder with no prior criminal history, and 6.5 to 8.5 years for manslaughter.

All three previously served in the Army, the attorney general's office said, and as police officers all had taken training on crisis intervention. Collins, 38, and Burbank, 35, had each been an officer for four years by March 2020 after serving eight years in the Army. Rankine, 32, joined the department in 2018 after six years in the Army and two as a security contractor for the U.S. State Department.

Police reform activists have long bemoaned the prevalence of former soldiers in civilian departments, saying they tend to be more aggressive than called for.

Survivor: California shooter was 'outsider' in workplace

By TERENCE CHEA, STEFANIE DAZIO and JOCELYN GECKER Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — First, there were gunshots. Then came the screams. And then — silence.

"Hey, what's going on? Anybody all right? What's happening?" Kirk Bertolet called out to his coworkers at a Northern California rail yard on Wednesday morning. "It was just eerie."

Cautiously, Bertolet left his barricaded office at the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority in San Jose, hoping he could offer first aid to anyone who needed help. But all he found were bodies.

"There wasn't helping anybody," the 64-year-old said, choking up. "He made sure they were all dead. I watched some of my coworkers breathe their last breath. And they were all gone."

The massacre was the worst mass shooting in the San Francisco Bay Area in decades. Gunman Samuel James Cassidy, a 57-year-old VTA employee, opened fire Wednesday morning at the San Jose rail yard, killing eight people before shooting himself. A ninth victim died hours later in the hospital.

Bertolet, who works in the signals department, said he had a polite relationship with Cassidy when they would pass in the locker room or hallway. He described "Sam" as an outsider at the facility, a loner who sat by himself, never talked to anyone and never fit in. He appeared to target specific coworkers, Bertolet said.

"I understand what pushed him. Sam was always on the outside. He was never in the group. He was never accepted by anybody," Bertolet said Thursday during an interview with The Associated Press. "You look back and you go, 'yeah, it fits.'"

In the hours after the violence, more pieces began to fit together:

Cassidy's ex-wife said he used to come home from work resentful and angry over what he perceived as unfair assignments more than a decade ago. A Biden administration official, speaking on the condition of authority, said Cassidy spoke of hating his workplace when customs officers detained him after a 2016 trip to the Philippines.

He had even talked about killing people at work, his ex-wife Cecilia Nelms told The Associated Press.

"I never believed him, and it never happened. Until now," she said tearfully.

Friends and relatives remembered the victims as a loving, kind-hearted and heroic group, and VTA officials have called the workforce of more than 2,100 a family. While Bertolet criticized the facility's lax security and said he wished he had had his own gun to stop Cassidy, he also told a different story of men who had worked together every day.

"I know some of those guys, they'll keep joking with you and they'll keep hammering you about stuff," he said, adding that anyone "thin-skinned" might not have been able to handle it.

Santa Clara County Sheriff Laurie Smith said Cassidy appeared to choose his targets. He told at least

one person "I'm not going to shoot you" and opened fire on others.

Bertolet told of a similar scenario.

"He was pissed off at certain people. He was angry, and he took his vengeance out on very specific people. He shot people. He let others live," he said. "It was very personal. Very targeted."

Authorities have not speculated on a motive beyond characterizing Cassidy on Thursday as a "highly disgruntled VTA employee for many years, which may have contributed to why he targeted VTA employees."

Glenn Hendricks, chair of the VTA's Board of Directors, said Thursday that he had no information about any tensions between Cassidy and the coworkers he shot.

"VTA is a close family," Hendricks said. "I would let the investigation work itself out."

The investigation is complicated. It spans two crime scenes — Cassidy apparently had a device that would set his home on fire almost simultaneously to when he began shooting — and has 100 potential witnesses who were working at the railyard at the time.

Cassidy arrived at the rail yard around 6 a.m., carrying a duffel bag filled with three semi-automatic handguns and 32 high-capacity magazines. It's not clear exactly when the bloodshed began, but the first 911 call reporting an active shooter came at 6:34 a.m.

"We were sitting in the front of our office and we started hearing the pops," Bertolet said. "BANG. BANG. BANG, BANG, BANG."

He and his coworkers threw a table in front of the door as Bertolet called the facility's control center while the shooting continued.

The gunshots caused Rochelle Hawkins, a VTA mechanic, to drop her cellphone in the tumult.

"I was running so fast, I just ran for my life," she said.

One of the victims, Taptejdeep Singh, tried to save his friend before Cassidy turned the guns on him.

"Taptejdeep called me to warn me that there was an active shooter in Building B and to go hide or get out immediately," Sukhvir Singh said.

Sukhvir Singh survived. His friend did not.

Social spending, business tax hike drive \$6T Biden budget

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's \$6 trillion budget proposal for next year would run a \$1.8 trillion federal government deficit despite a raft of new tax increases on corporations and high-income people designed to pay for his ambitious spending plans.

Biden had already announced his major budget initiatives, but during a rollout Friday, he will wrap them into a single proposal to incorporate them into the government's existing budget framework, including Social Security and Medicare. That provides a fuller view of the administration's fiscal posture.

Capitol Hill aides confirmed key elements of the Biden plan, which were first reported by The New York Times on Thursday. They spoke on condition of anonymity because the document is not yet public.

The whopping deficit projections reflect a government whose steadily accumulating pile of debt has topped \$28 trillion after well more than \$5 trillion in COVID-19 relief. The government's structural deficit remains unchecked, and Biden uses tax hikes on businesses and the wealthy to power huge new social programs like universal prekindergarten and large subsidies for child care.

The budget incorporates the administration's eight-year, \$2.3 trillion infrastructure proposal and its \$1.8 trillion American Families Plan and adds details on his \$1.5 trillion request for annual operating appropriations for the Pentagon and domestic agencies.

It is sure to give Republicans fresh ammunition for their criticisms of the new Democratic administration as bent on a "tax and spend" agenda with resulting deficits that would damage the economy and impose a crushing debt burden on younger Americans. Huge deficits have yet to drive up interest rates as many fiscal hawks have feared, however, and anti-deficit sentiment among Democrats has mostly vanished.

"Now is the time to build (upon) the foundation that we've laid to make bold investments in our families and our communities and our nation," Biden said Thursday in an appearance in Cleveland to tout his economic plans. "We know from history that these kinds of investments raise both the floor and the ceiling

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over the economy for everybody.”

The unusual timing of the budget rollout — coming the Friday before Memorial Day weekend — indicates that the White House isn't eager to trumpet the bad deficit news. Typically, lawmakers host an immediate round of hearings on the budget, but those will have to wait until Congress returns from a weeklong recess.

Under Biden's plan, the debt held by the public would exceed the size of the economy and soon eclipse record levels of debt relative to gross domestic product that have stood since World War II. That's despite more than \$3 trillion in proposed tax increases over the decade, including an increase in the corporate tax rate from 21% to 28%, increased capital gains rates on top earners, and returning the top personal income tax bracket to 39.6%.

Like all presidential budgets, Biden's plan is simply a proposal. It's up to Congress to implement it through tax and spending legislation and annual agency budget bills. With Democrats in control of Capitol Hill, albeit barely, the president has the ability to implement many of his tax and spending plans, though his hopes for awarding greater budget increases to domestic agencies than promised for the Pentagon are sure to hit a roadblock with Republicans. Some Democrats, however, are already balking at Biden's full menu of tax increases.

The Biden plan comes as the White House is seeking an agreement with Senate Republicans over infrastructure spending. There are growing expectations that he may have to go it alone and pass his plans by relying on support from his narrow Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate.

The flood of new spending includes \$200 billion over 10 years to provide free preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds and \$109 billion to offer two years of free community college to all Americans. Also, \$225 billion would subsidize child care to allow many to pay a maximum of 7% of their income for all children under age 5. And another \$225 billion over the next decade would create a national family and medical leave program, while \$200 billion would make recently enacted subsidy increases under the Obama health care law permanent.

It also calls for a major boost to Title I, a federal funding program for schools with large concentrations of low-income students. The proposal would provide \$36.5 billion for the program, an increase of \$20 billion over current levels. The new funding would be used to increase teacher pay, expand access to preschool, decrease inequities in education and increase access to rigorous coursework, according to a congressional aide briefed on the budget who spoke on condition of anonymity ahead of the official release.

Such increases would drive federal spending to about 25% of the GDP, while the tax increases would mean revenues approaching 20% of the size of the economy once implemented.

Last year's \$3.1 trillion budget deficit under President Donald Trump was more than double the previous record, as the coronavirus pandemic shrank revenues and sent spending soaring.

Speaking from Air Force One, White House press secretary Jen Psaki noted that Biden inherited deficits already swelled by COVID-19 relief and promised that the administration's initiatives "will put us on better financial footing over time."

And the Biden team says public sentiment is on its side, citing recent opinion polls that show the public largely approves of ideas like boosting spending for roads and bridges and better broadband, as well as its plans to raise taxes on corporations and upper bracket earners.

"The President's Jobs Plan and Families Plan represent once-in-a-generation investments in our economy, and they put forward a blue collar blueprint to ensure that prosperity is shared by all Americans," longtime Biden adviser Mike Donilon said in a statement.

Republicans expressed horror at the Biden budget numbers.

"So far this administration has recommended we spend 7 trillion additional dollars this year. That would be more than we spent in adjusted inflation dollars to win World War II," Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Thursday on CNBC. "So they have huge spending desire and ... a great desire to add in \$3.6 trillion in additional taxes on top of it."

Biden's budget assumes the economy will grow by 5.2% this year and 4.3% next year before settling to about 2% growth thereafter.

Deep-rooted racism, discrimination permeate US military

By KAT STAFFORD, JAMES LAPORTA, AARON MORRISON and HELEN WIEFFERING Associated Press
For Stephanie Davis, who grew up with little, the military was a path to the American dream, a realm where everyone would receive equal treatment. She joined the service in 1988 after finishing high school in Thomasville, Georgia, a small town said to be named for a soldier who fought in the War of 1812.

Over the course of decades, she steadily advanced, becoming a flight surgeon, commander of flight medicine at Fairchild Air Force Base and, eventually, a lieutenant colonel.

But many of her service colleagues, Davis says, saw her only as a Black woman. Or for the white resident colleagues who gave her the call sign of ABW – it was a joke, they insisted – an “angry black woman,” a classic racist trope.

White subordinates often refused to salute her or seemed uncomfortable taking orders from her, she says. Some patients refused to call her by her proper rank or even acknowledge her. She was attacked with racial slurs. And during her residency, she was the sole Black resident in a program with no Black faculty, staff or ancillary personnel.

“For Blacks and minorities, when we initially experience racism or discrimination in the military, we feel blindsided,” Davis said. “We’re taught to believe that it’s the one place where everybody has a level playing field and that we can make it to the top with work that’s based on merit.”

In interviews with The Associated Press, current and former enlistees and officers in nearly every branch of the armed services described a deep-rooted culture of racism and discrimination that stubbornly festers, despite repeated efforts to eradicate it.

The AP found that the military’s judicial system has no explicit category for hate crimes, making it difficult to quantify crimes motivated by prejudice.

The Defense Department also has no way to track the number of troops ousted for extremist views, despite its repeated pledges to root them out. More than 20 people linked to the Jan. 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol were found to have military ties.

The AP also found that the Uniform Code of Military Justice does not adequately address discriminatory incidents and that rank-and-file people of color commonly face courts-martial panels made up of all-white service members, which some experts argue can lead to harsher outcomes.

The military said it processed more than 750 complaints of discrimination by race or ethnicity from service members in the fiscal year 2020 alone. But discrimination doesn’t exist just within the military rank-and-file. That same fiscal year, civilians working in the financial, technical and support sectors of the Army, Air Force and Navy also filed 900 complaints of racial discrimination and over 350 complaints of discrimination by skin color, data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission shows.

In February, Lloyd J. Austin III – a former Army general who now is secretary of defense, the first Black man to serve in the post – ordered commanders and supervisors to take an operational pause for one day to discuss extremism in the ranks with their service members.

Austin gave commanders the latitude to address the matter as they saw fit, but emphasized that discussions should include the meaning of their oath, acceptable behaviors both in and out of uniform, and how service members can report actual or suspected extremist behavior through their chains of command.

A recent poll from The Military Times showed the stand-down was received with mixed reviews. Some service members said their units went “above and beyond,” but others reported their trainers made disparaging comments that undercut the discussions and that the sessions were short and non-interactive.

The Southern Poverty Law Center sent Austin a letter shortly after his order, applauding him for his decisive action but underscoring that systemic change on all military levels is urgent.

“Those who are indoctrinated into white supremacist ideology present a significant threat to national security and the safety of our communities,” SPLC President Margaret Huang wrote.

In a statement to the AP, the Defense Department said extremism is not “widespread” in the armed forces, but acknowledged that “efforts to stamp out extremist views from the rank-and-file have histori-

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cally been reactive versus proactive until recently." Pentagon spokesman Maj. César Santiago pointed to Austin's stand-down order in February that stressed the oath of office taken by military personnel, including a "commitment to protecting our nation from enemies foreign and domestic."

Santiago added that "we know that far too many service members indicate they experience discrimination." He noted that the Defense Department had launched multiple efforts in the past year, including updating its anti-harassment policy, assessing its training on implicit bias, and developing data-driven strategies to guide efforts to attract and retain diverse members and also identify unhealthy work environments.

When Davis was medically retired by the Air Force in 2019 after more than two decades of service, she felt ground down by overt racism and retaliated against for accusing a superior of sexually assaulting her.

She noted how insidious racism can be to members of the ranks – service members entrust their lives to their fellow troops, and a lack of cohesion in a unit can be deadly.

"It creates a harmful and dangerous work environment," Davis said. "And a lot of us suffer in silence because we feel like there's nothing that can be done."

In the midst of last year's summer of unrest sparked by police killings of Black Americans across the nation, Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, who is also the Department of Defense's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told congressional leaders the military cannot afford racism or discrimination.

"We who wear the cloth of our nation understand that cohesion is a force multiplier," Milley said. "Dissiveness leads to defeat. As one of our famous presidents said, 'A house divided does not stand.'"

Austin pledged to rid the ranks of "racists and extremists" during his confirmation hearing before Congress, which came on the heels of the Capitol insurrection.

"The job of the Department of Defense is to keep America safe from our enemies," he said. "But we can't do that if some of those enemies lie within our own ranks."

It's standard custom for enlisted personnel to show their respect to higher-ranking colleagues by offering salutes that are held until the gesture is returned.

When Marine Maj. Tyrone Collier was a newly minted second lieutenant and judge advocate, he had a profound experience with that practice. Collier, a Black man, was at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall in Virginia when he was saluted by a Black enlisted Marine. But even after Collier acknowledged the gesture, the salute continued. Puzzled, Collier asked why the Marine held it for so long.

"He said, 'Sir, I just have to come clean with something. ... We never see Black officers. We never see people like you and it makes me extraordinarily proud,'" Collier recalled.

