

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 1 of 69

[1- Upcoming Events](#)

[1- Death Notice: Arlene Anderson](#)

[2- City Council Meeting Agenda](#)

[3- Gov. Noem Announces Themes of 2021 Budget](#)

[Address](#)

[3- Avantara Help Wanted Ad](#)

[4- NSU Winter Commencement set for Saturday, Dec. 11](#)

[5- Snow this morning](#)

[6- That's Life by Tony Bender](#)

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

[11- Weekly Vikings Roundup](#)

[12- Prairie Doc: The Palm of Your Hand](#)

[13- Weather Pages](#)

[17- Daily Devotional](#)

[18- 2021 Community Events](#)

[19- Subscription Form](#)

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

UpComing Events

Tuesday, Dec. 7

7 p.m.: City Council meeting at City Hall

GBB hosts Flandreau Indian. Varsity only at 6 p.m.

4 p.m.: 7th GBB at Tiospa Zina (7th only)

Thursday, Dec. 9

7 p.m.: MS/HS Christmas Concert

Friday, Dec. 10

GBB hosts Britton-Hecla. JV at 6 p.m. with Varsity to follow

Saturday, Dec. 11

Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

8 a.m. to Noon: ACT testing at GHS

10 a.m.: Wrestling Tourney at LaMoure

Boys Basketball at Britton-Hecla. JV at 1:30 p.m. followed by varsity game.

Monday, Dec. 13

4:30 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling at Webster

Junior High GBB hosts Warner. (7th at 6 p.m. followed by 8th grade game)

7 p.m.: School Board Meeting

Thursday, Dec. 16

Basketball Double Header with Hamlin at Groton.

Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:15 p.m. followed by boys varsity.

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



Friday, Dec. 17

Brookings Bell Debate

Saturday, Dec. 18

Brookings Bell Debate

10 a.m.: Wrestling at Sioux Valley High School

Boys Basketball at Sioux Falls Lutheran. JV at 3 p.m. with varsity at 4 p.m.

Death Notice: Arlene Anderson

Arlene Anderson, 95, of Aberdeen and formerly of Andover passed away December 6, 2021 at Bethesda Home of Aberdeen. Services are pending for a later date with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

December 7, 2021 – 7:00pm

120 N Main Street

(NOTICE ADDRESS)

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1

(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)

2. Minutes

3. Bills

4. Department Reports

- Electric cars and charging stations
- Digger truck lease agreement with Altec/Global Rental Company
- Tour of Homes report and the City Hall & Wage Memorial Library Grand Opening December 11 from 9:30-11:30am
- Seasonal reports

5. Pay Request #6 – AB Contracting

6. Pay Request #7 Final – AB Contracting

7. Reconsider Pay Request #11 – Maguire Iron

8. Second Reading of Ordinance #757 – Updated City Ordinances as of 2022

9. Flag at City Hall – Legion will donate the flag if the City places the pole

10. Reappoint Chris Khali for Planning and Zoning Board Representative

11. First Reading of Ordinance #758 – Supplemental 2021 Appropriations

12. Northeast Council of Governments Joint Cooperative Agreement for 2022

13. NWE Groton Substation Two Plat Showing

14. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)

15. Hire Skating Rink Employees

16. Finance Officer Resignation

17. Adjournment

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 3 of 69

Gov. Noem Announces Themes of 2021 Budget Address

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem announced the primary themes of her 2021 Budget Address:

“South Dakota has the strongest economy in America right now, but that success does not stem from government. It stems from our people and from the Freedom that they enjoy. This year, as with years past, we will continue to focus on our people and their future.”

Gov. Noem will lay out her recommendations to lawmakers on how to responsibly manage South Dakota’s historic revenues, our strong economy, as well as federal dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act.

South Dakota’s economic strength is reflected by Governor Noem’s recent “Best Governor in America” ranking by the American Legislative Exchange Council and South Dakota’s top-five ranking in “Freedom in the 50 States” by the CATO Institute.

The 2021 Budget Address will take place in the South Dakota House of Representatives at 1 p.m. CT on Tuesday, December 7. The address will be livestreamed on South Dakota Public Broadcasting, SD.net, and Facebook.com/GovNoem.



H E L P
W A N T E D

Avantara-Groton is rapidly growing its team and hoping to invest in cook, dietary aides and Dietary Manager. Full and part time with after school hours available. Competitive wages, sign-on bonus, etc. Call Shana or Sarah to discuss your future employment opportunities today!

605-397-2365


AVANTARA
GROTON

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 4 of 69

NSU Winter Commencement set for Saturday, Dec. 11

ABERDEEN, S.D. – On Saturday, Dec. 11, 94 students will graduate from Northern State University at its 2021 winter commencement.

The ceremony begins at 10:30 a.m. in the NSU Johnson Fine Arts Center. Delivering the commencement address will be Dr. Kristi Bockorny, associate professor of management and marketing, the 2021 NSU Foundation Faculty Excellence Award. Student speaker will be Jacob Swanson, 2021-22 president of the Student Government Association.

The ceremony will be live streamed through the Northern State University Facebook page, the NSU Graduation and Commencement page, and locally through cable channel 12.

Graduates are listed below, grouped alphabetically by city and state:

SOUTH DAKOTA

Erin Barrie, Aberdeen (B.S.Ed. Elementary Education; Special Education)*

Todd Bitz, Aberdeen (B.A. History)

Alexis Boesl, Aberdeen (B.S. Marketing)**

Ryan Clay, Aberdeen (A.S. Biotechnology)^^^

Dylan Duvall, Aberdeen (BFA Digital Media)**

Titon Erler, Aberdeen (B.S. Management)

Kelsey Flihs, Aberdeen (B.S. Biology; A.S. Biotechnology; Allied Health Certificate)

Roger Frank II, Aberdeen (B.A. History)**

Jocelyn Gray, Aberdeen (B.S.Ed. Elementary Education)**

Brady Hamer, Aberdeen (B.A. History)

Bronson Heier, Aberdeen (B.S. Management)

McKinley Hoselton, Aberdeen (BME Music Education: Instrumental; Vocal)**

Sebastian Johnson, Aberdeen (A.S. Business Administration)

Amanda Koens, Aberdeen (B.A. Criminal Justice)

Kelsey Kuo, Aberdeen (B.S. Psychology)

Zackary Martinmaas, Aberdeen (B.S. Business Administration)**

Dasin Mateski, Aberdeen (A.A. General Studies)

Lionel Morningstar, Aberdeen (B.S. Management Information Systems)**

Dylan Northrop, Aberdeen (B.S. Management)*

Olivia O'Hara, Aberdeen (BGS General Studies)

Alex Peterson, Aberdeen (M.S. Accounting Analytics)

Kaden Peterson, Aberdeen (B.S. Management Information Systems)*

Makayla Pulfrey, Aberdeen (B.S. Sport Marketing and Administration)**

Anna Roettjer, Aberdeen (B.S.Ed. Elementary

Education)

Willa Schwab, Aberdeen (BGS General Studies)

Victoria Skinner, Aberdeen (B.S. Business Administration)

Jessica Sommers, Aberdeen (B.S.Ed. Elementary Education)**

Karli Stubbe, Aberdeen (B.S. Management)

Chase Teiken, Aberdeen (B.S. Business Administration)**

Hudson Thompson-Pearman, Aberdeen (B.S. Business Administration)

Kanuani Feliciano, Aberdeen (B.S. Management Information Systems)

Rosemary Vega, Aberdeen (B.A. Music)

Thomas Undlin, Aberdeen (B.S. Environmental Science)

Andrew Buechler, Bath (B.S. Management)*

Collin Schmidt, Bath (B.S. Marketing)

Dustann Norris, Blunt (B.S.Ed. Elementary Education; Special Education)**

Emma Terveer, Brandon (B.S.Ed. Elementary Education)**

Morgan Dahme, Britton (B.S.Ed. Elementary Education)**

Curtis Littau, Britton (M.S.Ed. Leadership and Administration)

Gillian Roda, Buffalo Gap (B.S. in Honoribus in Psychology; B.A. in Honoribus in Music)**

Nathan Schafer, Castlewood (B.S.Ed. Special Education)

Hunter Hansen, Dell Rapids (B.S. Human Performance)

Jamie Cedar, Dupree (M.S.Ed. Counseling: Clinical Mental Health)

Alyssa Sippel, Groton (M.S. Accounting Analytics)

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 5 of 69

Audrey Wanner, Groton (B.S.Ed. Special Education)
Amanda Schneider, Hosmer (B.S. Psychology)
Cally Anderson, Huron (A.A. General Studies)
Ashley Armstrong, Huron (M.S.Ed. Leadership and Administration)
Shayna DuBois, Huron (B.S. Accounting)
Kenneth Teger, Huron (A.A. General Studies)^
New New Win, Huron (B.S. Biology)
Sasha Andrews, Lake Preston (B.A. Art: Graphic Design)
Chance Olson, Langford (B.S. Business Administration) **
Madeline Brandner, Mitchell (B.A. Art: Graphic Design)*
Addison Sparling, Northville (B.S. Marketing; Management)*
Karlie Karst, Peever (B.S.Ed. Special Education)*
Joseph King, Pierre (B.S. Biology; Allied Health Certificate)
Kori Kerwin, Pukwana (BME Music Education: Vocal)***
Katie McManus, Reliance (B.S. Accounting)***

Adam Krueger, Rosholt (M.S.Ed. Leadership and Administration)
Richard Morgan, Rosholt (B.S.Ed. History)
Isaiah Chevalier, Sioux Falls (B.S. Accounting)*
Elizabeth Bogue-Seaman, Warner (B.S. Accounting)
Jack Braun, Warner (B.S. Management)**
Matalyn Andersen-Pommer, Watertown (B.S. Psychology)
Abby Brist, Watertown (B.S. Psychology)
Alexis Malimanek, Watertown (B.S.Ed. Elementary Education)
Isabelle Stroup, Watertown (B.S. Accounting)**
Angela Schleich, Yankton (B.A. Art: Graphic Design) *

*** Candidate for Summa Cum Laude

** Candidate for Magna Cum Laude

* Candidate for Cum Laude

^^^ Candidate for Highest Honor

^^ Candidate for High Honor

^ Candidate for Honor



Abut two inches of snow fell this morning prompting snow removal for the winter season.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 6 of 69

That's Life by Tony Bender Underwear for Christmas

And so this is Christmas. Almost. A time when many of us are still pondering the perfect gifts for those we love. It seems to me that each Christmas is a marker in time of our evolution. Dylan said the other day that he's at the point when there's much more satisfaction in giving than receiving. It's more about sharing the holiday with the ones he loves. The true spirit of Christmas is upon him.