"You can imagine what it's like for a Black enlisted Marine who, for example, might want to consider becoming a warrant officer or a commissioned officer or who served under commander after commander and received so few opportunities to see people that look like them in higher ranks," Collier said. "Representation really does matter."

Though that prolonged salute took place in 2010, the racial picture has not improved much since.

At the end of 2020, the Defense Department's Diversity and Inclusion Board released a report aimed at identifying ways to improve racial and ethnic diversity in the U.S. military.

Among the report's findings: The enlisted ranks of the active and reserve military were "slightly more racially and ethnically diverse than its U.S. civilian counterparts." But not the officer corps. Furthermore, it found that the civilian population eligible to become commissioned officers was "less racially and ethnically diverse than the civilian population eligible for enlisted service."

The breakdown of all active commissioned officers: 73% white; 8% each Black and Hispanic; 6% Asian; 4% multiracial; and less than 1% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native. And the diversity gap widened the higher individuals moved up in the ranks.

The report emphasized the increasing importance of the representation of minorities reflecting the nation's morphing demographics, saying the Defense Department "must ensure that all service members have access to opportunities to succeed and advance into leadership positions."

Several Black officers interviewed by the AP said the culture must give way if they are ever to flourish.

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While serving in Afghanistan, one Marine officer recalled being questioned by a white colleague about why he was conversing with fellow Black officers. "My response to him was 'I don't ask you why you're always hanging out with white officers,'" said the Marine, who asked not to be named because he remains on active duty. "Why can't they just be officers? Why the qualifier?"

Thomas Hobbs, an infantry colonel who retired after 27 years of service in the Marine Corps in 2018, was among the officers interviewed who spoke of the pressures of trying to blend into an overwhelmingly "white male culture," while also feeling the need to outperform white officers to negate racial stereotypes.

Hobbs said the Marines have done better than other branches of the service in recruiting Black candidates into the officer corps, but noted that "many of them don't stay in the military past their 10th year."

"At the moment, we have more captains than we ever had before," he said, "but our field grade levels are actually going down. Why don't they stay in? Because they're exhausted from having to act a certain way all the time and they can never be themselves."

The Marine who remains on active duty also called it "exhausting," adding "not only do you have to deal with your own things but whenever a Black enlisted Marine gets in trouble, they will come to you and say, 'Oh man, what's wrong with these guys?' Coming to you like you're the expert on everything Black."

Collier said he felt pressure to act differently from the first moments he was recruited, recalling an encounter at a formal dinner with a Marine major trying to bring him into the service.

"I was one of two Black men who were applying ... and he and I were chatting, and the selection officer kind of mentioned to us, 'Hey, you guys might not want to isolate yourselves in this way because it might not look good,'" Collier said. "I mean, this is one of my first experiences involving the Marine Corps and I have a Marine major telling me I can't talk to another Black person without worrying about how people will look at us if we're purposely isolating ourselves from the group."

Other service members of color detailed incidents in which they said they were discouraged by superiors from openly embracing their cultures. Some said they were told to avoid speaking languages other than English to not offend their mostly white colleagues.

Former Air Force Master Sgt. Ricardo Lemos, who was medically discharged in 2019, said a superior once discouraged him from speaking to his mother in Spanish on the phone in the office "because people can't understand you."

And some Black women detailed the challenges they faced navigating a culture that often labels them as "aggressive or difficult" and their natural hair as unkempt or unprofessional.

DeMarcus Gilliard, a 34-year-old former Marine captain, told the AP that he felt an unspoken pressure to prove himself better than his peers when he entered the Basic School, where new officers learn the ropes, feeling like a symbol of Black Americans.

But he said he never experienced overt racism there and credits the Marine Corps for making strides toward diversifying its top ranks.

"It's a great idea, 'I don't see color,' but it actually is pretty dismissive. And I think not talking about issues of race actually exacerbates the problem and we need to be able to talk about these things," said Gilliard. "I think the Marine Corps would be a great place to do it."

The Basic School told the AP that sessions on diversity and inclusion are a core part of the training it offers, including "discussions about the negative impact bias has on leadership, decision-making and cohesiveness."

Last year, Gen. David Berger, who became the top general of the Marine Corps in 2019, used the occasion of the Marine Corps Association's annual Modern Day Marine expo to drive home the message that diversifying the service will save lives.

"I am absolutely convinced: Too much similarity, too much that we look all the same, think the same, got the same background – we're going to get killed because we're going to end up with solutions that we're all familiar with, but they're easy to counter," Berger said.

Racism in the ranks is not merely a modern stain. More than a half-century ago in 1971, Frank W.

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Render, a Black man who was assistant secretary of defense, resigned over what he viewed as unequal treatment of people of color.

That same year, the Defense Department created what is now known as the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute – the Pentagon's premier agency for education and training programs covering diversity and inclusion within the U.S. military.

One of its tools is an anonymous, voluntary "organizational climate" survey that offers a snapshot of a unit's institutional effectiveness and provides commanders with insight into diversity and inclusion issues within their ranks and how they are addressed.

"Racist, sexual and bigoted jokes are a daily occurrence in my 'work place,'" a Marine at California's Camp Pendleton wrote in one December 2017 survey. "Very little has really ever been done to prevent it." Another Marine said slurs were commonly uttered by officers and enlisted colleagues with no repercussions.

But not everyone is comfortable filling out the surveys or with being honest. Women assigned to Navy SEAL units, for example, fear they can be identified since the surveys break down demographics by gender, rank and race and not many women are assigned to special operation units.

Congress and the Defense Department have mandated that the surveys be conducted annually or whenever a unit changes commanders, but response rates vary widely across units, the surveys do not fall under the Federal Records Act and they are destroyed after three years.

Using multiple Freedom of Information Act requests, the AP managed to collect surveys for the past four years, concentrating on the eleven aircraft carriers in the U.S. Navy fleet due to their large population size, which can mimic a small floating city with more than 5,000 personnel.

In surveys collected from 2017, 265 sailors from the USS Abraham Lincoln, the USS George Washington, the USS John C. Stennis, the USS Nimitz and the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower said they personally experienced racial discrimination. But in the fall of that year, the discrimination question softened, moving from pointed inquiries to broadly asking whether discrimination "does not occur."

Since that change, in 2019, the latest complete year obtained by AP, more than 1,600 sailors – or 1 in 5 – disagreed, saying racial discrimination did take place on their ships, with nearly a third reporting racial jokes, comments or slurs. Nearly 1 in 4 sailors said they could not use their chain of command to report incidents without fear of retaliation or reprisal, and 4 out of every 10 said discipline is unfairly administered.

Out of the 11 aircraft carriers, the George Washington, John C. Stennis and Abraham Lincoln performed worst when sailors were asked about racial discrimination and whether they could safely report harassment. In 2019 on the George Washington, for instance, 30% of sailors said unequal treatment occurred based on race, color or national origin.

The AP's request to interview a representative of the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute was referred to the Pentagon, which did not provide anyone with knowledge of the workings of the command climate surveys.

In a statement, the Navy called diversity a "key component to maintaining our highest state of readiness," adding that "certainly our military is better served when it reflects the nation it serves and all of its members are treated with dignity and respect."

As a young airman, Nick Shands didn't initially think much of it when he received a request to report to the medical treatment facility on Mountain Home Air Force Base. But when he arrived, he thought it was strange that he saw only a handful of superiors and a large dumpster. His task: Climb in and sift through the garbage for documents containing personally identifiable information.

Shands, one of the few Black airmen on the Idaho base, was stunned by the order but clambered over the side for what turned out to be a nearly all-day task, as his superiors watched him search fruitlessly.

He said it was just one incident among several on the nearly all-white base where he felt singled out, including being told repeatedly that he wasn't "built" for the military.

"If it was for the purpose of to embarrass and to mentally break you, I guess that's what they tried to do," he said.

Shands said targeted racism and discrimination continued after he left Idaho and served on different

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bases, leading him to depart the military in 2018. He believes a tough road lies ahead for the Defense Department and Congress, which provides oversight, to address structural racism in the military and prevent other service members from suffering as he did.

But a round of sweeping changes to the National Defense Authorization Act – which primarily funds and lays out policies governing the Defense Department and military services – could present a unique opportunity to begin to turn the tide toward systemic change.

A bill that was passed earlier this year ordered the Secretary of Defense to devise a plan to remove all names, symbols, displays and monuments that honor the Confederacy, including the renaming of military bases such as Fort Benning and Fort Hood that honor Confederate leaders.

“Several years ago, they uncovered a cell of white supremacists down at Fort Bragg,” U.S. House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn recalled in an interview with the AP. “Were they there because of the attitudes they brought with them or were they celebrating the fact that Fort Bragg is named after a segregationist?”

“That’s one reason those of us here in Congress feel that we need to get rid of all of the institutionalization and the celebration of these racist attitudes,” Clyburn said.

Buried deep within the more than 1,400-page bill are mechanisms aimed at transforming the way the military addresses racism and extremism from within. It lays out tracking and reporting requirements for supremacist, extremist and criminal gang activity, and creates an inspector general to oversee diversity and inclusion efforts.

And it says the military must add questions to its climate surveys that explicitly ask about racism, antisemitism and supremacism.

In addition, Shands believes the military – like the nation it is sworn to protect – also needs to do some deep soul-searching.

Though he has moved on with his life, he carries humiliation and pain that he cannot erase.

Still, he will always cherish aspects of his military career. As a public health instructor with the USAF School of Aerospace Medicine, he had a direct impact on students eager to make a change in the world. He also met his wife in the military.

After the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked protests that swept the globe, Shands finally confronted one of his former superiors – a white woman involved with the dumpster task more than a decade ago.

After the woman posted in a private military Facebook group that “Black Lives Matter,” Shands reached out to remind her of the incident, telling her he hoped it didn’t take the “murders of Black humans” to awaken her to the discrimination and racism that exists in both America and the Air Force – including the discrimination she exerted upon him.

The woman acknowledged she did not treat Shands well and had been “incredibly ignorant to acknowledging and/or recognizing many things, including systemic racism and the presence of it in the Air Force,” according to the screenshots reviewed by the AP.

For Shands, the conversation was cathartic, as others chimed in to offer support. But it also brought home the dualities facing Black Americans and other people of color, inside and out of the military, who are trying to navigate a nation riddled by racism.

“You’re not going to escape racism anywhere in this country,” he said. “The best interpretation I’ve ever heard of being in the military, especially a minority or a person of color in the military, is that the military is a microcosm of regular society.”

Genetically modified salmon head to US dinner plates

By CASEY SMITH Associated Press/Report for America

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The inaugural harvest of genetically modified salmon began this week after the pandemic delayed the sale of the first such altered animal to be cleared for human consumption in the United States, company officials said.

Several tons of salmon, engineered by biotech company AquaBounty Technologies Inc., will now head

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to restaurants and away-from-home dining services — where labeling as genetically engineered is not required — in the Midwest and along the East Coast, company CEO Sylvia Wulf said.

Thus far, the only customer to announce it is selling the salmon is Samuels and Son Seafood, a Philadelphia-based seafood distributor.

AquaBounty has raised its faster-growing salmon at an indoor aquaculture farm in Albany, Indiana. The fish are genetically modified to grow twice as fast as wild salmon, reaching market size — 8 to 12 pounds (3.6 to 5.4 kilograms) — in 18 months rather than 36.

The Massachusetts-based company originally planned to harvest the fish in late 2020. Wulf attributed delays to reduced demand and market price for Atlantic salmon spurred by the pandemic.

“The impact of COVID caused us to rethink our initial timeline ... no one was looking for more salmon then,” she said. “We’re very excited about it now. We’ve timed the harvest with the recovery of the economy, and we know that demand is going to continue to increase.”

Although finally making its way to dinner plates, the genetically modified fish has been met by pushback from environmental advocates for years.

The international food service company Aramark in January announced its commitment to not sell such salmon, citing environmental concerns and potential impacts on Indigenous communities that harvest wild salmon.

The announcement followed similar ones by other major food service companies — Compass Group and Sodexo — and many large U.S. grocery retailers, seafood companies and restaurants. Costco, Kroger, Walmart and Whole Foods maintain that they don’t sell genetically modified or cloned salmon and would need to label them as such.

The boycott against AquaBounty salmon has largely come from activists with the Block Corporate Salmon campaign, which aims to protect wild salmon and preserve Indigenous rights to practice sustainable fishing.

“Genetically engineered salmon is a huge threat to any vision of a healthy food system. People need ways to connect with the food they’re eating, so they know where it’s coming from,” said Jon Russell, a member of the campaign and a food justice organizer with Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance. “These fish are so new — and there’s such a loud group of people who oppose it. That’s a huge red flag to consumers.”

Wulf said she’s confident there’s an appetite for the fish.

“Most of the salmon in this country is imported, and during the pandemic, we couldn’t get products into the market,” Wulf said. “So, having a domestic source of supply that isn’t seasonal like wild salmon and that is produced in a highly-controlled, bio-secure environment is increasingly important to consumers.”

AquaBounty markets the salmon as disease- and antibiotic-free, saying its product comes with a reduced carbon footprint and none of the risk of polluting marine ecosystems like traditional sea-cage farming carries.

Despite their rapid growth, the genetically modified salmon require less food than most farmed Atlantic salmon, the company says. Biofiltration units keep water in the Indiana facility’s many 70,000-gallon (264,979-liter) tanks clean, making fish less likely to get sick or require antibiotics.

The FDA approved the AquAdvantage Salmon as “safe and effective” in 2015. It was the only genetically modified animal approved for human consumption until federal regulators approved a genetically modified pig for food and medical products in December.

In 2018, the federal agency greenlit AquaBounty’s sprawling Indiana facility, which is currently raising roughly 450 tons (408 metric tons) of salmon from eggs imported from Canada but is capable of raising more than twice that amount.

But in a shifting domestic market that increasingly values origin, health and sustainability, and wild over farmed seafood, others have a different view of the salmon, which some critics have nicknamed “Frankenfish.”

Part of the domestic pushback revolves around how the engineered fish is to be labeled under FDA guidelines. Salmon fishermen, fish farmers, wholesalers and other stakeholders want clear labeling practices to ensure that customers know they’re purchasing an engineered product.

USDA labeling law directs companies to disclose genetically-modified ingredients in food through use

of a QR code, an on-package display of text or a designated symbol. Mandatory compliance with that regulation takes full effect in January, but the rules don't apply to restaurants or food services.

Wulf said the company is committed to using "genetically engineered" labeling when its fish are sold in grocery stores in coming months.

In November, U.S. District Judge Vince Chhabria in San Francisco affirmed that the FDA had the authority to oversee genetically engineered animals and fish. But he ruled that the agency hadn't adequately assessed the environmental consequences of AquaBounty salmon escaping into the wild.

The company argued that escape is unlikely, saying the fish are monitored 24 hours a day and contained in tanks with screens, grates, netting, pumps and chemical disinfection to prevent escape. The company's salmon are also female and sterile, preventing them from mating.

"Our fish are actually designed to thrive in the land-based environment. That's part of what makes them unique," Wulf said. "And we're proud of the fact that genetically engineered allows us to bring more of a healthy nutritious product to market in a safe, secure and sustainable way."

New clashes as wildcat miners attack Indigenous in Brazil

By DIANE JEANTET Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Hundreds of wildcat miners attacked police who were trying to halt illegal mining in the Brazilian Amazon region and then raided an Indigenous village, setting houses on fire, federal prosecutors in the northern state of Para reported.

The clashes came days after a Supreme Court justice ordered the government to protect Indigenous populations threatened in recent weeks by illegal miners who appear to have been emboldened by support for their industry from President Jair Bolsonaro.

The state prosecutor's office said miners tried to block a federal police operation by closing off entries to the municipality of Jacareacanga on Wednesday and trying to raid a police base where heavy equipment for the operation was kept.

Hours later, miners raided a village of the Munduruku people and set several houses on fire, including one that belonged to a prominent mining critic and indigenous activist, Maria Leusa Munduruku.

The attack followed clashes farther north in Roraima state, where miners in motorboats have repeatedly attacked and threatened a riverside Yanomami settlement known as Palimiu. There, miners also clashed with federal officials investigating the incidents.

Júnior Hekurari Yanomami, president of a Yanomami association, told The Associated Press that two of the group's children drowned while fleeing during a particularly violent confrontation May 10 that also resulted in three miners being killed.

Federal prosecutors in Roraima have not been able to confirm any of the deaths, but said a police investigation was underway.

Clashes around the Palimiu community have intensified since April 24, when Yanomami men took fuel and some equipment from wildcat miners they accused of encroaching on their land, Hekurari and state prosecutors said.

Hekurari said miners have been driving their motorboats past the village almost daily, shouting threats and sometimes firing their guns.

"People aren't sleeping properly. They are very tired," Hekurari said in a Zoom call from Palimiu. He said Yanomami men keep watch each night.

He alleged that miners have killed several people and raped women and girls — allegations not confirmed by federal prosecutors in the state, who said they were investigating.

Bolsonaro on Thursday was less than 100 kilometers (60 miles) from the vast Yanomami reserve to inaugurate a small wooden bridge along a federal highway that runs near a rich deposit of the mineral niobium that he has often touted as a potential economic boon for Brazil.

The conservative president has been outspoken about his desire to legalize mining in Indigenous territories — something not allowed under Brazil's constitution — and to promote development in the Amazon.

"It isn't fair to want to criminalize the prospector in Brazil," Bolsonaro told supporters outside the presi-

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dential palace May 14, according to the newspaper Estado de S. Paulo. "People wearing suits and ties give their guesses about everything that's happening in rural areas."

Such comments have encouraged miners, say federal prosecutors, environmental and Indigenous rights activists.

"There is a feeling of impunity in the country, that those who invade won't be penalized," said Juliana Batista, a lawyer who works at the Socio-Environmental Institute, an advocacy group.

The institute says some 20,000 illegal miners are suspected of working within the Yanomami Indigenous Territory, which is Brazil's largest Indigenous reserve and roughly the size of Portugal. Some 27,000 Indigenous people live on that land.

Supreme Court Justice Luís Roberto Barroso this week ordered the federal government to "immediately adopt all necessary measures to protect the life, health and safety of indigenous populations" in Yanomami and Munduruku territory. He also accused the government for "recalcitrance and lack of transparency" in ensuring the health and safety of Indigenous groups.

Bolsonaro has repeatedly argued that Indigenous groups control too much territory, given their sparse population. He also says they should be integrated into broader society — a stance with which many communities disagree.

A March report published by two Indigenous associations, which used satellite imagery and flyovers, complained that the "unusual proximity" of some mining sites to Yanomami communities tends to fuel conflict.

Alisson Marugal, a prosecutor in Roraima state who has investigated clashes on Yanomami land, said from his office in the state capital of Boa Vista that illegal mining has brought prostitution, disease, drug and alcohol abuse and the loss of traditional ways of life.

"If nothing is done, conflicts with miners could lead to massacres," he said.

BLM's Patrisse Cullors to step down from movement foundation

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

A co-founder of Black Lives Matter announced Thursday that she is stepping down as executive director of the movement's foundation. She decried what she called a smear campaign from a far-right group, but said neither that nor recent criticism from other Black organizers influenced her departure.

Patrisse Cullors, who has been at the helm of the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation for nearly six years, said she is leaving to focus on other projects, including the upcoming release of her second book and a multi-year TV development deal with Warner Bros. Her last day with the foundation is Friday.

"I've created the infrastructure and the support, and the necessary bones and foundation, so that I can leave," Cullors told The Associated Press. "It feels like the time is right."

Cullors' departure follows a massive surge in support and political influence in the U.S. and around the world for the BLM movement, which was established nearly eight years ago in response to injustice against Black Americans. The resignation also comes on the heels of controversy over the foundation's finances and over Cullors' personal wealth.

The 37-year-old activist said her resignation has been in the works for more than a year and has nothing to do with the personal attacks she has faced from far-right groups or any dissension within the movement.

"Those were right-wing attacks that tried to discredit my character, and I don't operate off of what the right thinks about me," Cullors said.

As she departs, the foundation is bringing aboard two new interim senior executives to help steer it in the immediate future: Monifa Bandele, a longtime BLM organizer and founder of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in New York City, and Makani Themba, an early backer of the BLM movement and chief strategist at Higher Ground Change Strategies in Jackson, Mississippi.

"I think both of them come with not only a wealth of movement experience, but also a wealth of executive experience," Cullors said.

The BLM foundation revealed to the AP in February that it took in just over \$90 million last year, fol-

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Following the May 2020 murder of George Floyd, a Black man whose last breaths under the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer inspired protests globally. The foundation said it ended 2020 with a balance of more than \$60 million, after spending nearly a quarter of its assets on operating expenses, grants to Black-led organizations and other charitable giving.

Critics of the foundation contend more of that money should have gone to the families of Black victims of police brutality who have been unable to access the resources needed to deal with their trauma and loss.

"That is the most tragic aspect," said the Rev. T. Sheri Dickerson, president of an Oklahoma City BLM chapter and a representative of the #BLM10, a national group of organizers that has publicly criticized the foundation over funding and transparency.

"I know some of (the families) are feeling exploited, their pain exploited, and that's not something that I ever want to be affiliated with," Dickerson said.

Cullors and the foundation have said they do support families without making public announcements or disclosing dollar amounts.

In 2020, the BLM foundation spun off its network of chapters as a sister collective called BLM Grassroots, so that it could build out its capacity as a philanthropic organization. Although many groups use "Black Lives Matter" or "BLM" in their names, less than a dozen are considered affiliates of the chapter network.

Last month, Cullors was targeted by several conservative-leaning publications that falsely alleged she took a large annual salary from the foundation, affording her recent purchase of a southern California home.

In April, the foundation stated Cullors was a volunteer executive director who, prior to 2019, had "received a total of \$120,000 since the organization's inception in 2013, for duties such as serving as spokesperson and engaging in political education work."

"As a registered 501c3 non-profit organization, (the foundation) cannot and did not commit any organizational resources toward the purchase of personal property by any employee or volunteer," the foundation said in a statement. "Any insinuation or assertion to the contrary is categorically false."

In 2018, Cullors released, "When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir," which became a New York Times bestseller. She has also consulted on a number of racial justice projects outside of BLM, taking compensation for that work in her personal capacity.

She and the BLM movement have come a long way since its inception as a social media hashtag, following the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch volunteer who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida.

Cullors, along with BLM co-founders Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, pledged then to build a decentralized movement governed by consensus of a members' collective. In 2015, a network of chapters was formed, while donations and support poured in. Garza and Tometi soon stepped away from day-to-day involvement in the network to focus on their own projects.

Cullors, who has arguably been the most publicly visible of the co-founders, became the foundation's full-time executive director last year purely out of necessity, she said.

"We needed her," said Melina Abdullah, who leads BLM Grassroots and co-founded, with Cullors, BLM's first-ever official chapter in Los Angeles.

"George Floyd was killed and the whole world rose up," Abdullah told the AP. "I would like her to be there forever, but I also know that that's not feasible. The real test of any organization is can it survive the departure of its founders. And I have no question that Black Lives Matter will survive and grow and evolve, even with the departure of our final co-founder in a formal role."

On Oct. 5, St. Martin's Press will release Cullors' latest book, titled "An Abolitionists Handbook," which she says is her guide for activists on how to care for each other and resolve internal conflict while fighting to end systemic racism. Cullors is also developing and producing original cable and streaming TV content that centers on Black stories, under a multi-year deal with Warner Bros.

The first of her TV projects will debut in July, she said.

"I think I will probably be less visible, because I won't be at the helm of one of the largest, most controversial organizations right now in the history of our movement," Cullors said.

"I'm aware that I'm a leader, and I don't shy away from that. But no movement is one leader."

Shoppers go back to stores, but retailers face challenges

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Americans are going back to one of their favorite pastimes: store shopping.

With more people getting vaccinated and dropping their face masks, retailers from Walmart to Macy's are seeing an eager return to their stores after more than a year of their customers migrating online during the pandemic.

Marcia Williams, who lives in a Philadelphia suburb and who stuck to online shopping only during the height of COVID-19, went back to her local mall right after she was fully vaccinated last month. That was her first time in more than a year.

"I am definitely getting out," said Williams, a hair and makeup artist who spent nearly \$1,000 on clothing for herself and her three children during several buying trips. "I do feel more comfortable. I like the experience of trying on clothes. I love grocery shopping. It's my outlet."

The return to store shopping, highlighted in many retailers' earnings reports in recent days, offers a big relief in part because fewer shoppers ask for their money back after making a purchase at the store — 8% compared with 25% for online, according to Forrester Research. And store customers tend to do more impulse buying. For clothing, for instance, 25% of purchases are done on a whim versus 16% online, says market research firm NPD Group Inc.

"Retailers want you in the store," said Marshal Cohen, NPD's chief industry advisor. "They need you to be in the store so you generate more traffic. Crowds bring more crowds. (Shoppers) buy more product."

Still, retailers — particularly mall-based stores and other specialty stores that were struggling even before the pandemic — face plenty of challenges to keep customers coming back. They face stepped up competition online and from discounters that thrived in the last year. Experts also say that post-pandemic shoppers will be even more demanding: After being forced to stay close to home, they're looking for better and convenient services and experiences.

Many retailers like Macy's are still recovering from the pandemic, which forced them to temporarily close early last year, driving more traffic to big box stores that were allowed to stay open. And overall store traffic, while rebounding, is still not back to where it was two years ago.

Customer counts at overall stores surged 43.2% for the week starting May 10 compared to the year-ago period, but that number was still down 5.6% for that same period in 2019, says mobile-device location data from foot-traffic analytics firm Placer.ai. In clothing, customer counts soared more than two-fold for the same timeframe, but it was down 11.2% on a two-year basis. For big-box stores like Target, customer counts were up 5.3% for the same period but down 4.9% on a two-year basis.

Analysts are carefully watching the battered department store sector's market share, which shrunk from 3% in 2019 to 2% last year and has remained at that figure for the first four months of the year, according to NPD. In comparison, discounters' market share held steady at 21% last year from 2019 but ticked up to 22% for the early part of this year. Overall, market share for online retail rose to 26% last year from 23% in 2019.

The pandemic pulled forward the pace of online spending by about two years. Online shopping is expected to account for 21% of overall sales, or \$794 billion, in 2020 compared to the prior year and should increase to 27%, or \$1.1 trillion in 2023, Forrester says. However, online sales growth is slowing down, from 29.5% last year to a projected 15.6% this year and 10% next year.

Williams, who has a makeup line called Embellish Beauty and pivoted her consulting business to online during the height of the pandemic, says she will keep about 15% of her overall buying to online purchases like soap and other essentials.

Still, physical shopping is still not the same as it was pre-COVID-19. For example, retailers' beauty counters are not yet allowing shoppers to try on makeup. Target said it will resume product sampling in stores this year where customers can take home individually wrapped items.

Williams says she's used to being served champagne when she shopped at Tiffany's. But when she

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was at the upscale jeweler earlier this month, there was no champagne to be had because of COVID-19 restrictions.

"Those are the experiences I missed," she said.

Still, store executives are feeling optimistic — for now.

Walmart, based in Bentonville, Arkansas, said last week that transactions in its stores were up for the first time in a year. At Target, sales at stores opened at least a year jumped 18% in the three-month period that ended May 1. That follows a 6.9% increase in the previous quarter.

That trend continued this week.

Best Buy, which had earlier said that comparable store sales might fall this year, revised their expectations Thursday, saying that those sales, a critical gauge of a retailer's health, will likely rise between 3% and 6% in 2021.

Stores are seeing the return of shoppers "across all age demographics," said CEO Corie Barry on Thursday in a conference call with industry analysts.

Many retail executives say that they are adding fresh new merchandise to welcome back shoppers. Target is planning to open Ulta Beauty shops in more than 100 Target stores by mid-2021. Kohl's is getting ready to open Sephora beauty shops in 200 locations this fall. And Macy's is leaning into such areas as toys, health and wellness, pet care, food and wine.

"Clearly, our customer is ready to get on with life," Macy's CEO Jeff Gennette told analysts last week. "We don't see this as a short-term pop."

Biden to GOP: 'Don't get in the way' of infrastructure plan

By LISA MASCARO and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday warned naysayers in Congress not to "get in the way" of his big infrastructure plans as the White House panned a counteroffer from Republican senators to tap unused COVID-19 relief for a more modest investment in roads, highways and other traditional public works projects.

After touring a manufacturing technology center at a community college in Cleveland, Biden held up a card with the names of Republicans lawmakers who had rejected his coronavirus aid bill in Washington but later promoted its assistance when they were back home in front of voters. He warned them not to play similar games as he pushes this next legislative priority in Congress.

"I'm not going to embarrass anyone, but I have here a list," he said. "If you're going to take credit for what we've done," he continued, "don't get in the way of what we need to do."

The political arguments over Biden's ambitious proposals are quickly distilling into a debate over the size and scope of what all sides agree are sorely needed upgrades to the nation's aging and outmoded infrastructure.

As the president reaches for a soaring legislative achievement with his \$1.7 trillion American Jobs Plan and a separate \$1.8 trillion American Families Plan, he is assessing whether he can cut a bipartisan deal with Republicans or will have to push through his proposals with only Democratic votes.

Republican senators outlined a \$928 billion infrastructure proposal Thursday as a counteroffer to Biden, drawing a fresh red line against his plans raise the corporate tax, from 21% to 28%, to pay for new spending. Instead, the Republicans want to shift unspent COVID-19 relief dollars to help cover the costs, a nonstarter for many Democrats.

The Republican senators said their offer, raised from an initial \$568 billion, delivers on "core infrastructure investments" that Biden has focused on as areas of potential agreement. With about \$250 billion in new spending, the GOP plan remains far from the president's approach. Biden reduced his \$2.3 trillion opening bid to \$1.7 trillion in earlier negotiations.