Another milepost is the juncture at which your mother stops giving you underwear for Christmas. You may think you've reached adulthood when you're 18 or 21 but it's not official until your mom ceases gift-wrapping underwear and socks. I think that happened when I was 27, so I didn't have to buy underwear until I was about 35.

I spent the last two weekends catching up on laundry and that gave me some time to consider the inconsistencies in my mother's approach to the holiday. She announced regularly with great fanfare, trumpets and everything, that she'd better not receive a gift with a handle on it—a mop, broom, or a vacuum cleaner—in short, nothing utilitarian or misogynistic, even though that last word was not part of our vocabulary back then. We were relegated to “Yes, ma'am,” and an occasional accusatory “Joel did it.”

When it came to equality of the sexes, my mom was liberated long before Gloria Steinem had a training bra to burn. As I came to understand it, she was not only equal, she was more equal than the rest of us. We were forbidden from saying things like “What's for supper?” or “I don't have any clean socks.” To the best of my knowledge, there were six of us kids but it's possible one or two had been excommunicated before my time for crossing that line. I washed my own “dirty damn baseball uniform.” Unquote.

When someone instills that kind of fear in you—I still flinch if she makes a sudden movement—you don't really think about the inconsistencies. She had a very narrow window of acceptable gifts—jewelry, perfume, scarves, fine crystal collectibles—but I got underwear. Is that even fair? It's wildly hypocritical! And I used to think my mom was perfect; I had her on a pedestal but I'm taking her down this instant. For one thing, she might fall and break a hip.

As I was folding my underwear on Saturday... and I realize many of you don't... heathens... I remembered the good old days when I lived across the street from Carmel's Cleaners in Hettinger, ND. Every six weeks or so, I would drag a canvas bag that held all my soiled clothes (you could fit a Studebaker in there) across the street, and they would come back to me neatly pressed, folded, and on hangers, for not much more than I'd have paid to slug it out with other bachelors over the last open dryer at the laundromat.

When I could no longer count on Carmelo Bonomo because he refused to follow me when I moved—and if that isn't a sad reflection on the once-vaunted American work ethic, I don't know what is—I was forced into a new approach. Conventionality would have meant doing laundry more often but I just kept buying more underwear. Which is how we got to the current situation, me folding about a hundred pairs of underwear over the course of two weekends. A hundred? “Surely, you're exaggerating, Tony,” you're thinking. Not by much. If at all. And when you have a hundred pairs—give or take a hundred—they never wear out.

I don't know how this dating thing is going to go at my age but if we get to the part where she sees my Batman underwear it's going to be the true test of the relationship, a “Crossing the Rubicon” moment. It could be a dealbreaker, but I love my Batman underwear. And the utility belt comes in handy.

At this point, dear reader, you're wondering how did Tony take us from sweet Christmas thoughts to a haunting, sordid vision of him in Batman underwear? Probably pole-dancing, too. Easy. Because I'm a professional. And I've watched a lot of Hitchcock. And I have no filter. Plus, there's no one here to stop me. I'm all growed up.

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Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 7 of 69

#492 in a series Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

When we last talked on December 2—just three days ago—our seven-day new-case average was closing in on 86,000. At the time, I mentioned that the Thanksgiving cases should start coming home to roost soon, and that is apparently what happened—at least I hope that’s it, not some longer-term trend. At midday today, we were at 108,462; this is more than a 25 percent jump in three days. We hadn’t been over 100,000 in over two months—early October. We did blow past 49 million cases last night, also as predicted. (And much satisfaction as there usually is in being right, I’d give a fair amount to be wrong with one of my gloomy predictions one day soon.) We keep this up, we’re going to get past 51 million before Christmas. Here’s the history:

April 28, 2020 – 1 million – 98 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days
December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days
December 26 – 19 million – 5 days
December 31 – 20 million – 5 days
January 5 – 21 million – 5 days
January 9 – 22 million – 4 days
January 13 – 23 million – 4 days
January 18 – 24 million – 5 days
January 23 – 25 million – 5 days
January 30 – 26 million – 7 days
February 7 – 27 million – 8 days
February 19 – 28 million – 12 days
March 7 – 29 million – 16 days
March 24 – 30 million – 17 days
April 8 – 31 million – 15 days
April 24 – 32 million – 16 days
May 18 – 33 million – 23 days
July 16 – 34 million – 59 days
July 31 – 35 million – 15 days
August 11 – 36 million – 11 days
August 17 – 37 million – 6 days
August 23 – 38 million – 6 days

August 30 – 39 million – 7 days
September 5 – 40 million – 6 days
September 12 – 41 million – 7 days
September 18 – 42 million – 6 days
September 27 – 43 million – 9 days
October 6 – 44 million – 9 days
October 18 – 45 million – 12 days
November 1 – 46 million – 14 days
November 13 – 47 million – 12 days
November 24 – 48 million – 11 days
December 4 – 49 million – 10 days

Hospitalizations are increasing more modestly so far—from 55,243 on December 2 to 58,301 today. Deaths are firmly above 1000 per day again: The seven-day average is at 1179, up from 947 on December 2, a 24 percent increase. Let’s hope this settles down before the Christmas surge; we have almost three weeks before the holiday.

We knew this was coming given the Minnesota case who’d recently traveled to New York: There are five cases of Omicron identified in New York. These, of course, won’t be the last. People who attended the anime conference in New York that the Minnesota case had also attended are being urged to get tested and positives are showing up. There’s another case in Minnesota as well as more in other states previously reporting them. We can also add Hawaii, Colorado, Nebraska, Maryland, New Jersey, Georgia, Missouri, Wisconsin, Connecticut, Washington, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Utah to the list of states with identified cases. That puts us at 16 with more to follow, I’m very sure. While many of these are people with a history of recent travel, not all are; and we know there will soon be, if there has not already been, community transmission—cases showing up in people with no

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 8 of 69

travel history and no direct connection to someone with a recent travel history. That's simply a matter of time. While much about this variant (pretty much everything, truth be told) is still unknown, there are preliminary data that lead to a conclusion that it may have, according to the European Union's infectious disease agency, a "substantial advantage" over earlier variants; they're entertaining the possibility that this will be the dominant variant by spring. Now I don't know anything special, but we have to at least consider the likelihood that these folks are right even while fervently praying they're not.

South Africa's new-case count, very low before Omicron showed up, is low no more; it just about quadrupled in the four days from Tuesday to Friday last week—from 4373 to 16,066. The test positivity rate (the percentage of tests done that come back positive) has risen to 24.3 percent; three percent is considered to show reasonable containment. There's not enough genomic sequencing going on yet, but what is being done is looking like upwards of 70 percent of new cases are Omicron. That's not good. One of the latest countries to identify cases of Omicron is Greece. And for the record, I've heard from a friend who actually knows Greek from his graduate studies that the correct Greek pronunciation for Omicron is ah-mee-krahn. So you can take that under advisement as you choose a pronunciation from those I've so helpfully provided to you that won't make you look like an ignoramus. Meanwhile, Finland, India, Zimbabwe, Malaysia, and Mexico are also now on our growing list.

One piece of not-great news is that prior infection does not appear to be particularly protective against omicron. We knew that protection from prior infection wasn't exactly foolproof, but now, we're seeing a sharp rise in infections among the previously-infected, something we did not see when other variants, including Delta, swept through. Work not yet published (so not yet peer-reviewed) that was done at Stellenbosch University, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases in South Africa, and other agencies in that country shows that on a population level, "the Omicron variant is associated with substantial ability to evade immunity from prior infection." The analysis says Omicron is at least three times as likely to cause reinfections (that is, infections in previously-infected people) than earlier variants including Delta. Soaring new-case numbers in a population with a 40 percent prior infection rate bear this out. South Africa has gone from 4300 new cases per day on Tuesday to 8600 on Wednesday and 11,500 on Thursday. While we don't have proof of increased transmissibility, none of this says "less transmissible." If this current thinking pans out, then, also according to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control, there is reason to think Omicron "may have a substantial growth advantage over the Delta" variant and "mathematical modeling indicates that the Omicron VOC is expected to cause over half of all" coronavirus infections in the EU in the short-term future. It is notable that it already is the dominant variant in South Africa's Gauteng province where it is accounting for 74 percent of new cases sequenced last month. This is most likely not what we want to see.

Worse, the same group of South African scientists has also presented another piece of work at a scientific conference. This one offers the suggestion Omicron is, indeed, more transmissible and more capable of immune evasion. Juliet Pulliam, director of South Africa's DSI-NRF Center of Excellence in Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis at Stellenbosch University and an author on this paper, said, "It looks like it may be more transmissible than delta. There's a huge amount of uncertainty in the analysis, but I would say it looks likely." Also not great news although we should note that some scientists believe the trade-off for increased transmissibility is a loss in virulence—the ability to cause severe symptoms. Again, there's nothing definitive here, but it's cause for a very small hope at this point.

An international research team has spotted an insertion mutation in the Omicron variant which is causing some interest because the particular RNA sequence in this mutation has not shown up in any other variants of SARS-CoV-2, but does show up in a coronavirus that causes colds (HCoV-229E) and in HIV, as well as in the transcription products (RNA) of human cells. The most likely way such an insertion can find its way into the variant would be through a process called recombination whereby the genomes of

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 9 of 69

two different entities interact. This would happen in a host cell co-infected by SARS-CoV-2 and the other virus so that they could exchange a snippet of RNA. Viruses that engage in recombination are far more successful shape-shifters, and we really would prefer this virus did not exhibit this sort of behavior very often. Additionally, the variant picking up a piece of the human transcriptome might help it to appear more human-like to our immune systems—could potentially be an assist with immune evasion. All in all, although it's far too early to draw any firm conclusions, this isn't great news. Genes interact in ways that are not always predictable, so it remains to be seen how all of these many mutations in Omicron play together—could be some cancel out others, mute their effect, or enhance their expression. We should also note that there are other theories floating around about how this variant has managed to accumulate so many mutations, so nothing about a mechanism is a sure thing yet at all. This is just one more possibility to toss into the reckoning.

One of those other possibilities is something else I've seen floated just in the past few days: Some experts think it's plausible that SARS-CoV-2 engaged in what's called reverse zoonosis. Zoonosis is when an animal virus makes its way into humans; so reverse zoonosis is when a virus makes the opposite trip from human to animal. We know this virus has done that; in fact, we've been talking about zoo animals, mink, and deer, for example, becoming infected via contact with humans. Now, we're talking about following that up with new zoonosis back into humans again, only this time as a new variant. We know the wild-type virus that emerged in Wuhan, China, a couple of years ago was unable to infect rodents, but the currently prevailing variants are able to do so, which means there's been some genetic flexibility as to hosts developing already. This hypothesis goes that mutation might just be pushed along by selection pressures when the virus finds itself in a new host whose immune system the virus needs to stay ahead of. This hypothesis will gather weight if we find animal hosts that develop chronic infections because, just as we see in humans who are immunosuppressed, for example, a long-term infection sets up the conditions for an increased mutation rate. I will repeat that we don't know any of this for sure yet, and there are, in fact, other experts who think if this virus, probably as Delta, did evolve into Omicron in an animal there would be traces of the animal's genetic material in its genome. There has been none such spotted. All of these hypotheses are smart people's educated guesses about how we got here; it's going to take time to nail any of this down—if, indeed, we ever do. We can discuss, but it would be exceedingly silly for any of us here to be choosing sides—fairly safe statement as I don't think I have any molecular geneticists or such as readers.

I am not sure exactly how this new plan works, but a recent administration action seeks to make at-home Covid-19 testing free starting the first of the year. If you have private health insurance, it will be required to reimburse you for tests you purchase going forward—won't cover ones you bought before this program kicks off. Save your receipts starting January 1, and by then, I hope we have fuller information about how you make your claims. If you receive Medicare or Medicaid or if you have no insurance, there will also be a mechanism to make these available at no cost. It sounds like, to begin with, some 25 million tests will be distributed to community health centers and rural clinics; that should be a good start. When I know more, I'll provide more information; but if the supply holds, it looks like the cost of testing should not be a barrier to control going forward.

Maybe we can still be scared into doing the smart thing: There appears to be a spike in vaccinations in the US. They've gone up somewhat since early October with bumps as booster eligibility widened and young children became eligible; but there was a fairly sharp increase this week, apparently in response to the emergence of Omicron, putting us at 2.2 million doses on Thursday, which is well above the 1.5 million daily average a couple of weeks ago. This is the highest number of doses administered in a 24-hour period since May. Half of those were boosters, and around a third were first doses, which marks people initiating vaccination. Wait times are increasing, and most pharmacies and clinics offering vaccinations have gone to an appointment-only system whereas many were taking walk-ins a week or two ago and still

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 10 of 69

seeing doses expire for lack of demand. The federal government has responded to this recent demand by standing up what they're calling family vaccination centers where boosters and first doses will both be available. I'm not going to get all excited yet—this new demand could all settle down again in a week or two—but I can hope this augurs well for the future. Dr. Peter Hotez, professor and dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and co-director of the Texas Children's Hospital Center for Vaccine Development, told the Washington Post, "Right now, refusing to get vaccinated against covid-19 has become a leading cause of death in America. We've lost more than 100,00 unvaccinated Americans to covid despite the widespread availability of vaccines. It's death by anti-science aggression."

A British team of researchers at the University of Southampton published a report in *The Lancet* on Thursday with findings from a multicenter, randomized, controlled, double-blind phase 2 trial of booster doses following vaccination with the Oxford/AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines in 2878 people during June, 2021. They looked at safety, reactogenicity (production of common side effects like sore arm and fever), and immunogenicity (immune response). The vaccines tested as boosters were Novavax, Oxford/AstraZeneca, Pfizer/BioNTech (full and half-dose), Valneva (full and half-dose), Janssen/Johnson & Johnson, Moderna, CureVac, and a quadrivalent meningococcal conjugate vaccine as a control. (No one expects a vaccine against meningococcus, a common bacterial cause of meningitis, to have any boosting effect for a Covid-19 vaccine, so it makes a good control.)

Results were that all of the vaccines tested had a good safety profile; no serious reactions were common with any of them. All of the vaccines produced increased antibody levels and T-cell responses except for Valneva in those initially vaccinated with Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine; all of them with no exceptions did so after initial Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccination. The two mRNA vaccines (Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna) produced the largest increase in antibodies after 28 days, but the researchers pointed out that the other vaccines may be working in different ways which will yield a similar increase given more time. Participants will continue to be followed with further data collection at three months and one year, so I expect a follow-up report at some point. The trial's leader, Saul Faust of Britain's National Institute for Health Research, told the Washington Post, "The other vaccines are . . . still a massive boost compared to what was already protecting us." Bottom line: It probably doesn't matter much what vaccine is used for your booster; they all work very well indeed. Just get something.

On Friday, the FDA authorized the use of Eli Lilly's monoclonal antibody therapy for infected high-risk children under age 12. The two-antibody treatment is the first authorized for use in such young children; there hasn't really been anything available for them before.

The Antwerp Zoo in Belgium has reported Covid-19 in two hippopotamuses. To the best of my recollection, these are the first of their species to be diagnosed. These guys' runny noses tipped off zookeepers to the situation, and testing confirmed Covid-19. Both appear to be doing well, only mildly ill with upper respiratory symptoms. No one's too sure how the virus was transmitted to the animals because precautions are in place; a human caretaker is undoubtedly the source. Their area of the zoo is closed to visitors for the present, but the animals do not appear to be in any real danger at the moment.

That's a wrap. Stay well. We'll talk again.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 11 of 69

Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jack & Duane Kolsrud

The Vikings hand the Lions their first win of the season, falling 29-27 in a game that once again comes down to the last play.

What seemed to be the most winnable game of their schedule going into the 2021 season, the Vikings have now dropped two in a row on the road and are looking up at playoff teams with just five games to go.

The game started well as the Vikings moved the ball down the field but had to settle for two field goals to take an early 6-0 lead. The wheels came off in the second quarter, with the Lions getting a pair of touchdowns from their tight ends and adding two field goals to take a 20-6 lead into halftime. Depleted by injuries on the defensive side with four starters missing from the lineup, it appeared the Lions were not only going to win their first game but possibly blow out the purple.

After outscoring the Lions 21-3 for the majority of the second half, the Vikings seemed like they were going to steal another game late and come home with a 6-6 record. However, with just 1:50 remaining, Mike Zimmer put his defense in prevent mode. Prevent defense, which seems to prevent you from winning, did such as the Vikings gave up their only third-down conversions of the game to the Lions' offense. The Lions had failed to convert eight times previously during the game. Rushing just three linemen, the Vikings failed to pressure Jared Goff, as he marched the Lions down the field on 14 plays. The game ended on an 11-yard pass to St. Brown as time expired.

The Zimmer-Spielman regime may be coming to an end. Even though the Vikings were depleted with numerous starters missing, losing to the Lions can be the nail in the coffin for their tenure. For a defensive-minded coach like Zimmer, the Vikings have been awful in the final two minutes of games. In the first halves of this season, the Vikings have given up 72 points in the last two minutes to end the half. When it comes to the second half, they are 0 for 8 when attempting to get a stop to finish the game. The Vikings salvaged wins versus Carolina and Green Bay, but six games resulted in losses.

In 2001, Dennis Green was the last Vikings' coach to lose to a winless Lions team. By the end of that season, the Vikings fired Green and replaced him with Mike Tice. Could this be the fate of Mike Zimmer?

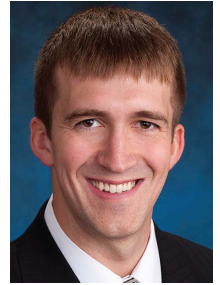
The Vikings still have time to turn this around and make a playoff run. There is absolutely no room for error the rest of the season.

The lone bright spot of the game was Justin Jefferson. He finished with 11 catches, 182 yards, and what looked like a game-winning touchdown. Ironically, this was the first game in which Jefferson caught at least seven passes, and the Vikings did not win.

Next up for the Vikings is the Pittsburgh Steelers on Thursday Night Football. Ben Rothlisberger comes into US Bank Stadium for what sounds like the last time (rumors abound that this will be his final season). Big Ben has been the starting quarterback for the Steelers for the past 18 seasons and has two Super Bowl titles. A true luxury of stability of having a franchise quarterback for more than a decade.

The Palm of Your Hand

As a family physician living on the upper Great Plains, I have many patients of Norwegian and German descent. Thus, I am familiar with some diseases that are prone to affect people of northern European ancestry. One such example is Dupuytren's contracture.



Andrew Ellsworth, MD

Dupuytren's contracture is a gradual thickening of the connective tissue of the palm of the hand. It may begin innocently as a nodule in the palm or joint stiffness, which are common for anyone. However, with Dupuytren's contracture, over time the fingers curl inwards and cannot be straightened. Cords can become visible in the palm of the hand. This is often a slow progression over several years and may or may not become painful. It can make it harder to grasp objects and use the hand in general.

Sometimes called the "Viking Disease," Dupuytren's contracture most often affects men of northern European descent over the age of 50. Other risk factors making a person susceptible to this disease can include smoking, alcohol, manual labor, and being thinner. It would seem being a fan of the Minnesota Vikings may be a risk factor, but that is probably just coincidence.

The condition is named after Guillaume Dupuytren, a French military surgeon who was skilled in anatomy. He described the condition well and was the first to perform a successful operation for it in 1831. Interestingly, Dupuytren gained prominence from treating Napoleon Bonaparte's hemorrhoids.

Although a steroid injection or physical therapy may be helpful, in general, Dupuytren's contracture cannot be cured, only treated. For a long time, surgery was the mainstay treatment, especially for more advanced cases. Surgery can involve cutting the fascia, the affected layer of connective tissue. A less invasive procedure involves using needles to weaken the thickened cords of fascia.

In the last decade a new treatment became available. Injecting the enzyme collagenase weakens the bonds in the collagen of the fascia, releasing the contractures. Extracted from the bacteria *Clostridium histolyticum*, the collagenase offers an effective nonsurgical option for treatment.