"It's a serious effort to try to reach a bipartisan agreement," said Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, the lead Republican negotiator.

As Biden left for Ohio, he said he called Capito to thank her for the proposal, but told her, "We have to

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finish this really soon.”

Biden toured Cuyahoga Community College, the same school where he was to hold a campaign rally in March 2020 only to have it be the first one canceled due to the pandemic. He cast his return as a symbol of how far the nation has come back, and he tried to make the case that passing his jobs and families plans would further the economy’s recovery and prepare it for the decades ahead.

The president said he was “not looking to punish anyone” with his tax plans. But said it was time for America’s wealthy and corporations to help invest in the nation’s future.

“Do you want to give the wealthiest people in America another tax cut? I don’t begrudge them the money they make. Just start paying your fair share just a little bit,” Biden said.

Talks are at a crossroads before a Memorial Day deadline to make progress toward a bipartisan deal. With slim majorities in the House and Senate, the Democratic president faces other hurdles if he decides to abandon talks with Republicans and tries to unite fractious Democrats.

The Republican offer would increase spending by \$91 billion on roads and bridges, \$48 billion on water resources and \$25 billion on airports, according to a one-page summary released by the GOP negotiators. It would provide for one-time increases in broadband investments, at \$65 billion, and \$22 billion on rail.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said on CNBC that it was time for the administration to “sober up and realize they don’t have a massive mandate in Congress to do all of the things they’re trying to do.”

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden and Capito are expected to meet next week, while Congress is on a break.

The White House is also “continuing to explore other proposals that we hope will emerge” she said. A bipartisan group of lawmakers that includes Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, is also preparing an alternative plan.

Psaki made clear the administration’s concern over tapping pandemic funds. “We are worried that major cuts in COVID relief funds could imperil pending aid to small businesses, restaurants and rural hospitals using this money to get back on their feet after the crush of the pandemic,” Psaki said in a statement.

Core differences remain between the White House and GOP negotiators over the definition of infrastructure: Republicans stick to traditional investments in roads, bridges, ports and water drinking systems, while Biden takes a more expansive view.

Under Biden’s initial proposal, there is more than \$300 billion for substantial upgrades to public schools, Veterans Administration hospitals and affordable housing, along with \$25 billion for new and renovated child care centers.

Biden’s proposal would spend heavily on efforts to confront climate change, with \$174 billion to spur the electric vehicle market, in part by developing charging stations, and \$50 billion so communities can better deal with floods, hurricanes, wildfires and other natural disasters.

One area of agreement is on boosting broadband, but the sides are apart on details. Republicans raised their initial offer to \$65 billion in an earlier exchange; Biden is seeking \$100 billion.

Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., said the Republicans’ overall proposal reflects what “what people at home in Wyoming think of is infrastructure, roads with potholes.”

The White House, still expressing public hopes for bipartisanship, welcomed the offer. At \$928 billion over eight years, it features \$257 billion in new money, more than the \$225 billion the White House had said was in the initial Republican proposal. But still far less than the White House had hoped.

Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., said there is \$700 billion in unspent COVID-19 aid from the American Rescue Plan, which was the administration’s \$1.9 trillion response to the coronavirus crisis earlier this year.

Toomey said some of that money could fill the gap between the amount of revenue normally collected from transportation taxes and fees, and the new spending the GOP senators are proposing.

But he said the Republican negotiators have made it “very, very clear on every single time we’ve had a discussion is that we’re not raising taxes.”

'Nothing looks good' preparing for summer wildfire season

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — Wearing soot-smudged, fire-resistant clothing and helmets, several wildland firefighters armed with hoes moved through a stand of ponderosa pines as flames tore through the underbrush. The firefighters weren't there to extinguish the fire. They had started it.

The prescribed burn, ignited this month near the scenic mountain town of Bend, is part of a massive effort in wildlands across the U.S. West to prepare for a fire season that's expected to be even worse than last year's record-shattering one.

The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have thinned by hand, machines and prescribed burns about 1.8 million acres (728,000 hectares) of forest and brushland since last season, officials from the agencies told The Associated Press. They typically treat some 3 million (1.2 million hectares) acres every year.

All that activity, though, has barely scratched the surface. The federal government owns roughly 640 million acres (260 million hectares) in the U.S. All but 4% of it lies in the West, including Alaska, with some of it unsuitable for prescribed burning.

"All these steps are in the right direction, but the challenge is big and complex," said John Bailey, professor of silviculture and fire management at Oregon State University. "And more needs to be done to even turn the corner."

The efforts face a convergence of bleak forces.

Severe drought has turned forests and grasslands into dry fuels, ready to ignite from a careless camper or a lightning strike. More people are building in areas bordering wildlands, expanding the so-called wildland-urban interface, an area where wildfires impact people the most. Invasive, highly flammable vegetation is spreading uncontrolled across the West.

"I'm seeing probably the worst combination of conditions in my lifetime," said Derrick DeGroot, a county commissioner in southern Oregon's Klamath County. "We have an enormous fuel load in the forests, and we are looking at a drought unlike we've seen probably in the last 115 years."

Asked how worried he is about the 2021 fire season, DeGroot said: "On a scale of 1 to 10, I'm a 12. Nothing looks good."

In other prevention measures in the West, utility companies are removing vegetation around power lines and are ready to impose blackouts when those lines threaten to spark a fire.

Armies of firefighters are being beefed up. And communities are offering incentives for residents to make their own properties fire-resistant.

Still, much work remains to change the region's trajectory with fire, particularly in two key areas, said Scott Stephens, professor of wildland fire science at the University of California, Berkeley.

"One is getting people better prepared for the inevitability of fire in areas like the wildland-urban interface. That includes new construction," he said. "And the second is getting our ecosystems better prepared for climate change and fire impacts."

On the local level, individuals and communities need to create defensible spaces and evacuation plans, he said. On the government level, more resources need to go toward managing forests.

"I think we've got one to two decades," Stephens said. "If we don't do this in earnest, we're frankly just going to be watching the forest change right in front of our eyes from fire, climate change, drought, insects, things of that nature."

Part of the issue is that increasing wildfire resilience often requires trade-offs, said Erica Fleishman, professor at Oregon State University's College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences.

Cities or states could require defensible spaces around homes. Building codes could call for fire-resistant materials. That would drive up construction costs but also mean homes would be less likely to burn and need rebuilding, she said.

"The insurance industry and the building industry and communities and lawmakers are all going to need to have the will to create these changes," she said.

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Fleishman also believes more prescribed fires could be conducted in the wildland-urban interface, but said "society is risk averse."

"Right now, there's not, in many cases, a whole lot of will to do it," she said.

Prescribed burns target vegetation that carries flames into forest canopies, where they can explode into massive wildfires.

Planning and preparing for them can take two to five years. And carrying them out is a never-ending task, said Jessica Gardetto, spokeswoman for the National Interagency Fire Center, in Boise, Idaho.

While targeting one forest, other forests continue to grow, creating "this vast buildup across the landscape," she said.

Besides overgrown forests, the West faces a newer threat: cheatgrass, which grows prolifically after a wildfire and becomes incredibly flammable.

Gardetto said trying to get rid of the invasive grass is like the endless toil of Sisyphus, the Greek mythological figure who was forced to roll a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll down as it neared the top, over and over again.

After a fire is put out, the first thing to come back is cheatgrass.

"It starts this horrible cycle that is really difficult to combat," she said.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom and U.S. Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen signed an agreement last August committing the state and the federal agency to scale up treatment of forest and wildlands to 1 million acres (405,000 hectares) annually by 2025.

They have a long way to reach that goal. Cal Fire, a state agency responsible for protecting over 31 million acres (12.5 million hectares) of California's privately owned wildlands, treated some 20,000 acres (8,100 hectares) with prescribed fire and thinning from last summer through March.

Meanwhile, California increased the number of seasonal firefighters by almost 50%, according to Lynne Tolmachoff, spokeswoman for Cal Fire.

With the fire season getting longer each year, Colorado lawmakers last spring allocated about \$3 million to increase staffing at the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control, said Mike Morgan, its director.

"Historically, wildland firefighters were college students. They'd get out of school on Memorial Day, they'd go fight fire, and they'd go back to school on Labor Day," Morgan said. "Well, now we're having fires every month of the year, and so we need firefighters year-round."

The Bureau of Land Management is transforming its seasonal firefighting force to fulltime with a \$13 million budget increase, Gardetto said.

Despite all these efforts, warnings are going out telling people to be ready for the worst.

The Oregon Office of Emergency Management advised residents on Monday to have a bag packed and have an evacuation plan.

"Abnormally dry conditions and pre-season fires on the landscape are causing concern for the 2021 wildfire season," the agency said. "Now is the time for Oregonians to prepare themselves, their families and their homes for wildfire."

EXPLAINER: What's the Senate filibuster and why change it?

BY ALAN FRAM and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republicans are poised to use a filibuster to derail Democrats' effort to launch a bipartisan probe of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. The showdown will be the first vote this year when the GOP has used the delaying tactic to try killing major legislation.

Yet while the GOP seemed certain to succeed Thursday, their victory may prod Democrats closer to curbing or eliminating a legislative tactic that's been the bane of Senate majorities since the Founding Fathers.

Here's a look at the filibuster, how it works and the current political firestorm over it.

WHAT'S A FILIBUSTER?

Unlike the House, the Senate places few constraints on lawmakers' right to speak. Senators can also easily use the chamber's rules to hinder or block votes. Collectively these procedural delays are called

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filibusters.

Senate records say the term began appearing in the mid-19th century. The word comes from a Dutch term for "freebooter" and the Spanish "filibusteros" that were used to describe pirates.

Filibusters were emblazoned in the public's mind in part by the 1939 film, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," in which Jimmy Stewart portrayed a senator who spoke on the chamber's floor until exhaustion. In a real-life version of that, Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., stood continuously by his desk for 24 hours and 18 minutes speaking against the 1957 Civil Rights Act, the longest Senate speech by a single senator for which there are records of speaking length.

Those days are mostly gone. Senators usually tell Senate leaders or announce publicly that they will filibuster a bill, with no lengthy speeches required. Their impact usually flows not from delaying Senate business but from the need to get a supermajority of votes to end them.

HOW DO FILIBUSTERS END?

Records from the first Congress in 1789 show senators complaining about long speeches blocking legislation. Frustration grew and in 1917, the Senate voted to let senators end filibusters with a two-thirds majority vote.

In 1975, the Senate lowered that margin to the current three-fifths majority, which in the 100-member chamber is 60 votes. That margin is needed to end filibusters against nearly all types of legislation, but no longer applies to nominations.

Democrats controlling the Senate in 2013, angered by GOP delays on then-President Barack Obama's picks, reduced the margin for ending filibusters against most appointees to a simple majority, exempting Supreme Court nominees. In 2017, Republicans running the chamber, eager to add conservative justices under then-President Donald Trump, lowered the threshold to a simple majority for Supreme Court picks as well.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Democrats emerged from the 2020 elections controlling the White House, Senate and House. They had pent-up pressure to enact an agenda that includes spending trillions to bolster the economy and battle the pandemic, expanding voting rights and helping millions of immigrants in the U.S. illegally become citizens.

But Democrats have a slender House majority and control the 50-50 Senate only because of the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Kamala Harris. That means that to overcome a filibuster, Democrats need support from at least 10 Republicans, a heavy lift in a time of intense partisanship.

That's frustrated progressive senators and outside liberal groups, who've pressured Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., to eliminate filibusters — even as their use has become increasingly common by whichever party is in the minority.

According to Senate records dating back to World War I, the number of votes to end filibusters in any two-year Congress never reached 100 until the 2007-2008 sessions. It hit a high of 298 in the 2019-2020 Congress, mostly on Trump appointees that Republicans running the Senate were pushing to confirmation.

In this year's first five months as of this week, there were already 41 votes to end filibusters, mostly on President Joe Biden's nominees.

WHAT CAN DEMOCRATS DO?

It takes a simple majority, 51 votes, to change how the Senate cuts off filibusters. GOP support for retaining them is solid, with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., saying Democrats want to end them in a quest for "raw power."

But with Democrats eager to enact their priorities before they lose their fragile majority, their support for discarding filibusters has grown. Biden, who's influential despite having no vote on the matter, has said the tactic is "being abused in a gigantic way."

Yet Democrats lack the votes to do that. Their two most conservative senators, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Arizona's Kyrsten Sinema, have opposed a change, arguing the country is better served when Congress can find bipartisan solutions to its problems.

WHAT IMPACT MIGHT THE JAN. 6 COMMISSION VOTE HAVE ON FILIBUSTERS?

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Democrats consider creating a commission to examine the violent attack on the Capitol by Trump supporters just one of many issues they're pushing that the public supports. Others in that category include House-passed measures easing voting access, expanding citizenship opportunities for immigrants and curbing gun rights.

So far, Schumer hasn't forced Senate votes on many such bills. But advocates of eliminating filibusters hope Thursday's vote on the Jan. 6 commission, a top Democratic priority, will build pressure on Schumer, Manchin and Sinema to eliminate the delays.

Schumer hasn't overtly tipped his hand on what he'll do but has consistently kept the door open. The Senate spent much of this week debating a bipartisan bill aimed at strengthening the U.S.'s ability to compete economically with China, which some saw as demonstrating that Democrats work with Republicans when they can.

"We hope to move forward with Republicans, but we're not going to let them saying no stand in our way," Schumer said this week.

Democrats used special budget procedures to push Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package through the Senate with just a simple majority in March. They may try the same with Biden's huge infrastructure bill, but Senate rules limit the ability to use that route.

Navigation error sends NASA's Mars helicopter on wild ride

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A navigation timing error sent NASA's little Mars helicopter on a wild, lurching ride, its first major problem since it took to the Martian skies last month.

The experimental helicopter, named Ingenuity, managed to land safely, officials at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory reported Thursday.

The trouble cropped up about a minute into the helicopter's sixth test flight last Saturday at an altitude of 33 feet (10 meters). One of the numerous pictures taken by an on-board camera did not register in the navigation system, throwing the entire timing sequence off and confusing the craft about its location.

Ingenuity began tilting back and forth as much as 20 degrees and suffered power consumption spikes, according to Havard Grip, the helicopter's chief pilot.

A built-in system to provide extra margin for stability "came to the rescue," he wrote in an online status update. The helicopter landed within 16 feet (5 meters) of its intended touchdown site.

Ingenuity became the first aircraft to make a powered flight on another planet in April, two months after landing on Mars with NASA's rover Perseverance.

The 4-pound (1.8-kilogram) helicopter aced its first five flights, each one more challenging than before. NASA was so impressed by the \$85 million tech demo that it extended its mission by at least a month.

Saturday's troubled flight was the first for this bonus period. Engineers have spent the past several days addressing the problem.

AP Interview: NATO chief says Afghan forces can cope alone

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

ABOARD HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH (AP) — NATO has helped provide security in Afghanistan for almost two decades but the government and armed forces in the conflict-torn country are strong enough to stand on their own feet without international troops to back them, the head of the military organization said Thursday.