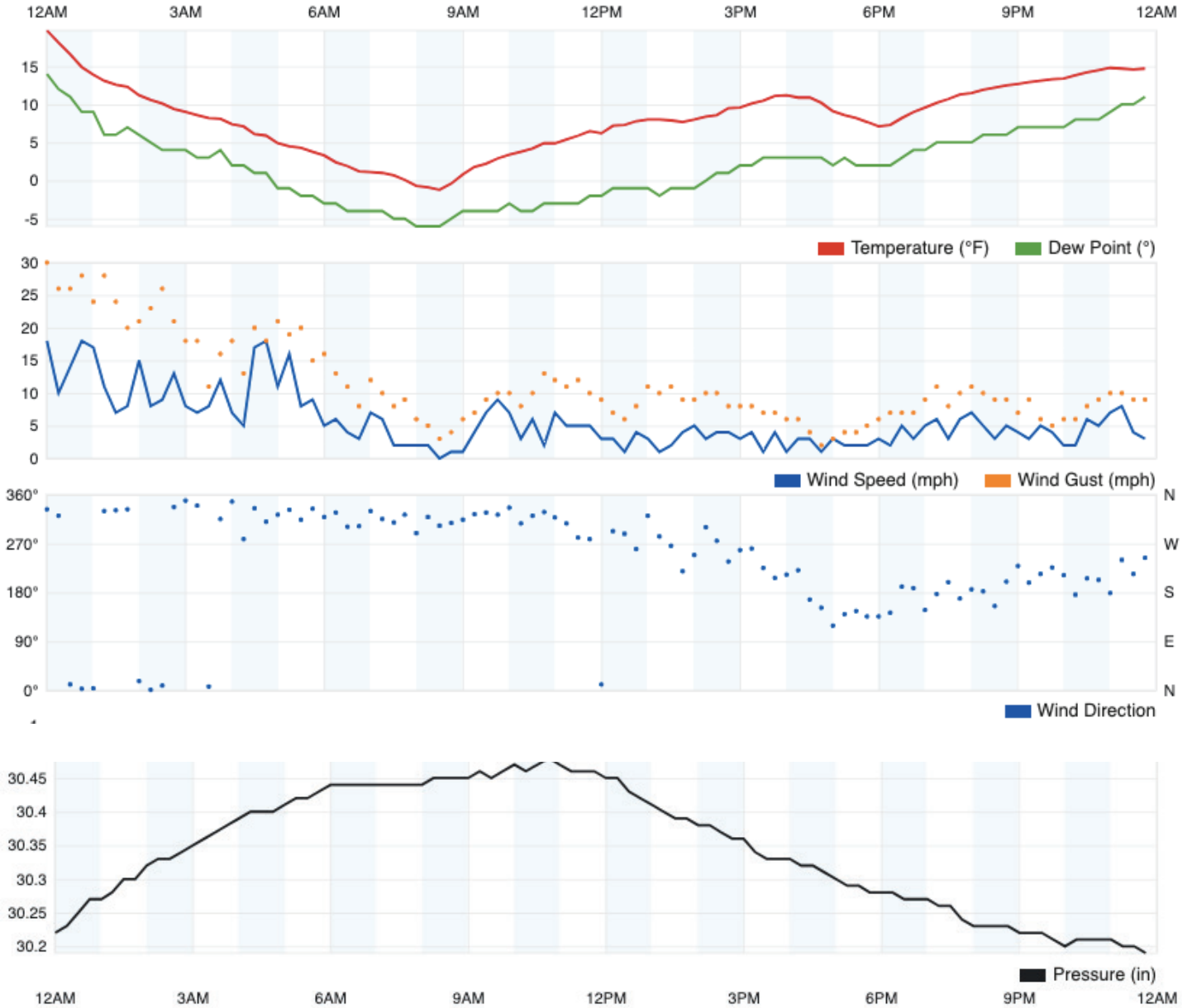
I am not sure what my Norwegian and German ancestors would have thought about injecting an enzyme from a bacterium into their hands. However, patients today appreciate regaining the use of their hands for daily activities and to clap and cheer for their favorite football team.

Andrew Ellsworth, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org and on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show celebrating its twentieth season of truth-ful, tested, and timely medical information, broadcast on SDPB and streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 13 of 69

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 14 of 69

Today



Slight Chance
Snow then
Mostly Cloudy

High: 24 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 10 °F

Wednesday



Mostly Sunny

High: 30 °F

Wednesday
Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 22 °F

Thursday



Mostly Sunny

High: 37 °F

This Morning

Light Snow Across the East
Limited Visibility

This Afternoon

Sunshine to make an
appearance?

Highs 20-30°



NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION



www.weather.gov/abr
12/7/2021 4:52 AM

Snow will come to an end this morning. Some clearing is possible this afternoon, though clouds will remain around. Cold temperatures will persist before above average highs return Wednesday and Thursday.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 15 of 69

Today in Weather History

December 7, 1963: Winds of 50 to 60 mph resulted in blowing snow all day on the 7th, which reduced visibilities to near zero and produced snow drifts several feet deep in many areas. Snowfall in eastern South Dakota was generally from 3 to 7 inches with 1 to 2 inches in the western part of the state. Storm total snowfall included 8 inches at Sisseton, 5 inches at Watertown and Wheaton, 4 inches at Aberdeen, and 2 inches at Mobridge.

December 7, 1971: Heavy snow of 7 to 12 inches fell in north-central South Dakota on the 7th. Timber Lake and Eagle Butte each reported 12 inches of snow. Strong winds accompanied the snow and caused extensive drifting. Drifts up to 15 feet were reported in sheltered areas near Lemmon. Seven inches fell at Mobridge, and 11 inches fell at Selby. McIntosh received 4 inches.

December 7, 1740: By all accounts, the Merrimack River in New Hampshire flooded on this day. The flood is likely the first recorded in New Hampshire. "The snow melted, and a freshet occurred in the Merrimack River, nothing like it having been experienced there for seventy years. At Haverhill, the stream rose fifteen feet, and many houses were floated off." (Perley, Sidney, 1891, *Historic storms of New England* p. 49-51).

December 7, 2006: A rare tornado tore through Kensal Rise in London. This T4 on the TORRO scale, equivalent to an F2 on the Fujita scale, injured six people and damaged 150 homes. According to the BBC, the last tornado which caused significant damage in London was in December 1954, in West London.

1740 - In early December two weeks of mild and rainy weather culminated in the worst flood in fifty years in the Lower Connecticut River Valley. The Merrimack River swelled to its highest level, and in Maine the raging waters swept away mills, carried off bridges, and ruined highways. (David Ludlum)

1935 - Severe flooding hit parts of the Houston, TX, area. Eight persons were killed as one hundred city blocks were inundated. Satsuma reported 16.49 inches of rain. The Buffalo and White Oak Bayous crested on the 9th. (6th-8th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Heavy rain fell across eastern Puerto Rico, with 19.41 inches reported at Las Piedras. Flooding caused five million dollars damage. Another in a series of storms hit the northwestern U.S., with wind gusts above 100 mph reported at Cape Blanco OR. While snow and gusty winds accompanied a cold front crossing the Rockies, strong westerly winds, gusting to 93 mph at Boulder CO, helped temperatures in western Kansas reach the 60s for the sixth day in a row. Freezing drizzle in northeastern slowed traffic to 5 mph on some roads in Morrow County. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - An outbreak of cold arctic air brought up to 18 inches of snow to the Colorado Rockies, with 14 inches at Boulder CO, and seven inches at Denver. Heavy snow blanketed New Mexico the following day, with 15 inches reported near Ruidoso. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A storm moving out of the Central Rocky Mountain Region spread snow across Kansas and Oklahoma into Arkansas and Tennessee. Snowfall totals ranged up to 7.5 inches at Winfield KS. Freezing rain on trees and power lines cut off electricity to 24,000 homes in northeastern Arkansas, and 40,000 homes in the Nashville TN area were without electricity for several hours. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

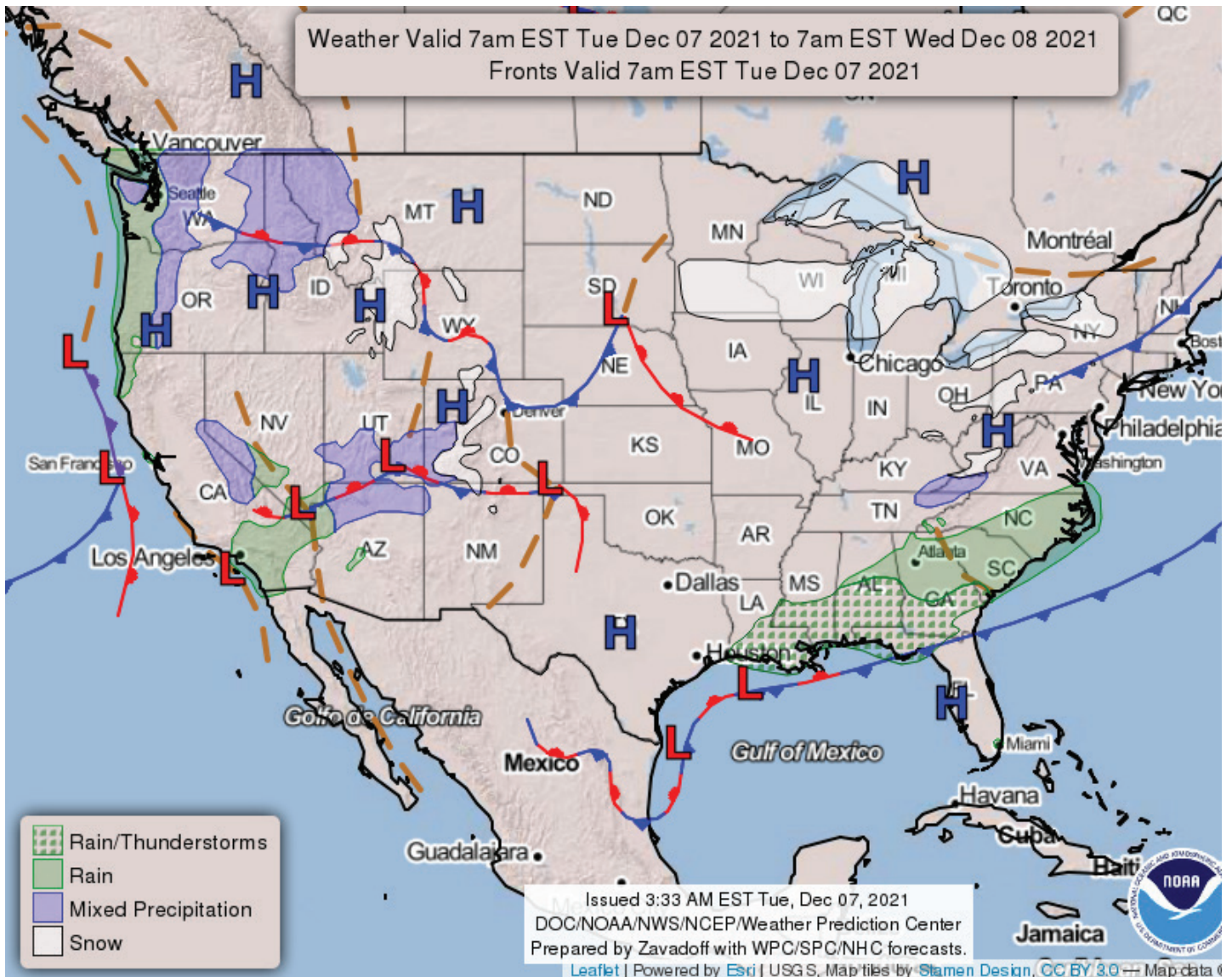
Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 16 of 69

Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 19.7 °F at Midnight
Low Temp: -1.2 °F at 8:30 AM
Wind: 30 mph at Midnight
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 60° in 1918
Record Low: -27° in 2013
Average High: 32°F
Average Low: 11°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.14
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.06
Average Precip to date: 21.35
Precip Year to Date: 19.92
Sunset Tonight: 4:51:01 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:58:03 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 17 of 69



A GIFT FOR ETERNITY

Timothy did well in his first semester at college. A sense of excitement was building in the family as the day approached when he would be home for Christmas. His mother wanted to make it a special event, one he would remember for years to come.

"Let's give Timothy a wristwatch for Christmas," she said. "He's done so well and I want him to know how much we appreciate all of his hard work."

"But," protested his father, "what happened to that crush proof, waterproof, shockproof, scratchproof watch we gave him when he left for college?"

"He can't find it," said his mother.

In giving us the gift of His Son, God gave us Someone Who will be with us forever. A Gift that will be with us until the end of our lives and throughout eternity. An indestructible, unchanging, all-powerful, and ever-present Presence.

Jesus promised: "be sure of this – I am with you always and everywhere, even to the end of the age."

Some would ask, "What does it mean that He will be with us? Did he not leave His disciples when He ascended into heaven?" No, He didn't.

When He left them physically, He sent the Holy Spirit to be His presence with them personally. We know He was called "Immanuel – God with us" when He was born. We know He is with us now through the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: It's easy, Father, to lose sight of You and Your messages at this time of the year. But help us to pause, pray frequently and sense Your presence within us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 28:20 Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 18 of 69

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 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** 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
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament
Cancelled Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)
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
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/11/2021 Veteran's Day Program at the GHS Arena
11/21/2021 Groton Area Snow Queen Contest
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
11/30/2021 James Valley Telecommunications Holiday Open House 10am-4pm
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 19 of 69

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$122 million

Powerball

03-21-38-50-59, Powerball: 6, Power Play: 3

(three, twenty-one, thirty-eight, fifty, fifty-nine; Powerball: six; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$280 million

South Dakota to get \$60M federal boost for water projects

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota will receive more than \$60 million in water project funding in the massive federal infrastructure bill.

While state budget planners are still determining the U.S. Treasury Department's stipulations on how to use it, the Argus Leader reports the infusion of federal dollars to state coffers means South Dakota's next budget will likely be larger than ever.

Ian Fury, a spokesman for Gov. Kristi Noem, said the funding is part of about \$355 million that South Dakota is set to receive over the next several years.

The additional dollars at the state's disposal means more opportunities for big-ticket projects and spending initiatives. And there's been no shortage of requests being considered.

Earlier this fall during a series of calls between legislators and the governor, the need for increased water supply for communities like Rapid City and Aberdeen were discussed.

In the northeastern part of the state, business and community leaders have been angling to connect a new water pipeline from the Missouri River reservoir to the region.

Noem will deliver her annual budget address and reveal where her administration's spending priorities will be at 1 p.m. Tuesday at the Capitol.

Aberdeen man sentenced in crash that killed motorcyclist

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — An Aberdeen man has been sentenced to 15 years in prison with five years suspended in a crash that killed a man just weeks away from getting married.

Carson Maunu, 19, earlier pleaded guilty to vehicular homicide in an agreement with prosecutors. Maunu originally faced three felonies.

Maunu was driving a pickup truck last June that crossed the center line on an avenue in Aberdeen, and collided with a motorcycle, killing 27-year-old Casey Kulm, of Groton.

During a sentencing hearing Friday, several relatives of the victim talked about the loss of a family member who was three weeks away from getting married. They said Kulm was studying to become a trauma medic at the time of his death.

"Carson, you are the only one responsible. I pray that someday I can forgive you, but that won't come without a change in your lifestyle," said Kulm's father, Mike Kulm.

Brown County State's Attorney Ernest Thompson said Maunu had been drinking alcohol that night and left the scene of the crash. Thompson argued for a 15-year sentence.

Maunu's attorney Chad Locken argued for a lighter sentence and noted that his client has been going through trauma and grief counseling since the crash, Aberdeen American News reported.

Judge Gregg Magera suspended five of the 15-year sentence he imposed, provided Maunu have a chemical dependency evaluation and complete aftercare recommendations. Maunu's driver's license will also be

revoked for 10 years starting at the time of his release from prison.

Biden to warn Putin of economic pain if he invades Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is ready to warn Vladimir Putin during a video call Tuesday that Russia will face economy-jarring sanctions if it invades neighboring Ukraine as Biden seeks a diplomatic solution to deal with the tens of thousands of Russian troops massed near the Ukraine border.

Biden aims to make clear that his administration stands ready to take actions against the Kremlin that would exact “a very real cost” on the Russian economy, according to White House officials. Putin, for his part, is expected to demand guarantees from Biden that the NATO military alliance will never expand to include Ukraine, which has long sought membership. That’s a non-starter for the Americans and their NATO allies.

“We’ve consulted significantly with our allies and believe we have a path forward that would impose significant and severe harm on the Russian economy,” White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday in previewing the meeting. “You can call that a threat. You can call that a fact. You can call that preparation. You can call it whatever you want to call it.”

The leader-to-leader conversation — Biden speaking from the Situation Room, Putin from his residence in Sochi — is expected to be one of the toughest of Biden’s presidency and comes at a perilous time. U.S. intelligence officials have determined that Russia has massed 70,000 troops near the Ukraine border and has made preparations for a possible invasion early next year.

In a statement released just hours before the leaders’ video call, Ukrainian authorities charged that Russia is sending tanks and snipers to war-torn eastern Ukraine to “provoke return fire.” Ukraine’s Defense Ministry alleged that Russia is holding “training camps under the leadership of regular servicemen of the Russian Armed Forces.” The Kremlin hasn’t commented on the allegations.

The U.S. has not determined whether Putin has made a final decision to invade. Still, Biden intends to make clear to the Russian leader that there will be a “very real cost” should Russia proceed with military action, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity.

Biden was vice president in 2014 when Russian troops marched into the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea and annexed the territory from Ukraine. Aides say the Crimea episode — one of the darker moments for former President Barack Obama on the international stage — looms large as Biden looks at the current smoldering crisis.

The eastward expansion of NATO has from the start been a bone of contention not just with Moscow but also in Washington. In 1996, when President Bill Clinton’s national security team debated the timing of membership invitations to former Soviet allies Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, Defense Secretary William Perry urged delay to keep Russian relations on track. Perry wrote in his memoir that when he lost the internal debate he considered resigning.

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were formally invited in 1997 and joined in 1999. They were followed in 2004 by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the former Soviet states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Since then, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia have joined, bringing NATO’s total to 30 nations.

A key principle of the NATO alliance is that membership is open to any qualifying country. And no outsider has membership veto power. While there’s little prospect that Ukraine would be invited into the alliance anytime soon, the U.S. and its allies won’t rule it out.

In Washington, Republicans are framing this moment as a key test of Biden’s leadership on the global stage.

Biden vowed as a candidate to reassert American leadership after President Donald Trump’s emphasis on an “America first” foreign policy. But Biden has faced fierce criticism from Republicans who say that he’s been ineffective in slowing Iran’s march toward becoming a nuclear power and that the Biden administration has done too little to counter autocratic leaders like China’s Xi Jinping, Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 22 of 69

and Putin.

"Fellow authoritarians in Beijing and Tehran will be watching how the free world responds," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell. "And President Biden has an opportunity to set the tone when he speaks with Putin."

Trump, who showed unusual deference to Putin during his presidency, said in a Newsmax interview on Monday that the Biden-Putin conversation would not be a "fair match," describing it as tantamount to the six-time Super Bowl champion New England Patriots facing a high school football team.

Ahead of the Putin call, Biden on Monday spoke with leaders of the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy to coordinate messaging and potential sanctions.

The White House said in a statement that the leaders called on Russia to "de-escalate tensions" and agreed that diplomacy "is the only way forward to resolve the conflict."

Ahead of the Biden-Putin faceoff, Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Zelenskyy wrote on Twitter that he and Blinken "agreed to continue joint & concerted action" and expressed his gratitude for the U.S. and allies providing "continued support of our sovereignty & territorial integrity." Biden is expected to speak with Zelenskyy later this week.

State Department spokesman Ned Price said that Blinken "reiterated the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity in the face of Russian aggression."

The Kremlin has made clear that Putin planned to seek binding guarantees from Biden precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine. Biden and aides have indicated no such guarantee is likely, with the president saying he "won't accept anyone's red line."

Psaki stressed "NATO member countries decide who is a member of NATO, not Russia. And that is how the process has always been and how it will proceed."

Still, Putin sees this as a moment to readjust the power dynamic of the U.S.-Russia relationship.

"It is about fundamental principles established 30 years ago for the relations between Russia and the West," said Fyodor Lukyanov, a leading Moscow-based foreign policy expert. "Russia demands to revise these principles, the West says there's no grounds for that. So, it's impossible to come to an agreement just like that."

Beyond Ukraine, there are plenty of other thorny issues on the table, including cyberattacks and human rights. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said U.S.-Russian relations are overall in "a rather dire state."

Both the White House and the Kremlin sought in advance to lower expectations for the call. Both sides said they didn't expect any breakthroughs on Ukraine or the other issues up for discussion, but that just the conversation itself will be progress.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters Tuesday that "obviously, if the two presidents decided to have a conversation, they intend to discuss issues and don't mean to bring matters to a dead end."

"Putin has repeatedly said that we look for good, predictable relations with the U.S.," Peskov said. "Russia has never planned to attack anyone. But we have our own concerns, our own red lines — the president spoke clearly about that. To that, Mr. Biden responded that he doesn't intend to accept any red lines. This issue will be discussed (during the call) as well."