NATO took charge of security efforts in Afghanistan in 2003, two years after a U.S.-led coalition ousted the Taliban for harboring former Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Fewer than 9,000 troops remain, including up to 3,500 US personnel, and they are scheduled to leave by Sept. 11 at the latest.

"I think that the Afghans, they also realize that we have been there now for 20 years and we have invested heavily in blood and treasure in Afghanistan," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told The

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Associated Press, aboard a U.K. aircraft carrier involved in wargames off the coast of Portugal.

"Afghanistan has come a long way, both when it comes to building strong, capable security forces, but also when it comes to social and economic progress. At some stage, it has to be the Afghans that take full responsibility for peace and stability in their own country," Stoltenberg said in an interview.

But as NATO troops leave, much of the country stands as contested ground. The government in Kabul holds hold sway in towns and cities, but the Taliban dominate the countryside. Some of the heaviest fighting this year took place just this week, in Laghman province in the east.

Stoltenberg said that NATO countries would continue to support Afghanistan through civilian experts who will help to advise government ministries, by funding the security forces and with support for slow-moving peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban.

He said that NATO is also "looking into the possibility of providing some training out of country for the Afghan security forces, but no final decision has been taken."

U.S. military leaders are still grappling with how best to carry out President Joe Biden's order to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan by September while helping Afghan forces and monitoring the threat that prompted the U.S. invasion of the country 20 years ago.

Biden and Stoltenberg will meet with the other leaders of the 30-nation military alliance on June 14 to usher in a new era in trans-Atlantic ties after four tumultuous years of the former Trump administration. The other big issue will be Afghanistan, although no Afghan leaders are due to attend the Brussels summit.

Asked about the impact of leaving Afghanistan without the security guarantee that has helped keep the Taliban at bay, Stoltenberg conceded that "there are risks entailed to the decision of ending NATO's military mission in Afghanistan. We have been very transparent and clear-eyed about that."

"At the same time, to continue to stay means that we will also have to take some risks; the risk of more fighting, the risk of being forced to increase the number of troops there, and the risk of remaining with a (military) mission," he said.

Many of the international troops in Afghanistan will already have left by the time the leaders meet next month. America's allies in Europe, plus Canada, rely on U.S. logistical and transport help to operate in Afghanistan and could only follow once Biden announced the withdrawal.

Many officials have expressed concern that once the U.S. leaves, the government and its armed forces will be quickly overrun by the Taliban. Violence has steadily mounted in recent months as the drawdown gathered pace.

It remains unclear what level of security might be needed, and who would provide it, to protect international embassies spread around the capital Kabul. The city's airport, the main international gateway to Afghanistan, and the route to it must also be protected.

Stoltenberg said that NATO plans to provide financial support to keep Kabul airport up and running, but — just a few months before the alliance ends its biggest, costliest and most ambitious mission ever — the details of how all this might play out remained unclear.

Auditors find no fraud in disputed New Hampshire election

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

PEMBROKE N.H. (AP) — There is no evidence of fraud or political bias in a controversial New Hampshire election where a recount and audit has drawn the interest of former President Donald Trump, auditors concluded Thursday.

Rather, auditors investigating the election in the town of Windham believe a folding machine used by the town to try to accommodate the numbers of absentee ballots in the November election is responsible for mistakenly adding to vote counts for candidates in four legislative seats.

"We found no evidence of fraud or political bias," Mark Lindeman, one of the three auditors and the acting co-director of Verified Voting, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization, said. "I have heard no one actually articulate a credible hypothesis of how fraud could account for what we found."

The town used the machine to fold the absentee ballots before sending them to voters. After they were

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returned, the ballots were fed into a counting machine. Because the folds on some ballots went through a Democrats name, the ballot was either not counted or a vote was wrongly given to the Democrat.

The audit, mandated by the legislature and started earlier this month, is set to finish Thursday. It was called by lawmakers from both parties after a recount requested by a losing Democratic candidate in one of the legislative races showed the Republicans getting hundreds more votes than were originally counted. No matter the audit findings, the results won't change.

The discrepancy drew the attention of Trump and his supporters in their effort to find evidence of his wider claim of election fraud from 2020. Trump's cheerleading of skeptics in Windham shows how his search for evidence to support his false claims of election fraud have burrowed into American politics, even at the local level.

Kristi St. Laurent, the losing Democratic candidate who requested the recount, was watching the audit wrap up Thursday at the Edward Cross Training Center in Pembroke. She was satisfied with the audit and was counting on either the legislature or the secretary of state's office take action to ensure the problem doesn't happen again.

"They have been very thorough, very transparent and it's also clear that it's multiple factors that led to the results we had on election night" she said.

But not everyone was convinced the audit would find the reason for the discrepancy in the counts or that auditors had done enough to look at fraud or other factors.

"I wish it wasn't ending. There is still a lot more work that needs to be done. If you are going to turn over every rock and look at every possibility, there is a lot of evidence that hasn't been looked at," said Tom Murray, a contractor from Windham who was watching the audit. He said he has "less faith in the integrity of the system now than I did before this audit started."

Auditors must issue a final report within 45 days and Lindeman said that would include a series of recommendations. But he doubts the findings would have relevance beyond Windham.

"We have no reason to think that it's a statewide or national issue, although it's certainly possible that it occurred in other localities," he said.

That was echoed by Secretary of State Bill Gardner, who said ballots are sent to towns and cities with score marks to facilitate folding and the state ensures those marks don't go through the ovals where votes are marked.

"There's never been a ballot we sent out that was scored over an oval," he said.

While it's unknown how many other communities might use a folding machines like the one Windham did, Gardner said he suspects that few, if any, do. While the number of absentee ballots skyrocketed due to the pandemic, they generally make up a small percentage of the votes and communities don't have a problem folding ballots by hand.

Gardner has overseen 549 recounts in his 44 years as secretary of state, including 16 after the November elections. Those recounts involved 168,000 ballots — 22% of the total cast statewide — and 65 polling places.

"We don't have any reason to believe that any other town is facing this kind of situation," he said. "There wasn't anything else that we saw that was like this, and there's not been anything else like it over the years."

UN rights chief: Israeli strikes in Gaza may be war crimes

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The top U.N. human rights body on Thursday passed a resolution aimed to intensify scrutiny of Israel's treatment of Palestinians, after the U.N. rights chief said Israeli forces may have committed war crimes and faulted the militant group Hamas for violations of international law in their 11-day war this month.

The 24-9 vote, with 14 abstentions, capped a special Human Rights Council session on the rights situation faced by Palestinians. The session and the resolution were arranged by Organization of Islamic

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Cooperation countries, which have strongly supported Palestinians in their struggles with Israel.

The resolution, which was denounced by Israel, calls for the creation of a permanent "Commission of Inquiry" — the most potent tool at the council's disposal — to monitor and report on rights violations in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank. It would be the first such COI with an "ongoing" mandate.

The commission is also to investigate "all underlying root causes of recurrent tensions, instability and protraction of conflict" including discrimination and repression, according to the text. Amid signs that the resolution would pass, its authors added more teeth to its language with a late revision on Wednesday.

The revised text calls on states to refrain from "transferring arms" — the recipients were not specified — when they assess "a clear risk" that such weapons might be used to commit serious violations of human rights or humanitarian law. That appeared aimed to countries that ship weapons to Israel.

"Today's shameful decision is yet another example of the U.N. Human Rights Council's blatant anti-Israel obsession," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement. "This travesty makes a mockery of international law and encourages terrorists worldwide."

The Palestinian Authority welcomed the resolution, saying it amounted to "international recognition of Israel's systemic oppression and discrimination against the Palestinian people."

"This reality of apartheid and impunity can no longer be ignored," it added.

China and Russia were among those voting in favor. Several Western and African countries voted no.

British ambassador Simon Manley said the commission's "overly expansive mandate ... risks hardening positions on both sides," and Austrian ambassador, Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger, said the session "continues the regrettable practice of singling out Israel for criticism in the Human Rights Council."

Russian envoy Olga Vorontsova said the resolution "has the goal of establishing all of the facts behind all alleged violations in the latest period." Venezuelan Ambassador Hector Constant Rosales said a resolution "condemning the genocidal action of the Israeli government" was urgently needed.

Israel had called on "friendly" countries to oppose the meeting, and the United States — while not a member of the 47-member state body — did not take part, even in its status as an observer state. An array of countries denounced the latest violence and urged efforts to address the roots of the Mideast conflict.

After the vote, the U.S. mission in Geneva said the United States "deeply regrets" the move to create an "open-ended" Commission of Inquiry. It said some unspecified member states of the council "have chosen to engage in a distraction that adds nothing to ongoing diplomatic and humanitarian efforts" in the region.

U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, who spoke early in the session, called on Israel to allow an independent probe of military actions in the latest spasm of deadly violence, which left devastation and death in the Gaza Strip before a cease-fire last week.

The 11-day war killed at least 248 in Gaza, including 66 children and 39 women. In Israel, 12 people also died, including two children.

"Air strikes in such densely populated areas resulted in a high level of civilian fatalities and injuries, as well as the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure," Bachelet said.

"Such attacks may constitute war crimes," she added, if deemed to be indiscriminate and disproportionate in their impact on civilians. Bachelet urged Israel to ensure accountability, as required under international law in such cases, including through "impartial, independent investigations" of actions in the escalation.

Bachelet said Hamas' indiscriminate rocket fire during the conflict was also a clear violation of the rules of war, and she derided the group's tactics that included locating military assets in densely populated civilian areas, and firing rockets from them.

"These rockets are indiscriminate and fail to distinguish between military and civilian objects, and their use, thereby, constitutes a clear violation of international humanitarian law," Bachelet said. "However, the actions of one party do not absolve the other from its obligations under international law."

She cautioned violence could erupt again unless the "root causes" are addressed.

The day-long virtual debate involved personal accounts from Palestinians — like one of a young woman journalist from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in east Jerusalem, an early flashpoint that triggered the

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violence — as well as the statements from the council's 47 member states and also observer states.

Israel — backed at times by the United States — has long accused the council of anti-Israel bias and has generally refused to cooperate with its investigators.

Israeli Ambassador Meirav Eilon Shahar said Hamas — designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. and its allies — had fired 4,400 rockets at Israeli civilians from "from Palestinian homes, hospitals, and schools. Each one of these rockets constitutes a war crime."

"What would you do if rockets were fired at Dublin, Paris, or Madrid," she asked.

Riad al-Maliki, the Palestinian foreign minister, sought to highlight years of suffering by Palestinians in the lands controlled or occupied by Israel.

"The Israeli war machinery and terrorism of its settlers continue to target our children who face murder, arrest and displacement, deprived of a future in which they can live in peace and security," al-Maliki said.

EU weighs Belarus sanctions at sectors close to leader

By RAF CASERT and BARRY HATTON Associated Press

LISBON, Portugal (AP) — European Union nations sketched out plans Thursday for new sanctions against Belarus, targeting economic sectors close to its authoritarian leader, as they sought to strike back at him for the diversion of a passenger jet to arrest a dissident journalist.

Meeting in Lisbon, EU foreign ministers vowed to continue ramping up pressure on Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko — whose disdain for democratic norms and human rights has made his country a pariah in the West.

The country's isolation has only deepened since Sunday, when Belarusian flight controllers told the crew of a Ryanair jet about a bomb threat and instructed it to land in Minsk, where journalist Raman Pratashevich was pulled off the plane.

A list of EU sanctions in place against senior members of the Belarus government, including Lukashenko, "isn't having the dissuasive effect we need," said Portuguese Foreign Minister Augusto Santos Silva.

Amid the testy standoff, Belarus did get some help from its ally Russia, which refused to allow two Moscow-bound jetliners to change their flight paths in order to avoid Belarus' airspace.

As the EU works to hold Lukashenko to account, Pratashevich's parents appealed at a news conference in Poland for help from the international community to free their 26-year-old son.

"I want you to hear my cry, the cry of my soul. So that you understand how difficult it is for us now and how much we are experiencing this situation," said his mother, Natalia Pratashevich. "I am begging you, help me free my son."

The EU ministers said they kept the family in mind as they did their work.

"I'm thinking of this young blogger, this young journalist, his mother and his father," Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn said in the Portuguese capital. "These are bandit tricks that are being carried out here. That can't be tolerated by the European Union."

The latest plans for sanctions, which could target the country's lucrative potash industry among others, comes after the dramatic diversion of the Ryanair flight. EU leaders have denounced the move as a state-sponsored hijacking, while Lukashenko defended his actions and accused the West of trying to "strangle" his country with sanctions.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the bloc would not ease up on Belarus. "We need to move more swiftly on sanctions," he said after the informal Lisbon gathering, which drew up guidance for EU leaders but was not meant to take concrete action.

The EU has already advised its airlines to avoid the ex-Soviet nation's airspace and barred Belarusian carriers from EU airports and airspace.

But in a sign of support for Belarus, Russian authorities refused to allow two EU-based carriers to change their routes to Moscow so they could skirt Belarusian airspace. An Austrian Airlines flight from Vienna and an Air France flight from Paris both had to be canceled, the companies said. It was unclear what would happen to Friday's schedule.

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The French pilots' union SNPL said in a statement it was "more than surprised" at the move.

"While normally the responses to this type of request for modification are accepted immediately, it's been radio silence for two days" from the Russian authorities, it said.

The 27-nation bloc previously slammed Belarusian authorities with sanctions over the August election, which gave Lukashenko a sixth term and that opposition groups have rejected as rigged, along with his ensuing crackdown on protests.

If the next batch of sanctions does not ease the crackdown on the opposition and democratic values, German Foreign minister Heiko Maas said the EU "will continue to look at what effects this has in Belarus, whether Lukashenko relents. If that isn't the case, we have to assume that this will be just the beginning of a big and long spiral of sanctions."

Foreign ministers from the G-7 group of leading industrialized nations — which includes some EU countries — also promised to take action. They said in a statement: "We will enhance our efforts, including through further sanctions as appropriate, to promote accountability for the actions of the Belarusian authorities."

The EU has tried on and off to encourage democratic reforms in Belarus — bring it closer to the bloc and distance it from Russia — but has not had much success. Some say more sanctions will do little to alleviate the situation and will only push it closer to Russia, reducing the influence of the EU and others.

Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg acknowledged it is a difficult balance.

"What we don't want to do is to drive the country in the arms of Russia," he said.

Asselborn said the bloc was focused on the country's large potash industry, a major supplier for fertilizer, "and I think it would hurt Lukashenko a great deal if we accomplished something there."

The giant Belaruskali plant, which is controlled by the state as are most economic assets in the country of 9.3 million, is the main cash earner for Lukashenko's government, along with petrochemicals.

Later in the day, the International Civil Aviation Organization was planning a closed-door meeting at its headquarters in Montreal to discuss Sunday's flight diversion. Western leaders have asked the organization to investigate.