Peskov characterized the Biden-Putin call as a "working conversation during a very difficult period," when "escalation of tensions in Europe is off the scale, extraordinary."

Litvinova reported from Moscow. Associated Press writers Robert Burns and Darlene Superville contributed reporting.

Shadow of Floyd, Chauvin case hangs over Kim Potter's trial

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — It's former Officer Kim Potter who's on trial for the killing of Daunte Wright, but the trial in the same courtroom earlier this year of ex-cop Derek Chauvin in the death of George Floyd is

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 23 of 69

casting a shadow over the proceedings.

During jury selection last week, there was little mention of Chauvin or Floyd, whose death sparked outrage over police brutality in the U.S. The court has seemed determined at times not to bring it up.

But with opening statements set for Wednesday, reminders of the earlier case are everywhere, ranging from the presence of some of the same prosecutors who tried Chauvin to potential jurors being asked about their fears of delivering an unpopular verdict.

Hennepin County Judge Regina Chu is using the same 18th-floor courtroom where Chauvin was convicted of murder in April by a jury that repeatedly watched video of the white officer kneeling on the neck of Floyd, a Black man, and where Chauvin was later sentenced by Judge Peter Cahill to 22 1/2 years.

Video will also figure prominently in Potter's manslaughter trial. The jury will see footage showing the white officer shouting "Taser, Taser, Taser" as she aimed her Glock 9 mm semi-automatic pistol at Wright, a Black man, as he tried to drive away from a traffic stop on April 11, then fired a fatal bullet into his chest before exclaiming, "I grabbed the wrong (expletive) gun."

Her attorneys say Wright's death was an innocent mistake, not a crime.

Though Floyd's death was rarely mentioned directly during jury selection, his case's impact on the trial has been obvious. The jury pool got nearly the same questionnaires used for Chauvin's trial, with only slight edits in some places to fit the circumstances of the Potter case. It doesn't mention either Chauvin or Floyd by name.

Jurors were asked whether they agree with the "defund the police" movement that gained momentum after Floyd's death. They were asked whether they trust police — and whether it's right to second-guess an officer's actions under pressure. They were also asked if they had been affected by damaging protests.

Prosecutors and the defense sifted their answers carefully and probed deeper in court. People with moderate views were more likely to be seated, like a man who said he opposed cutting police funding but also said: "I absolutely believe there's a need for change."

Some potential jurors were asked by the defense if they had any concern about blowback if they were to acquit Potter. The only Black person to make it onto the jury, a woman in her 30s, said that "is not a concern for me."

One of the few direct mentions of Floyd came from a woman who said his case "caused a lot of trauma in our city" and it made her sad. She said she did not like the negative attention it brought Minneapolis, but said a positive result of protests is that important issues are being discussed.

She made the jury as an alternate.

Just as with Chauvin, Potter's trial is being livestreamed, a rarity in Minnesota that is partly a concession to high public interest and partly due to pandemic considerations. The courtroom has clear plastic dividers that are strategically placed.

People who tune in will see several of the same faces who successfully prosecuted Chauvin, too: Assistant Attorneys General Matthew Frank and Erin Eldridge sit at the prosecution table, with their boss Keith Ellison frequently in the courtroom.

Security is heightened for the trial, with several entrances to the courthouse closed off. But the tall chain-link fences, razor wire and concrete barriers put in place for Chauvin are gone, as are the National Guard soldiers and armored vehicles that patrolled the area this spring. And the building is open to the public.

Find the AP's full coverage of the Daunte Wright case: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-daunte-wright>

China says US diplomatic boycott violates Olympic spirit

BEIJING (AP) — China accused the United States of violating the Olympic spirit on Tuesday after the Biden administration announced a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Games over human rights concerns.

Rights groups have pushed for a full-blown boycott of the Games, accusing China of rights abuses against ethnic minorities. The U.S. decision falls short of those calls but comes at an exceptionally turbulent time for relations between the powerhouse nations and was met with a barrage of criticism from China.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 24 of 69

The U.S. is attempting to interfere with the Beijing Games "out of ideological prejudice and based on lies and rumors," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian told reporters.

The boycott "seriously violates the principle of political neutrality of sports established by the Olympic Charter and runs counter to the Olympic motto 'more united,'" Zhao said.

As he did the previous day, Zhao vowed that China would respond with "resolute countermeasures" but offered no details.

"The U.S. will pay a price for its practices. You may stay tuned for follow-ups," Zhao said.

On Monday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters that the Biden administration will fully support U.S. athletes competing at the Games but won't dispatch diplomats or officials to attend.

Psaki said the U.S. has a "fundamental commitment to promoting human rights" and that it "will not be contributing to the fanfare of the Games."

The diplomatic boycott comes as the U.S. attempts to thread the needle between stabilizing difficult relations with Beijing and maintaining a tough stance on trade and political conflicts. The U.S. has accused China of human rights abuses against Muslim Uyghurs in northwest Xinjiang province, suppressing democratic movements in Hong Kong, committing military aggression against the self-ruled island of Taiwan and more.

Other major countries have yet to say if they will follow the American lead.

Beijing has denounced U.S. criticisms and punitive sanctions as interference in its internal affairs and slapped visa bans on American politicians it regards as anti-China.

Zhao warned the U.S. to "stop politicizing sports" and cease what he said were actions undermining the Beijing Winter Olympics, "otherwise it will undermine the dialogue and cooperation between the two countries in a series of important areas and international issues."

The Chinese Embassy in Washington dismissed the move as posturing in a tweet.

"In fact, no one would care about whether these people come or not, and it has no impact whatsoever on the #Beijing2022 to be successfully held," the embassy said.

China's mission to the United Nations called the boycott a "self-directed political farce."

Even the ruling Communist Party's notoriously opaque Central Commission for Discipline Inspection issued a response in the form of a lengthy screed on its website entitled "The Spirit of the Olympic Charter Cannot be Tarnished."

"Some Western anti-China politicians" have shown a "defensive Cold War mentality aimed at politicizing sport," the article said, calling that a "clear violation of the Olympic spirit and a challenge to all people who love the Olympic movement."

People on the streets of Beijing were overall dismissive of the U.S. move.

"I don't think it matters at all if they would come or not. The Olympic Games are not about one country or a couple of countries," said coffee shop employee Deng Tao.

"Such remarks from someone we never invited are simply a farce. And I don't think it will have much impact on the holding of the Winter Olympics," Lu Xiaolei, who works in trade.

It wasn't clear which officials the U.S. might have sent to Beijing for the Games and Zhao said Monday that no invitation had been extended by China.

Amid the calls for a boycott, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Tuesday that the country would make its own decision "from the perspective of national interests, taking into consideration the significance of the Olympic Games and the significance of Japan's diplomacy."

Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said a decision on officials attending would be made "at an appropriate time."

"In any case, Japan hopes that the Beijing Winter Games will be held as a celebration of peace in line with the principles of the Olympic and Paralympic Games," Matsuno said.

South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesperson Choi Young-sam declined to comment on the U.S. decision and said the ministry had not received any request from its ally not to send officials.

South Korea hopes the Beijing Olympics will "contribute to peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia and the world and help improve relations between South and North Korea," Choi said.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 25 of 69

New Zealand said Tuesday it won't be attending the games at a diplomatic level, but that it made the decision earlier due mostly to pandemic travel restrictions.

The country told China in October about its plans not to send government ministers, Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson said.

"But we've made clear to China on numerous occasions our concerns about human rights issues," Robertson said.

Australia, whose relations with China have grown increasingly tense, has yet to say whether it will send dignitaries.

The dispatching of high-level delegations to each Olympics has long been a tradition among the U.S. and other leading nations. Then-President George W. Bush attended the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Summer Games. First lady Jill Biden led the American contingent to the Summer Olympics in Tokyo this year and second gentleman Doug Emhoff led a delegation to the Paralympic Games.

EXPLAINER: What's behind Russia-Ukraine tensions?

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Ukrainian and Western officials are worried that a Russian military buildup near Ukraine could signal plans by Moscow to invade its ex-Soviet neighbor.

The Kremlin insists it has no such intention and has accused Ukraine and its Western backers of making the claims to cover up their own allegedly aggressive designs.

It's unclear whether the Russian troop concentration heralds an imminent attack. Russian President Vladimir Putin has pushed for Western guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine, and the buildup could reflect an attempt to back up the message.

Here is a look at the current tensions:

WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE STANDOFF?

Ukraine, which was part of the Russian empire for centuries before becoming a Soviet republic, won independence as the USSR broke up in 1991. The country has moved to shed its Russian imperial legacy and forge increasingly close ties with the West.

A decision by Kremlin-leaning Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to reject an association agreement with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Moscow sparked mass protests that led to his ouster in 2014. Russia responded by annexing Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and throwing its weight behind a separatist insurgency that broke out in Ukraine's east.

Ukraine and the West accused Russia of sending its troops and weapons to back the rebels. Moscow denied that, charging that Russians who joined the separatists were volunteers.

More than 14,000 people have died in the fighting that devastated Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland known as Donbas.

A 2015 peace agreement brokered by France and Germany helped end large-scale battles, but efforts to reach a political settlement have failed, and sporadic skirmishes have continued along the tense line of contact.

Earlier this year, a spike in cease-fire violations in the east and a Russian troop concentration near Ukraine fueled war fears, but tensions abated when Moscow pulled back the bulk of its forces after maneuvers in April.

THE LATEST RUSSIAN MILITARY BUILDUP

U.S. intelligence officials last week determined that Russia is planning to deploy an estimated 175,000 troops and almost half of them are already stationed along various points near Ukraine's border in preparation for a possible invasion that could begin as soon as early 2022.

Ukraine has complained that Moscow has kept over 90,000 troops not far from the two countries' border following massive war games in western Russia in the fall.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry said units of the Russian 41st army have remained near Yelnya, a town about 260 kilometers (160 miles) north of the Ukrainian border.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 26 of 69

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told lawmakers Friday that the number of Russian troops near Ukraine and in Russian-annexed Crimea is estimated at 94,300, warning that a "large-scale escalation" is possible in January.

Additionally, the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces says Russia has about 2,100 military personnel in Ukraine's rebel-controlled east and that Russian officers hold all commanding positions in the separatist forces. Moscow has repeatedly denied the presence of its troops in eastern Ukraine.

Russia hasn't provided any details about its troop numbers and locations, saying that their deployment on its own territory shouldn't concern anyone.

WHAT DOES MOSCOW WANT?

The Kremlin has accused Ukraine of failing to honor the 2015 peace deal and criticized the West for failing to encourage Ukrainian compliance. The agreement was a diplomatic coup for Moscow, requiring Ukraine to grant broad autonomy to the rebel regions and offer a sweeping amnesty to the rebels.

Ukraine, in turn, has pointed to cease-fire violations by Russia-backed separatists and insists there is a continuing Russian troop presence in the rebel east despite the Kremlin's denials.

Amid the recriminations, Russia has rejected a four-way meeting with Ukraine, France and Germany, saying it's useless in view of Ukraine's refusal to abide by the 2015 agreement.

Moscow has strongly criticized the U.S. and its NATO allies for providing Ukraine with weapons and holding joint drills, saying that encourages Ukrainian hawks to try to regain the rebel-held areas by force.

Earlier this year, Putin ominously said a military attempt by Ukraine to reclaim the east would have "grave consequences for Ukrainian statehood."

The Russian president has repeatedly described Russians and Ukrainians as "one people" and claims that Ukraine has unfairly received historic Russian lands during Soviet times.

Putin has strongly emphasized that Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO represent a red line for Moscow, and also expressed concern about plans by some NATO members to set up military training centers in Ukraine. He said that would give them a military foothold there even without Ukraine joining NATO.

Last week, Putin emphasized that Russia will seek "reliable and long-term security guarantees" from the U.S. and its allies "that would exclude any further NATO moves eastward and the deployment of weapons systems that threaten us in close vicinity to Russian territory."

He charged that "the threats are mounting on our western border," with NATO placing its military infrastructure closer to Russia and offered the West to engage in substantive talks on the issue, adding that Moscow would need not just verbal assurances, but "legal guarantees."

Putin's foreign affairs advisor, Yuri Ushakov, said the Russian leader will push for these guarantees in a video call with U.S. President Joe Biden set for Tuesday, but numerous former U.S. and NATO diplomats say any such Russian demand to Biden would be a nonstarter. Biden himself said Friday that he doesn't "accept anyone's red line."

IS THE THREAT OF A RUSSIAN INVASION REAL?

Russia rejected talk of an invasion plot as a Western smear campaign and charged the claims could conceal a Ukrainian intention for an attack in the east. Ukraine denies such plans.

Some observers interpret the troop buildup as a demonstration by Putin that Russia is prepared to raise the stakes to convince NATO to respect Moscow's red lines and stop sending troops and weapons to Ukraine.

Last month, Putin noted with satisfaction that Moscow's warnings finally have some traction and caused a "certain stress" in the West. He added: "It's necessary to keep them in that condition for as long as possible so that it doesn't occur to them to stage some conflict on our western borders that we don't need."

U.S. officials conceded that Moscow's intentions are unclear, but pointed to Russia's past behavior as a cause for concern.

Biden pledged Friday to make it "very, very difficult" for Putin to attack Ukraine, saying that a set of new initiatives coming from his administration are intended to deter Russian aggression.

Dasha Litvinova in Moscow contributed to this report.

Whistleblower: As Afghanistan fell, UK abandoned supporters

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's Foreign Office abandoned many of the nation's allies in Afghanistan and left them to the mercy of the Taliban during the fall of the capital, Kabul, because of a dysfunctional and arbitrary evacuation effort, a whistleblower alleged Tuesday.

In devastating evidence to a parliamentary committee, Raphael Marshall said thousands of pleas for help via email were unread between Aug. 21 and Aug. 25. The former Foreign Office employee estimated that only 5% of Afghan nationals who applied to flee under one U.K. program received help. He said that at one point, he was the only person monitoring the inbox.

"There were usually over 5,000 unread emails in the inbox at any given moment, including many unread emails dating from early in August," he wrote to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, which is investigating Britain's chaotic departure from Afghanistan. "These emails were desperate and urgent. I was struck by many titles including phrases such as 'please save my children'."

Marshall said some of those left behind had been killed by the Taliban.

As the Taliban took power in August, the United States, the U.K. and other countries rushed to evacuate Afghans who had worked with Western forces and others at risk of violent reprisals.

Britain managed to airlift 15,000 people out of the country in two weeks, and the government says it has since helped more than 3,000 others leave Afghanistan.

But an Afghan Resettlement Scheme announced by the government in August with the goal of bringing another 20,000 people to Britain has yet to get underway.

Former Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, who was moved from the Foreign Office to become Justice Secretary after the crisis, defended his actions.

"Some of the criticism seems rather dislocated from the facts on the ground, the operational pressures that with the takeover of the Taliban, unexpected around the world," he told the BBC. "I do think that not enough recognition has been given to quite how difficult it was."

Tom Tugendhat, a Conservative lawmaker who heads the foreign affairs committee, said Marshall's testimony "raises serious questions about the leadership of the Foreign Office." The committee is due to quiz senior Foreign Office civil servants later Tuesday.

The Taliban stormed across Afghanistan in late summer, capturing all major cities in a matter of days, as Afghan security forces trained and equipped by the U.S. and its allies melted away. The Taliban took over Kabul on Aug. 15.

Many who had worked for Western powers or the government worried that the country could descend into chaos or the Taliban could carry out revenge attacks against them.

Many also feared the Taliban would reimpose the harsh interpretation of Islamic law that they relied on when they ran Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. At the time, women had to wear the all-encompassing burqa and be accompanied by a male relative whenever they went outside. The Taliban banned music, cut off the hands of thieves and stoned adulterers.

Armed gangs raise risks in vaccinating rural Nigerians

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

KUJE, Nigeria (AP) — Yunusa Bawa rolled his motorcycle away from the health care clinic where he works in Kuje, southwest of Nigeria's capital of Abuja, and secured a black box of COVID-19 vaccine for the rough ride ahead.

The rocky and rugged pathway — Bawa described it as a road that "will make you tired" — was the least of his worries. Kidnapping along the route by armed gangs is rampant, he added.

But such trips are essential if Africa's most populous country is to reach its ambitious goal of fully vaccinating 55 million of its 206 million people in the next two months.

As the emergence of the omicron variant underscores the importance of inoculating more people to

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 28 of 69

prevent new mutations of the coronavirus, Nigeria also is facing a difficult path: Only 3.78 million are fully vaccinated.

Going directly to the villagers is one way to overcome any hesitancy they might have in getting the shots, said Bawa, 39.

"When you meet them in their home, there is no problem," he added. "Everybody will take (the vaccine)."

On Dec. 1, Nigeria began requiring government employees to be vaccinated or show a negative test for the virus in the past 72 hours. Although authorities emphasize the country is capable of getting the Western-manufactured vaccines to everyone, health care workers in rural areas are struggling, mostly because of delayed government funding.

At the Sabo health center in Kuje, a town of about 300,000 people near Abuja's international airport, Bawa and three colleagues work in dilapidated buildings with worn-out office equipment. In the past three months, only two of them have received compensation from the government, getting about 10,000 Nigerian naira (about \$24).

That's barely enough to cover the gas for Bawa's personal motorcycle — "the one we are using to move around and inform them that we are coming on specific dates," he said as he held the hand of 75-year-old Aminu Baodo before giving him a shot.

On a good day, he can get to about 20 people, but usually it is five or fewer. Many rural residents are poor and spend most of their time on farms scattered across the countryside, rather than in their homes in the village.

That often means a long day for Bawa and his coworkers, in addition to the risk of violence and waiting weeks for paltry compensation. He said he is unsure when he'll next be paid by the government for his efforts or how long his personal finances will hold out.

A 20-year-old colleague, Yusuf Nasiru, said he hasn't been paid or reimbursed for expenses since starting the job in November.

"If you should work on weekends, you should be paid," said Dr. Ndaeyo Iwot, executive secretary of Abuja's primary health care agency, which oversees vaccinations in the capital. He added that government workers who go out on mobile teams should have logistical support.

Armed groups in northwestern and central parts of Nigeria have killed hundreds of people this year and kidnapped thousands, seeking ransoms.

In areas not beset by violence, delayed payments to workers who transport and administer the vaccine remains "a big challenge for us," said Dr. Rilwanu Mohammed, the top government official leading vaccination efforts in Bauchi state in Nigeria's northeast.

"They won't pay the money until when the people have finished the work, and there is no money for movement from one point to another," Mohammed said, noting that he had to find funds himself to pay workers' expenses.

Others criticize the government for not adequately funding a campaign to inform people about the coronavirus and the need for vaccination.

"Nobody around here knows anything about the vaccine to be frank," said Omorogbe Omorogiuwa, who lives in Adamawa state, which borders the country of Chad in northeastern Nigeria. "Nobody is saying you should go and take it. In fact, it is assumed that (the pandemic) is over."

In an interview with The Associated Press, Dr. Faisal Shuaib, executive director of Nigeria's National Primary Health Care Development Agency that oversees the vaccination program, blamed "poor planning (and) poor coordination that results in difficulties or challenges in making sure that the vaccines actually get to rural areas."

Officials also have to battle skepticism about the vaccine in many parts of Nigeria, a deeply religious country where some religious leaders spread misinformation about the virus and the vaccine to their millions of followers.

In addition to false information spread on social media, some in northern Nigeria remember the 1996 deaths of several children from meningitis during a Pfizer clinical trial for an oral antibiotic, resulting in a

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 29 of 69

legal battle with the pharmaceutical giant that won payouts for some families.

Authorities have been engaging with traditional and religious leaders to get the truth about the vaccine to their followers, Shuaib said.

"But clearly, a lot of work still needs to be done by some states in ensuring that these vaccines get to the communities," he added, noting that Nigeria has 30 million doses on hand, with many more arriving in the coming months.

Adewunmi Emoruwa, the lead strategist at Gatefield, an Abuja-based consultancy group, said the government should be more focused on "promoting vaccine safety and efficacy," rather than implementing a mandate for state employees. Public servants will spread the word about the vaccine if they are "convinced" it will work, he added.

Musa Ahmed, an immunization officer in Kuje, said "social mobilization has not been taken place ... and that is (why) some people are still doubting the vaccine."

That has left a large part of Nigeria's population unvaccinated and at "very great" risk of exposure, said Dr. Richard Mihigo, immunization and vaccines development program coordinator for the World Health Organization's Africa regional office.

"As much as we give the opportunity to the virus to continue to circulate in a naive population, we give the virus the opportunity to mutate," Mihigo said in an online briefing.

On Dec. 1, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control said the omicron variant was found in three travelers who arrived in the country late November — the first in West Africa to have recorded the omicron variant since scientists in southern Africa detected and reported it.