Lukashenko on Wednesday defended the move, maintaining a bomb threat was made against the flight. He also insisted Belarusian authorities had a legitimate right to arrest Pratasevich, who has become one of his top foes, saying that the journalist was trying to foment a "bloody rebellion." Pratasevich's Russian girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, who also was on the flight, was arrested as well.

Pratasevich, who left Belarus in 2019, ran a popular messaging app that had a key role in helping organize huge demonstrations against Lukashenko after the August election. But he has only increased his crackdown, and more than 35,000 people have been arrested since the protests began, with thousands reported beaten.

Yellen says economic recovery likely to be 'bumpy'

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen says that the economic recovery is going to be "bumpy" with high inflation readings likely to last through the end of this year.

But Yellen insisted that the inflation pressures will be temporary and if they do threaten to become embedded in the economy, the government has the tools to address that threat.

In testimony before a House Appropriations subcommittee Thursday, Yellen was asked about a big jump in prices reported last week, which showed consumer price index rising by 4.2% over the past year, the largest 12-month gain since 2008.

Yellen said that the April price increase was the result of a number of special factors related to the economy opening back up. She said as she has in the past that the price jump would be temporary but she indicated it would be more than a one-time gain.

"I expect it to last, however, for several more months and to see high annual rates of inflation through the end of this year," Yellen told lawmakers.

"As the economy gets back on line, it is going to be a bumpy process," Yellen said.

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The high April inflation reading, Yellen said, reflected in part big gains in the prices of airline tickets, hotel rooms and recreation, all areas where prices had fallen dramatically after the pandemic hit the U.S. in March 2020.

In addition, Yellen said prices were being driven higher by supply chain shortages in such critical areas as computer chips and auto production, where there were temporary factory shutdowns during the pandemic.

"We have an economy that was struck by a very severe and unusual shock. It caused very substantial shifts in spending patterns," she said.

Yellen said that she started studying economics and began her professional career during the 1970s, the last period of high inflation in this country.

"I remember what that terrible period was like. No one wants to see that happen again," she said. "We obviously have to watch the current situation very closely."

Yellen was testifying on the Treasury Department's budget request for next year. The Biden administration will release its full 2022 budget request Friday.

The administration's budget calls for a significant boost in funding for the Internal Revenue Service, an agency under the Treasury Department. Yellen said the increased funding was needed to boost IRS efforts to narrow the tax gap, the amount of payments that are being evaded which she said could total \$7 trillion over the next decade.

"Many of the country's wealthiest taxpayers do not pay their full tax bill and the IRS is not nearly staffed up enough to ensure compliance," Yellen said.

She said that currently the IRS has fewer auditors than at any time since World War II.

AP sources: Staffing hampered response to prison suicide

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The radios crackled with a frantic call for backup at a federal prison in California: An inmate was found hanging in his cell. Help was needed immediately.

But the prison, like many run by the U.S. government, is so chronically understaffed that other prison workers who would normally rush to the scene weren't able to leave posts where they were being forced to fill-in as correctional officers, two people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

Monday's death was reminiscent of one of the worst crises in the history of the federal Bureau of Prisons — when Jeffrey Epstein took his own life while in custody at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York — and exemplifies the dangers of the agency's severe staffing crisis, nearly three years after Epstein's suicide cast a bright spotlight on an agency that has been besieged by serious misconduct in recent years.

The Associated Press reported last week that nearly one-third of federal correctional officer jobs in the United States are vacant, forcing prisons to use cooks, teachers, nurses and other workers to guard inmates. The expanded use of that practice, known as augmentation, has been raising questions about whether the agency can carry out its required duties to ensure the safety of prisoners and staff members while also putting in place programs and classes required under the law.

The 47-year-old inmate who died Monday at FCI Mendota, a medium-security prison just west of Fresno, was serving a more than four-year sentence for illegally reentering the United States after being deported. Juan Ramon Rodriguez-Barbosa was being held in the prison's segregated housing unit and was found hanging by officers who were making their required checks of inmates in the unit every 30 minutes, the people familiar with the matter said. They could not discuss the details of the incident publicly and spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

The Bureau of Prisons said responding staff members "immediately initiated life-saving measures" and called for emergency medical crews, but Rodriguez-Barbosa was pronounced dead at the scene.

The agency insists that there was an immediate response to the medical call and an appropriate number of staff members responded. But there were others who normally would've responded to such a call and couldn't.

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At the time of the incident, about half of the prison's correctional officer posts were filled by workers whose regular duties do not include guarding inmates. The Bureau of Prisons says all prison workers are trained as correctional workers, regardless of position or job title. Fully staffed, there would have been more first responders rushing to the emergency call.

Just hours before Rodriguez-Barbosa's death, the prison's warden, Douglas White, wrote to the entire staff to complain about media coverage that he said "painted a negative image" of the prison. He told them it is "time to stop talking and printing negative information" about the staff there.

Federal regulations require all Justice Department employees — including those in the Bureau of Prisons — to report allegations of illegal activity or serious administrative misconduct to the Justice Department's inspector general or internal affairs.

The warden's email appeared to have been sparked by an AP story highlighting understaffing at Mendota and the protest by union officials. White had also sent other Bureau of Prisons employees with video cameras to record their fellow prison workers who were protesting and members of the media covering it.

"The Warden sent staff to determine what was happening. When they found out no threat existed, they returned to the institution," a Bureau of Prisons spokesperson told the AP. The agency has refused to provide a copy of the video.

The Bureau of Prisons has been working to try to bring on more staff members — launching what it called a "hiring frenzy" — in February. The bureau says it hired nearly 4,000 new staff members in 2020 — more than in prior years — and that more than 500 additional hires are on the way.

And the bureau says it has been holding hiring events at several prisons across the country.

They included two on Wednesday: one at Mendota this week and another to attract staff to work at federal jails in New York City — facilities that a federal judge recently said were "run by morons" and left inmates in "inhuman" conditions.

But when The Associated Press visited the public park in downtown Manhattan where the event was supposed to be held, it was nonexistent. The Bureau of Prisons said the hiring fair was canceled "for safety and security" because of a rumor that a protest was going to happen in the same place.

The AP did not witness any large-scale protest in the nearly empty park; two people who were sitting at a table in the park said they were protesting police misconduct after being approached by an AP photographer.

The Bureau of Prisons said officials don't like to cancel hiring events and were hoping to reschedule. An agency spokesperson said the bureau held about 20 hiring events, both virtually and in-person this year, to try to attract new employees to work at New York City's federal jails.

"We absolutely would like to see as many hiring initiatives in the works as possible," the agency said in a statement. "Hiring events are only one component of our recruitment efforts, and while we want them to proceed as planned, due to institutional needs, they may be postponed."

More jobless getting aid than in past even as cutoffs loom

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Far more Americans are receiving unemployment benefits than the last time the jobless rate was at the current 6.1%, thanks to a major expansion of the federal safety net that has provided aid to millions of people out of work.

Yet many businesses and Republican officials say all that jobless aid has contributed to worker shortages in some industries, which is why most GOP-led states are moving to cut off the federal support.

About 15.8 million people received unemployment aid through one of several benefit programs during the week of May 8, the latest period for which data is available, according to a Labor Department report Thursday. That's nearly eight times as many people as received jobless payments in August 2014, when the unemployment rate was where it is now and roughly the same proportion of adults had jobs.

The primary reason for the expansion is that the government created two emergency programs in last spring's pandemic relief legislation. About three-quarters of all unemployment beneficiaries — nearly 12

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million people — are receiving aid through one of those federal programs. One of them provides payments to the self-employed and gig workers, who had never been eligible for jobless aid before. The other program benefits people who have been unemployed for more than six months. Both are scheduled to end Sept. 6.

Yet 20 states have announced this month that they will cut off the emergency aid early, beginning as soon as June 12, according to an Associated Press analysis, including Texas, Georgia, Tennessee and South Carolina. As a result, about 2.5 million people will lose all their unemployment benefits by early July. Those states are also ending an extra \$300 weekly federal payment to the unemployed.

Four other states, including Florida and Arizona, are ending the \$300 payment only.

Collectively, those cutoffs of aid coincide with a steady decline in the number of people applying for jobless benefits. The government on Thursday reported the fourth straight weekly drop, to 404,000, the lowest level since the pandemic erupted in March of last year.

The decision by some states to end the aid early highlights the key role the benefits payments have played since the onset of COVID-19. Now, more people — and a higher proportion of the jobless — are receiving unemployment aid than in any past recovery, according to data that extends to the late 1960s. That expansion of aid, economists say, captured millions of people who in previous recessions had fallen through the cracks.

Arindrajit Dube, an economics professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, suggested that the enhanced aid was a key reason — along with three rounds of stimulus checks for most individuals — why Americans' incomes, as a whole, actually rose during the recession despite the loss of millions of jobs.

"That is a success story," Dube said, "and I think that's something we should look at and recognize as a good thing."

Another reason incomes rose is that so many people who lost jobs had been paid comparatively little, while higher-paid professionals who mostly worked from home generally kept their jobs. In fact, total wages and salaries have already rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, even though the economy has 8.2 million fewer jobs.

In the fall of 2014, when the job market was in similar shape, just one-quarter of the unemployed were receiving aid. By then, emergency programs that provided benefits in the aftermath of the Great Recession for as long as 99 weeks had ended. And as the economy slowly improved, many states took steps to limit the availability of unemployment payments, such as reducing the duration of aid.

Now, more Americans are actually receiving jobless benefits that are officially counted as unemployed, though that reflects quirks in the data. The government says 9.8 million people are unemployed. But that doesn't include several million who lost jobs in the pandemic and have stopped looking for work; they aren't counted as unemployed.

As the economy improves, analysts say that the large proportion of people receiving benefits, along with the \$300-a-week supplemental payment, may contribute to labor shortages. But jobless aid can also allow people the time to find work that is a good fit for their education and experience, which is helpful for the economy.

"You don't want someone to take the very first job that comes along," said Jason Furman, an economist at Harvard who was an adviser to President Barack Obama. "You want them to take a job that's good for them. ... But you don't want them turning down multiple jobs, either."

The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which mostly covers self-employed and gig workers, also allowed parents who were forced to quit and care for children in online schools to receive jobless aid. It essentially acted as a paid leave program, Furman said, which the U.S. doesn't otherwise require from employers, unlike in European countries.

That program has also benefited many other Americans who had previously fallen through the cracks, including people who haven't worked enough hours to meet state requirements to qualify for unemployment benefits.

Dube said his research has found little evidence that the extra \$300 has prevented people from taking

jobs. In lower-income states where the extra money is a larger boost, hiring has rebounded at the same pace as in other states, he said.

But a separate study by economists at the San Francisco Federal Reserve concluded that the \$300-a-week supplement had a modest effect, reducing the rate at which people out of work find jobs by about 3.5 percentage points.

Companies in the restaurant, hotel, manufacturing, and construction industries have said they are struggling to find workers. States began announcing cutoffs to the extra benefits after April's jobs report showed a sharp slowdown in hiring, compared with March, despite a record level of job openings.

Many unemployed remain reluctant to take jobs in restaurants, hotels and other service industries for fear of contracting COVID-19. And some women can't return to work without adequate child care, though that is now having a relatively small impact, according to recent research by Furman and economist Melissa Kearney.

Facebook won't remove posts claiming COVID-19 is human-made

Facebook says it will no longer remove claims that COVID-19 is human-made or manufactured "in light of ongoing investigations into the origin of COVID-19 and in consultation with public health experts."

There is rising pressure worldwide to investigate the origins of the pandemic, including the possibility that it came from a lab. Since the pandemic began, Facebook has been changing what it allows on the topic and what it bans. In February, it announced a host of new claims it would be prohibiting -- including that COVID-19 was created in a Chinese lab. Other claims it added at the time included the false notion that vaccines are not effective or that they are toxic.

Lisa Fazio, a professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University, said the reversal shows the difficulty of fact-checking in general, particularly with something unprecedented like the coronavirus, when experts can disagree and change their minds with new evidence.

"It's one reason that content moderation shouldn't be static, scientific consensus changes over time," Fazio said. "It's also a reminder to be humble and that for some questions the best current answer is "we don't know yet" or "it's possible, but experts think it's unlikely."

Facebook's reversal comes as President Joe Biden ordered U.S. intelligence officials to "redouble" their efforts to investigate the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, including any possibility the trail might lead to a Chinese laboratory. After months of minimizing these claims as a fringe theory, the Biden administration is joining worldwide pressure for China to be more open about the outbreak. It aims to head off GOP complaints that Biden has not been tough enough and to use the opportunity to press China on alleged obstruction.

"We're continuing to work with health experts to keep pace with the evolving nature of the pandemic and regularly update our policies as new facts and trends emerge," said Guy Rosen, Facebook's vice president of integrity, in a statement Wednesday.

Facebook does not usually ban misinformation outright on its platform, instead adding fact-checks by outside parties, which includes The Associated Press, to debunked claims. The two exceptions have been around elections and COVID-19.

Boris Johnson defends virus record after ex-aide's attack

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Thursday rejected claims by his former chief aide that he botched Britain's coronavirus response and is unfit for office, denying an allegation his government oversaw tens of thousands of needless deaths.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock also hit back after Dominic Cummings singled him out for criticism in an excoriating attack on the government.

Cummings, who left his job as Prime Minister Boris Johnson's top adviser in November, claimed the

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government's slow and chaotic initial response, and Johnson's failure to learn from mistakes, meant that tens of thousands of people had died unnecessarily.

"People did not get the treatment they deserved. Many people were left to die in horrific circumstances," he said during his hours of testimony to lawmakers on Wednesday.

Cummings — whose key role in the campaign to take Britain out of the European Union helped propel Brexit-backer Johnson into the prime minister's post — said Johnson was "unfit for the job,"

Johnson brushed aside the criticism, saying "some of the commentary I have heard doesn't bear any relation to reality."

"This has been an incredibly difficult series of decisions, none of which we've taken lightly," Johnson said. He said that "at every stage, we've been governed by a determination to protect life, to save life."

"What people want us to get on with is delivering the (reopening) road map and trying, cautiously, to take our country forward through what has been one of the most difficult periods that I think anybody can remember," he told reporters on Thursday.

Cummings accused Hancock of lying to the public and said he "should have been fired" for mistakes including testing failures that saw patients with the virus discharged from hospitals to nursing homes. Around 20,000 people died with COVID-19 in British nursing homes in the first months of the outbreak.

Hancock said "the unsubstantiated allegations around honesty are not true."

"We worked as hard as we could to protect people who live in care homes," he said at a news conference.

"But we could only do that once we had the testing capacity," Hancock added, saying "it wasn't possible" to test everyone being discharged from hospitals at the start of the outbreak.

The health spokesman for the opposition Labour Party, Jonathan Ashworth, said the government had questions to answer, whether or not Cummings' testimony was true,

"These allegations from Cummings are either true, and if so the secretary of state (Hancock) potentially stands in breach of the ministerial code,...or they are false and the prime minister brought a fantasist and a liar into the heart of Downing Street," Ashworth said. "Which is it?"

The government says it will begin an independent public inquiry into its handling of the pandemic within the next year. Opposition politicians, and families who have lost loved ones to COVID-19, want it to start sooner.

The U.K. has recorded almost 128,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest toll in Europe, and experienced one of the world's deepest recessions in 2020 as three successive lockdowns hobbled the economy.

A mass vaccination campaign that started in December has brought confirmed cases and deaths down sharply, though Britain is now reckoning with a more transmissible new strain of the virus first identified in India. It is spreading across the country, with the number of cases doubling in the past week, according to Public Health England.

Scientists expect the variant become the dominant one in Britain, but they say existing vaccines appear to work against it.

Almost three-quarters of British adults have had one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, and 45% have had both doses.

The government has been lifting restrictions in stages, with indoor eating, drinking and entertainment venues reopening last week, but social distancing and mask-wearing rules still in place.

Hancock said it was "too early now to say" whether remaining social restrictions imposed to slow the spread of the virus could be lifted on June 21 as planned.

Johnson said removing the remaining measures would depend on how much the new variant drove an increase in cases, and the speed of the vaccination campaign.

"I don't see anything currently in the data to suggest that we have to deviate from the road map," he said. "But we may need to wait."

Summer travel forecast calls for longer waits, fewer choices

By JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

After a year of coronavirus lockdowns, the start of summer beckons with vacation plans made possible by relaxed COVID-19 restrictions. But a severe worker shortage brings a warning for travelers: Expect delays and pack a little patience.

Lifeguards and hotel housekeepers are in short supply. So are rental cars. And don't count on having a fruity cocktail at the hotel Tiki bar.

The labor shortage is hitting the nation's tourist destinations just as they try to rebound from a year lost to the pandemic, where periodic surges in cases and lockdowns had Americans sticking close to home. Now, with more than half of adults vaccinated, Americans are ready to venture out with the traditional start of summer travel.

But the staffing issues threaten to derail the travel industry's recovery. Travelers can expect fewer menu choices at restaurants, lengthy check-in lines at hotels and airports, and fewer rides and food stands at theme parks.

Some hotels aren't filling all of their rooms or changing the sheets as often because they don't have enough housekeepers. Six of the most popular national parks — including Yosemite, Rocky Mountain, Acadia and Zion — will require advance reservations for many visitors to allow for social distancing.

"This is nothing like we've ever seen before," said Michelle Woodhull, president of Charming Inns, which includes four small hotels and a fine dining restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina.

The company has limited room reservations by 20 percent during some weeks and reduced seating at the restaurant, said Woodhull, who recently fielded a complaint from a customer who couldn't get a table for four weeks.

"Unfortunately, that is a reality," she said, adding that it's better than delivering poor service. "What business wants to turn away business, especially after the year we've had?"

Still, the tourism industry is showing signs of coming back. Airline executives say domestic leisure travel is at pre-pandemic levels, and the number of people passing through U.S. airports daily is likely to top 2 million before the week is over — the first time that has happened since early March 2020.

Air travelers planning to rent a car during the Memorial Day weekend might be out of luck. Rental cars are scarce, and they are pricey — the average cost has roughly doubled from a year ago, according to government figures.

The AAA auto club forecasts that 37 million Americans will travel at least 50 miles from home over the upcoming holiday, a 60% increase over last year. But if AAA is right about this weekend, that will mean 6 million fewer people traveling than over the same holiday in 2019.

The reasons behind the worker shortage are hotly debated. Many employers blame the federal government's extra \$300-per-week in unemployment aid. But plenty of hospitality workers who abruptly lost their jobs a year ago have moved on to new careers and aren't coming back.

Some employers in the hospitality industry want to hire new workers at lower wages instead of recalling laid-off employees, said D. Taylor, president of the hotel, gaming and airport workers union Unite Here.

Big hotel chains are considering eliminating housekeeping and guest-services jobs, and casinos are moving to cut jobs in food and beverage, he told a congressional subcommittee this week.

"That's bad for customers, but it's also bad for workers and communities because housekeepers, cooks, servers — that's the backbone of the service economy," Taylor said.

A survey of 4,000 travel and tourism workers earlier this year showed that many found jobs with higher pay and predictable schedules and more plan on leaving the industry soon, said Peter Ricci, director of Florida Atlantic University's hospitality and tourism management program.

The travel sector as a whole, he said, faces a moment of change and will need to offer better wages and benefits and rethink how it treats employees.

"It's time for our industry to wake up and see that's an important thing. We have a shortage for a reason," said Cathy Balestriere, general manager of Crane's Beach House, a boutique hotel in Delray Beach, Florida.

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She has managed to keep most of her staff and brought in outside workers to provide massages and yoga, but the hotel is not offering breakfast, and the poolside Tiki bar is closed because there's no one to serve drinks. Managers and maintenance staff have pitched in with housekeeping duties.

Maine's biggest amusement park, Funtown Splashtown USA, which opens Memorial Day weekend, is scaling back hours and operating only five days a week because it cannot find enough workers.

The park in Saco, Maine, still needs lifeguards, ride operators and cleanup crews despite offering wage increases and four season passes for summer hires. The reduced number of international students is another problem for the largest seasonal employer in the state.

Raj Kapoor, who manages a popular food court on the Belmar, New Jersey, oceanfront, has hired 14 people for the summer, but he could still use eight to 10 more to scoop ice cream, roll burritos and sell sodas, milkshakes and candy.

The labor shortage has affected his business in other, less obvious ways. A shipment of soda that was promised the next day took a week and a half to arrive because the distributor did not have enough delivery drivers.

Diners in tourist hot spots shouldn't be surprised when they find restaurants with limited hours, streamlined menus and some seating sections closed, even when there's a wait for tables, said Barry Gutin, co-owner of the Cuba Libre restaurant chain on the East Coast.

To attract workers and help them get ahead, they've raised wages and gone as far as offering English and Spanish language courses and personal finance training. But hiring has still been a challenge. Their location in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, is only open for dinner right now — not even for takeout or delivery.

"We're protecting the guest experience by not over-seating," he said. "We're hoping they understand things are a little different than pre-pandemic."

Regardless of destination, travelers should make sure to call ahead and be ready to change plans at a moment's notice.

Jamie Goble had been set to fly to Ohio from her home in Waco, Texas, to join her family for three days next week at Cedar Point amusement park, where they planned to celebrate her nephew's high school graduation.

But nine days before her flight, the park announced last week that it would be closed two days a week for most of the month because of staffing shortages.

"Not just the park, the hotel too," she said. "So we were out of a place to stay. It's all understandable, but we thought they had things figured out."

Instead, they quickly shifted plans to ride roller coasters at Dollywood in Tennessee and go hiking at Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Unearthing history: Tulsa massacre victims search resumes

By KEN MILLER Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — As the U.S. marks 100 years since one of its most shameful historical chapters, researchers, including descendants of Black victims of the Tulsa Race Massacre, are preparing to resume a search for remains believed to have been hastily buried in mass graves.

Although many details about the two terrifying days in 1921 eventually came to light after decades of shared silence by perpetrators, victims and their progeny, some basic facts remain unknown, including the true death toll and the names of many members of the city's once thriving Black community who died at the hands of a white mob.

The state declared the death toll to be only 36 people, including 12 who were white. But for various reasons, including contemporaneous news reports, witness accounts and looser standards for tracking deaths, most historians who have studied the event estimate it to be between 75 and 300.

Most Black victims were buried in unmarked graves, and efforts are ongoing to locate their remains for proper burial and recognition.

"Most of these people were just thrown away, their bodies were buried while their loved ones were be-

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ing held by armed guards in internment camps," said Scott Ellsworth, a University of Michigan professor of Afroamerican and African studies who is consulting on the search and is among the foremost experts on the massacre, which is sometimes referred to as a riot.

After a white mob descended on the Black section of Tulsa, Greenwood, and burned more than 1,000 homes, looted hundreds of others and destroyed its thriving business district, more than 4,000 Black people were forcibly interned for several days at a fairground and other sites during a period of martial law.

Victims' bodies — some burned beyond recognition — were unceremoniously buried during that time, with interned families unable to claim their loved ones' remains or not even aware they had died, according to the 2001 findings of a state commission that explored the massacre.

After the initial shock about the massacre wore off, it receded from the public's consciousness.

Neither white residents, out of embarrassment, nor Black residents, out of fear, openly discussed it for decades, according to Bob Blackburn, a retired director of the Oklahoma Historical Society who served as chairman of the panel, which was then known as the Tulsa Race Riot Commission.

But rumors of mass graves persisted, and the commission was formed in 1997 to try to give a fuller account of what happened. It announced in January 2000 that a search would be conducted for victims' remains. However, it reversed course a few months later and decided against excavating any of the sites where bodies were thought or rumored to be buried — a decision Ellsworth thinks was driven by fear of the negative publicity it could generate.

But Tulsa's current mayor, G.T. Bynum, announced in 2018 that the search would happen, after all, at Oaklawn and Rolling Oaks cemeteries and The Canes, a homeless encampment next to a city park. Ground scans at the sites showed anomalies suggesting they could be mass graves.

Bynum, who is white, said last summer that he felt it was the right thing to do.

"You had generations of people who grew up in this community ... and never heard about it," he said. "I feel a tremendous responsibility as mayor to try and find these folks. That's a basic thing that a city government should do for people."

The search got underway last year, and researchers in October found at least 12 sets of remains in coffins at Oaklawn Cemetery, where most of the Black victims whose deaths were confirmed had been buried in unmarked graves. They looked at the remains inside the coffins but covered them back up for further study at a later date and haven't yet confirmed they are those of massacre victims.

They'll resume their search on June 1 in that same section of Oaklawn Cemetery, said the state archaeologist, Kary Stackelbeck.

"If the boundaries we estimate are accurate, what we excavated in October is maybe a third or a quarter of that overall size," she told The Associated Press. "It is not unreasonable for us to develop an estimate of around 30 total (bodies) in the overall mass grave, and that's a conservative estimate."

Most of the confirmed Black victims were recorded as having been buried at Oaklawn Cemetery, and any mass graves found during the eventual search at Rolling Oaks Cemetery could confirm witness accounts of bodies being buried there, said Phoebe Stubblefield, a forensic anthropologist on the search team.

"(Rolling Oaks) is a critical area to examine because any remains there, if we can get at the identities, will speak to the event as a massacre," Stubblefield said.

The area around The Canes is where people reportedly saw remains being prepared for burial, Ellsworth said, estimating there could be 50 to 60 bodies there.

Opinions differ about what to do with any remains that are found. By law, any that are identified would have to be turned over to that person's descendants to determine how and where to re-inter them, said Ellsworth.

"For those that remain unidentified, (there) should be a memorial akin to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier," he said.

Chief Egunwale Amusan, a member of Tulsa's 1921 Graves Public Oversight Committee whose aunt, Mary Beard, disappeared during the violence and is believed to have been killed, said he thinks any victim remains should be reburied in a cemetery other than Oaklawn, where white people thought to have taken

part in the atrocity were also buried.

"One thing you don't do is inter those bodies of people who were killed in the massacre with the people who committed this atrocity," Amusan said. "Jews would never allow themselves to be placed in the same cemetery Hitler is interred in. That would never happen."

Stubblefield, whose aunt and uncle survived the violence but had their home burned, said Oaklawn is well maintained and was used by Black and white people during its long history. She said it's true that the massacre victims were "discarded and were not honored," but she views the cemetery as a place for all Tulsans.

"I'm content to have the Greenwood heroes reinterred there ... properly honored with identification" as a confirmed victim of the violence, she said.

The researchers have said getting state approval to exhume the remains and rebury them elsewhere could delay the project by another year, but that doesn't deter Amusan.

"We waited 100 years. What's another year? We get one shot to do this right," he said.

Cops who kill often catch a break at sentencing time

By DON BABWIN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Throughout the murder trial, prosecutors showed jurors the video seen countless times around the world of the white police officer killing a Black male. And when it was over, the jurors found the officer guilty of murder.

That was in 2018. Now, as former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin waits to be sentenced for killing George Floyd, it's worth remembering what happened in Chicago after a jury convicted a white police officer in the shooting death of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald: The judge didn't follow prosecutors' recommended 18-20 years behind bars. Former officer Jason Van Dyke got a more lenient sentence — and might be released from prison in about three years.

It's possible things have changed. Floyd's horrific death touched off mass protests and calls for police reform that have rippled across the U.S. and in Congress. Chauvin could end up the exception, with a sentence of 30 years behind bars, particularly after the judge who will sentence him agreed Chauvin had committed particular cruelty in Floyd's death. But if history is any indication, a slam-dunk sentence is not guaranteed.

That was filmmaker Spike Lee's point when, shortly after the verdict, he said on CNN that he started worrying as soon as "I heard the judge would be the one (who) would be the one that handed out the sentence." The jury, he said, "got it right, but we don't know what this judge (will decide)."

Much has been written about how rare it is for a police officer to be charged for an on-duty killing. Philip Stinson, a Bowling Green University criminal justice professor who tracks police prosecutions, has found that since 2005, just 142 non-federal police officers have been charged with murder or manslaughter for on-duty shootings.

Chauvin is part of an even smaller roster of officers who have actually been convicted in on-duty killings: According to Stinson's count, Chauvin is just the eighth officer convicted of murder for an on-duty killing.

The officers convicted of murder for on-duty shootings were sentenced to an average of 16.4 years in prison, Stinson found. In comparison, the average sentence for a murder conviction in the United States was, just over 48.8 years as of 2018, according to a report released this year by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The average time they spend behind bars can be considerably less than that. Depending on the state, convicted felons can have as much as half their sentence lopped off if they behave themselves in prison. In Minnesota, the presumption is that defendants with good behavior will serve two-thirds of their sentences before they are released on parole.

What that means, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, is that the people who received decades-long sentences for murder or non-negligent manslaughter actually served an average of 17.8 years in

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state prison before they were released.

For police officers, it often translates to less than a decade behind bars. In Texas, for example, when a former Balch Springs police officer convicted of murder in the shooting death of an unarmed Black teenager was sentenced in 2018 to 15 years in prison, he knew he'd be eligible for parole after serving 7.5 years.

That helps explain why in Illinois, Van Dyke's attorney sounded more like he'd won the case than lost it when the judge handed down what amounts to a three-year sentence.

"He truly felt great. I mean, he was not just relieved, he was happy ..." attorney Dan Herbert told reporters.

Under Minnesota's sentencing guidelines, Chauvin will only be sentenced for the most serious charge — second-degree murder — in Floyd's 2020 death. That meant that at the time Chauvin was convicted he faced a presumptive sentence of 12 1/2 years in prison, with the judge limited to sentencing him between 10 years and eight months to 15 years.

But in May, Judge Peter Cahill ruled that there Chauvin abused his authority as a police officer when he restrained Floyd in 2020 and that he treated Floyd with particular cruelty — aggravating factors that add much more more prison time.

The reasons why police officers seem to catch such a break at sentencing begin with one of the first things a prosecutor typically points to when asking for a stiff prison sentence: the defendant's criminal history.

That, however, runs up against the reality that police officers rarely have any criminal history, for the simple reason that felony convictions get officers fired or prevent them from getting hired in the first place.

"Sentences can go way up if someone has a felony record," said Robert Weisberg, a law professor at Stanford University and co-director of the Stanford Criminal Justice Center. "Chauvin doesn't have that."

And there's another argument: "Officers who otherwise have lived a lawful life can make a really strong argument that a long prison sentence isn't necessary to protect the public, that he ... won't be a threat to public safety," said Joseph McMahon, the special prosecutor who successfully prosecuted Van Dyke.

Chauvin, his attorneys can argue, won't commit a similar crime because he's no longer a police officer.

That's what a California judge said when he didn't follow a prosecutor's request to sentence a former police officer convicted of involuntary manslaughter in a 2015 fatal shooting to four years in prison in favor of 180 days in jail and three years' probation.

"He has absolutely no prior criminal record, the crime was committed because of very unusual, somewhat bizarre circumstances, which is very unlikely — in fact — will never occur again," Butte County Judge James F. Reilly said of former Paradise Police officer Patrick Feaster.

That doesn't mean prosecutors are defenseless, though.

During Van Dyke's sentencing hearing, McMahon made sure the judge knew about his past, even if that past did not include any convictions.

"I went through all the prior complaints against Jason Van Dyke and even though every one of was (determined to be) unfounded by Chicago Police, I found those individuals all across the country and had them testify about their experiences."

People like a Black man named Edward Nance. During Van Dyke's sentencing hearing, Nance tearfully recounted the day Van Dyke pulled him from his car, handcuffed him behind his back and dragged him to his squad car violently enough to rip rotator cuffs. Nance spoke of his constant physical pain, multiple surgeries, and anxiety and depression that more than a decade later made it impossible to sleep through the night.

That is the "kind of witness" available to Minnesota prosecutors if they wish, said McMahon.

Indie bookstores avoid the worst — so far — from pandemic

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Through the first year of the pandemic, the country's independent booksellers have

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— so far — avoided disaster.

On Thursday, the American Booksellers Association told The Associated Press that membership increased from 1,635 to 1,701 since May 2020, the additions a combination of brand-new stores and existing stores that had not been part of the independents' trade group. While association CEO Allison K. Hill and others had feared that hundreds of stores could go out of business during the 2020-21 holiday season, the ABA has tallied only 14 closings in 2021 so far, along with more than 70 last year.

"It's fair to say that it could have been much, much worse," Hill said, describing the independent community as "bruised" but standing.

Hill cited a few factors that helped compensate for pandemic-caused shutdowns and limited hours: PPP loans that enabled some owners to meet their payrolls, a surprisingly strong holiday season in December, increased online sales, and the rise of bookshop.org, an online seller that partners with independent stores and has directed more than \$14 million to them in revenues.

But Hill said business for independent stores remains "more challenging than ever," with many owners not expecting in-person events at least through the summer and still facing the growing strength of Amazon.com. While book sales overall have been strong during the pandemic, much of that has been at either Amazon or discount chains that sell books such as Walmart and Target.

"We're open, we're not making a profit, our sales are less than half of what they used to be," said Bryanne Hoeg, manager of the Portland, Oregon-based Powell's Books, during an online panel this week at the inaugural U.S. Book Show. "We can't have in-store events. We have to ask everyone to use a mask and no, we don't have a bathroom."

Bookstores are trying to reinvent themselves, and so is the American Booksellers Association — starting with what it means to be a "bookstore" and how one becomes an association member.

In 2019, the ABA had more than 1,800 members (and more than 2,500 store locations), a substantial increase from a decade before when core membership had fallen to just over 1,400 — after once exceeding 5,000 — in face of competition from Amazon and from such physical bookstore chains as Barnes & Noble and Borders. The demise of Borders and the unexpectedly limited appeal of e-books helped the independents grow in recent years.

Hill said the current membership numbers, which include nearly 2,100 locations, are smaller than in 2019 because the association has tightened its rules. Before 2020, essentially any store that happened to offer books could be an ABA member. Now, only "businesses who primarily sell books (over 50% of inventory)" are eligible, according to the association's website.

The ABA also became stricter last year in counting its "inactive" members, those that had not responded to repeated efforts to renew their membership. Unlike in previous years, "inactive" members are not automatically included in the total numbers. (The status of dozens of such stores remains undetermined, according to the ABA).

"The opening of new stores" is still a priority, Hill said. But the association is now taking a "more holistic view" in measuring the state of independent selling, with factors including diversity, profitability, and finding new management when an existing owner wants to retire.

The ABA is in transition in other ways. Criticized for its predominantly white leadership and membership, it has established a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council, and, in its announcement Thursday, cited the addition of 23 BIPOC-owned stores as members. It has also expanded the definition of a "store." While many members are traditional general interest bookstores, whether the Tattered Cover in Denver or Books & Books in Coral Gables, Florida, others are "pop-up" sellers setting up temporary or online-only outlets, such as Marianne Reiner's runforcoverbookstore.com.

Reiner, based in San Diego, had opened Run For Cover as a physical store in 2018 and was anticipating a strong 2020 before the pandemic hit. With sales plunging and the rent not going down, she decided to shut down the store and become a digital seller instead, a "concierge" personally delivering books to customers and including hand-written notes.

"It's been a challenging year, but a good one," Reiner said, adding with a laugh, "I may even be able

to pay myself a little.”

Wayne Brady and his Black experience

By MESFIN FEKADU AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — For years Wayne Brady had been working on a one-man show about being a young Black man growing up in Orlando, but he could never finish the project.

That’s until acclaimed actor Glenn Close asked him to participate in her spoken word jazz album.

“To be honest with you, the reason it took me a couple of years was because it was so painful. Every time I’d go to it, I would start a draft and it got a little too real. I felt myself wanting to do the thing that you can do — whether you’re talking to a group of friends or whether you’re onstage — I’m going to now make this funny and I’m going to deflect. Or I’ll sidetrack or I’ll do something that takes away the weight because I don’t want to remember this,” Brady recalled.

“Glenn coming to me, that was the impetus of me saying, ‘You’re going to finish this and you’re going to finish this now. You’ve got to talk about this. You’ve got to share this.’”

That’s when the actor-comedian-singer crafted “A Piece by the Angriest Black Man in America (or, How I Learned to Forgive Myself for Being a Black Man in America).” It appears on “Transformation: Personal Stories of Change, Acceptance, and Evolution,” Close’s new album released this month.

“My heart was going a mile a minute ... It’s really the first time that people will be hearing this piece of Wayne, this struggle of Wayne, that some people know and some people don’t,” said Brady, who recorded the track in front of a live audience at New York City’s Jazz at Lincoln Center.

“What I’m trying to do is move the needle a little bit because there is someone who may sit down and know Wayne Brady from ‘Whose Line Is It Anyway?’ or looked at ‘Let’s Make a Deal’ or ‘I loved him on that sitcom or I loved him on this’ — they don’t know this story of pain is lurking there because I don’t share that. Well, I have come to share that to let you know maybe you’re skewed to what Black is or what Black isn’t.”

On “Angriest Black Man in America,” Brady tells his Black experience, beginning with a lighter-skinned Black person, Tessa Grady, saying to him during his young years: “You’s a Black, ugly mother(expletive).”

“It was just a fact. There was Black and then there was Blaaaaaaaaaack,” Brady reads on the spoken word track. “I fit into the latter, dark as Black matter and hearing you pair Black and ugly together in that manner, made me feel like my type of Black life didn’t matter.”

On the poignant, eight-minute song, the performer continues to break down his life’s experiences, touching on topics like his hair and not wanting to play outside in the sun because he didn’t want to get darker to being called “one of the good ones” by white people.

Close told the AP she “was really moved by what Wayne Brady wrote. Very unexpected.” She invited Brady to perform on two more songs on her album, a collaborative project with Grammy-winning jazz musician and Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra player Ted Nash.

“I had tears in my eyes,” Nash said after reading Brady’s original piece. “I had tears in my eyes for several reasons — first of all, that he was willing to share this with us and allow us to have him participate.” Nash added that one of his band players, who is Black, “came up to Wayne after we did one of the performances and he says, ‘Look, I have to just tell you that you just said the same thing that I have felt for so long about how I feel about myself.’”

“You don’t sometimes realize how people interpret what’s put to them,” Nash said. “And that was deep.”

Brady said he forgives Tessa Grady for the ill-words she spoke as a child and he plans to reach out to her since his song is out and widely available. He adds that he didn’t write the poem to “vilify her, I just use Tessa as the example of one of those self-codifying moments that form who you are as a person.”

“I had to deal with that person all my life up until I realized I needed to forgive myself for whatever — for how Black that I felt I was, or how not Black that I felt I was,” he continued. “Those things were holding me back. Especially at a point in our country’s development where race has always been on the table and it’s always been a fight, but now voices are demanding to be heard. I realized I needed to add

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my voice to that.”

Brady, 48, has won five Emmys for his roles across various TV shows, appeared on Broadway stages and even earned a Grammy nomination for his cover of Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come.” He said he’s been working on new music and he wants to continue to be a voice for people who look like him, especially with the platform he has.

“By the time I started getting on, around the time of ‘Who’s Line,’ I kind of fell into this narrative that was being written for me by some network people who didn’t want to see Black either. They wanted an amiable, shiny, Black face that could connect with their viewers, but we don’t necessarily have to talk about the Black experience. You’re Black but we don’t necessarily need all that ‘rah rah’ about it. Sure, and I was complicit because in my mind, I’m not going to talk about Blackness either, I’m going to kick ass and show everybody how amazing I am. And if I do that because of the talent that I have, then that will change the conversation of race,” he said. “It was very idealistic of me but super naïve and the world doesn’t work like that. If I would have used my platform even from the get-go, to be able to say, ‘I sit in my Blackness, that’s who I am and let’s go,’ that would have been a different thing.”

He added: “I think that I was part of a system where as long as you didn’t cause waves and as long as you smiled and you’re Black and you’re happy, great — versus, I’m Black, I’m going to smile and I’m going to be happy because I have a blessed life but I am also going to be very proud of my culture and my background, and I will not let you step on me about it.”

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, May 28, the 148th day of 2021. There are 217 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On May 28, 1977, 165 people were killed when fire raged through the Beverly Hills Supper Club in Southgate, Kentucky.

On this date:

In 1863, the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, made up of freed Blacks, left Boston to fight for the Union in the Civil War.

In 1912, the Senate Commerce Committee issued its report on the Titanic disaster that cited a “state of absolute unpreparedness,” improperly tested safety equipment and an “indifference to danger” as some of the causes of an “unnecessary tragedy.”

In 1918, American troops fought their first major battle during World War I as they launched an offensive against the German-held French village of Cantigny (kahn-tee-NYEE’); the Americans succeeded in capturing the village.

In 1929, the first all-color talking picture, “On with the Show!” produced by Warner Bros., opened in New York.

In 1934, the Dionne quintuplets — Annette, Cecile, Emilie, Marie and Yvonne — were born to Elzire Dionne at the family farm in Ontario, Canada.

In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt pushed a button in Washington signaling that vehicular traffic could begin crossing the just-opened Golden Gate Bridge in California. Neville Chamberlain became prime minister of Britain.

In 1940, during World War II, the Belgian army surrendered to invading German forces.

In 1959, the U.S. Army launched Able, a rhesus monkey, and Baker, a squirrel monkey, aboard a Jupiter missile for a suborbital flight which both primates survived.

In 1964, the charter of the Palestine Liberation Organization was issued at the start of a meeting of the Palestine National Congress in Jerusalem.

In 1972, Edward, the Duke of Windsor, who had abdicated the English throne to marry Wallis Warfield Simpson, died in Paris at age 77.

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In 1987, to the embarrassment of Soviet officials, Mathias Rust (mah-TEE'-uhs rust), a young West German pilot, landed a private plane in Moscow's Red Square without authorization. (Rust was freed by the Soviets the following year.)

In 2003, President George W. Bush signed a 10-year, \$350 billion package of tax cuts, saying they already were "adding fuel to an economic recovery."

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama praised Poland's transition to democracy following a meeting in Warsaw with President Bronislaw Komorowski (kah-mah-RAWF'-skee). After a four-year blockade, Egypt permanently opened the Gaza Strip's main gateway to the outside world. North Korea freed Eddie Jun, an American it had held for a half year for reportedly proselytizing.

Five years ago: A 3-year-old boy fell into a gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo; he was rescued by a team that shot to death a 400-pound gorilla named Harambe after the rescuers concluded that the boy's life was at stake, a decision that led to mourning and criticism around the globe. New Orleans Pelicans guard Bryce Dejean-Jones was shot to death by an apartment resident after kicking down the door of what he mistakenly thought was his girlfriend's flat in Dallas.

One year ago: People torched a Minneapolis police station that the department was forced to abandon amid spreading protests over the death of George Floyd. Protesters in New York defied a coronavirus prohibition on public gatherings, clashing with police; demonstrators blocked traffic and smashed vehicles in downtown Denver before police used tear gas to disperse the crowd. At least seven people were shot as gunfire erupted during a protest in Louisville, Kentucky, to demand justice for Breonna Taylor, a Black woman who was fatally shot by police in her home in March. The government reported that about 2.1 million Americans had lost their jobs in the preceding week despite the gradual reopening of businesses around the country. Organizers of the Boston Marathon canceled the event for the first time in its 124-year history because of the coronavirus; participants who verified that they ran 26.2 miles on their own would receive their finisher's medal.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Carroll Baker is 90. Producer-director Irwin Winkler is 90. Basketball Hall of Famer Jerry West is 83. Former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is 77. Singer Gladys Knight is 77. Singer Billy Vera is 77. Singer John Fogerty (Creedance Clearwater Revival) is 76. Country musician Jerry Douglas is 65. Actor Louis Mustillo is 63. Former governor and U.S. Rep. Mark Sanford, R-S.C., is 61. Actor Brandon Cruz (TV: "The Courtship of Eddie's Father") is 59. Country singer Phil Vassar is 57. Actor Christa Miller is 57. Singer-musician Chris Ballew (Presidents of the USA) is 56. Rapper Chubb Rock is 53. Singer Kylie Minogue (KY'-lee mihn-OHG') is 53. Actor Justin Kirk is 52. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., is 50. Olympic gold medal figure skater Ekaterina Gordeeva is 50. Television personality Elisabeth Hasselbeck is 44. R&B singer Jaheim is 44. Actor Jake Johnson is 43. Actor Jesse Bradford is 42. Actor Monica Keena is 42. Actor Alexa Davalos is 39. Actor Megalyn Echikunwoke (eh-cheek-uh-WALK'-ay) is 39. Pop singer Colbie Caillat (kal-LAY') is 36. Actor Carey Mulligan is 36. Actor Joseph Cross is 35. Chicago Cubs pitcher Craig Kimbrel is 33.