In Kaduna state, which neighbors the capital region, Bitrus Maiyaki is another health care worker taking the risk to carry vaccines to rural communities beset by violence.

"In order to support the activities of the government, we have surrendered (our lives)," Maiyaki, 41, told AP in a telephone interview from Jama'a, where he oversees vaccinations. "And we want to save lives. ... We have taken an oath to serve our fatherland. We just take the bull by the horns."

Associated Press journalist AJayi Taiwo Oluwole in Abuja, Nigeria contributed.

Follow AP's coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Desperation drives thousands of Afghans a day across borders

By LEE KEATH and MSTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

HERAT, Afghanistan (AP) — Over the course of an hour on a recent night, the bus waiting in the Herat station filled with passengers. Mostly young men, they had no luggage, just the clothes on their backs, maybe a bag with some bread and water for the long road ahead of them.

That road is leading them to Iran.

Every day, multiple buses rumble out of Afghanistan's western city of Herat, carrying hundreds of people to the border. There they disembark, connect with their smugglers and trek for days, sometimes crammed into pickup trucks bumping through wastelands, sometimes on foot through treacherous mountains in the darkness, eluding guards and thieves.

Once in Iran, most will stay there to look for work. But a few hope to go farther.

"We're going to get to Europe," said Haroun, a 20-year-old sitting in the bus next to his friend Fuad. Back in their village there is no work. "We have no choice, the economy here is a wreck. Even if it means our death on the way, we accept that."

Afghans are streaming across the border into Iran in accelerating numbers, driven by desperation. Since the Taliban takeover in mid-August, Afghanistan's economic collapse has accelerated, robbing millions of work and leaving them unable to feed their families. In the past three months, more than 300,000 people have crossed illegally into Iran, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council, and more are coming at the rate of 4,000 to 5,000 a day.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 30 of 69

The European Union is now bracing for a potential swell in Afghans trying to reach its shores at a time when EU nations are determined to lock down against migrants in general.

So far, a post-Taliban surge of Afghan migrants to Europe hasn't materialized. Afghan entries into the EU have "remained mostly stable," according to an EU weekly migration report from Nov. 21. The report noted that some Afghans who arrived in Italy from Turkey in November told authorities they had fled their country after the Taliban takeover.

But a significant portion of migrants likely intend to stay in Iran, which is struggling to shut its doors. It already hosts more than 3 million Afghans who fled their homeland during the past decades of turmoil.

Iran is stepping up deportations, sending 20,000 or 30,000 Afghans back every week. This year, Iran deported more than 1.1 million Afghans as of Nov. 21 — 30% higher than the total in all of 2020, according to the International Organization for Migration. Those deported often try again, over and over.

In Afghanistan, the exodus has emptied some villages of their men. In Jar-e Sawz, a village north of Herat visited by The Associated Press, an elderly man was the only male left after all the younger men left.

One smuggler in Herat — a woman involved in the business for two decades — said that before the Taliban takeover, she was transporting 50 or 60 people a week into Iran, almost all single men. Since the August takeover, she moves around 300 people a week, including women and children.

"The country is destroyed so people have to leave," she said, speaking on condition she not be named because of her work. "I feel like I'm doing the right thing. If some poor person asks me, I can't refuse them. I ask God to help me help them."

She charges the equivalent of almost \$400 per person, but only about \$16 up front, with the rest paid after the migrant finds work. The pay-later system is common in Herat, a sign that there are so many migrants, smugglers can accept some risk that some will be unable to pay. Along the way, smugglers pass out bribes to Taliban, Pakistani and Iranian border guards to turn a blind eye, she said.

Everyone going gives the same reason.

"There is nothing here. There is no work and our families are hungry," said Naib, a 20-year-old who was pausing with a group of migrants one night in a desolate area within sight of the Iranian border outside Herat. "We go crawling if we have to. There is no other choice."

Afghanistan was already one of the poorest countries in the world before the Taliban takeover, and the economy has deteriorated the past year, worsened by the coronavirus pandemic and a punishing drought since late 2020.

When the Taliban came to power on Aug. 15, the main artery keeping Afghanistan's economy alive — international donor funds — was severed. With the Taliban government unable to pay salaries, hundreds of thousands of state employees found themselves with no livelihoods. With funding for projects gone, many jobs vanished across the labor market.

Farid Ahmed, a 22-year-old in Herat, used to go to a main square each day to be hired by building contractors for a day's work. Previously, he found work most days. "Now we wait all day and no one comes to hire us," he said.

So last month, he took his wife and their two young daughters — ages 8 months and 2 years — across the border. From a relative already there, he heard that a Tehran weaving factory had jobs for him and his wife.

The crossing was a nightmare, he said. They had to walk for three hours in the darkness with several hundred other people across the border. In the cold and darkness, his daughters were crying. Once in Iran, they were almost immediately caught by police and deported.

Back home, nothing has changed. He goes to the square every day but finds no work, he said. So he will try taking his family again. "After winter," he said. "It's too cold now for the children to cross."

Herat, Afghanistan's third largest city, is a main hub for Afghans from other parts of the country making their way to Iran.

The city is only about an hour's drive from the Iranian border, but the frontier is too heavily patrolled here. Instead, migrants embark on a 300-mile (480-kilometer) trip south to Nimrooz, a remote region of

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 31 of 69

deserts and mountains that is Afghanistan's most sparsely populated province. Here, the migrants cross into a corner of Pakistan, from where they can more easily slip into Iran.

It's an arduous journey. Reza Rezaie, a Herat resident, made the trip with his 17-year-old son. The most harrowing moment comes at the Iranian-Pakistani border, where migrants must ascend and then descend Moshkelghar, literally "Difficult Mountain," on narrow trails along steep drop-offs.

"It's pitch darkness and you can't turn on flashlights for security," he recalled. On the way up, they walk in single file, each holding the scarf of the person in front of them. Descending on the Iranian side, they gingerly crawl down so they don't tumble off the edge. "If you fall, no one will help you because they will fall too," he said.

At one point in Iran, he and others hid in the luggage compartment under a bus to get around checkpoints. He worked for a few weeks doing construction in Shiraz before he was caught in a police raid and expelled.

But he is undaunted. His father recently died, so he has to wait for the 40-day mourning period to end. Then he'll try Iran again.

"What else can I do? Here, there is nothing," he said.

Associated Press writers Abdul Qahar Afghan and Omid Haqqjou contributed to this report.

End of an era: Germany's Merkel bows out after 16 years

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Angela Merkel was assured of a place in the history books as soon as she became Germany's first female chancellor on Nov. 22, 2005.

Over the next 16 years, she was credited with raising Germany's profile and influence, working to hold a fractious European Union together, managing a string of crises and being a role model for women.

Now that near-record tenure is ending with her leaving office at age 67 to praise from abroad and enduring popularity at home. Her designated successor, Olaf Scholz, is expected to take office Wednesday.

Merkel, a former scientist who grew up in communist East Germany, is bowing out about a week short of the record for longevity held by her one-time mentor, Helmut Kohl, who reunited Germany during his 1982-1998 tenure.

While Merkel perhaps lacks a spectacular signature achievement, the center-right Christian Democrat came to be viewed as an indispensable crisis manager and defender of Western values in turbulent times.

She served alongside four U.S. presidents, four French presidents, five British prime ministers and eight Italian premiers. Her chancellorship was marked by four major challenges: the global financial crisis, Europe's debt crisis, the 2015-16 influx of refugees to Europe and the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's undeniable that she's given Germany a lot of soft power," said Sudha David-Wilp, the deputy director of the German Marshall Fund of the United States' Berlin office. "Undoubtedly she's elevated Germany's image in the world."

"When she first came onto the scene in 2005, a lot of people underestimated her, but she grew in stature along with Germany's role in the world," David-Wilp added. Others in Europe and beyond "want more of an active Germany to play a role in the world — that may not have been the case before she was in office, necessarily."

In a video message at Merkel's final EU summit in October, former U.S. President Barack Obama thanked her for "taking the high ground for so many years."

"Thanks to you, the center has held through many storms," he said.

Merkel was a driving force behind EU sanctions against Russia over its annexation of Crimea and backing of separatists in eastern Ukraine, and also spearheaded so-far-unfinished efforts to bring about a diplomatic solution there. She was regarded as being "able to have a dialogue with (Russian President Vladimir) Putin on behalf of the West," David-Wilp said.

She was steadfast in pursuing multilateral solutions to the world's problems, a principle she set out at

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 32 of 69

a military parade in her honor last week.

The global financial crisis and the migrant influx “made clear how much we depend on cooperation beyond national borders and how indispensable international institutions and multilateral instruments are to be able to cope with the big challenges of our time,” Merkel said, identifying those as climate change, digitization and migration.

That stance was a strong counterpoint to former U.S. President Donald Trump, with whom she had a difficult relationship. At their first meeting in the White House in March 2017, when photographers shouted for them to shake hands, she quietly asked Trump “do you want to have a handshake?” but there was no response from the president, who looked ahead.

Merkel dismissed being labeled as “leader of the free world” during that period, saying leadership is never up to one person or country.

Still, she was viewed as a crucial leader in the unwieldy 27-nation EU, famed for her stamina in coaxing agreements in marathon negotiating sessions.

“Ms. Merkel was a compromise machine,” Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel said recently. When negotiations were blocked, she “mostly found something that unites us to move things along.”

That was on display in July 2020, when EU leaders clinched a deal on an unprecedented 1.8 trillion-euro (\$2 trillion) budget and coronavirus recovery fund after a quarrelsome four-day summit.

At her 107th and last EU summit, European Council President Charles Michel told Merkel: “You are a monument.” A summit without her would be like “Rome without the Vatican or Paris without the Eiffel Tower,” he added.

The appreciation from her counterparts was genuine, although there was plenty of friction over the years. Merkel always sought to keep the EU as tightly knit as possible but strongly defended Germany’s interests, clashing with Greece during the debt crisis and disagreeing with Hungary, Poland and others over their refusal — unlike Germany — to host migrants arriving in Europe.

Merkel said she was bowing out of the EU “in a situation that definitely gives me cause for concern as well.”

“We have been able to overcome many crises in a spirit of respect, in an effort always to find common solutions” she said. “But we also have a series of unresolved problems, and there are big unfinished tasks for my successor.”

That’s also true at home, where her record — dominated by the crises she addressed and including a pandemic that is flaring anew as she steps down — is a mixed bag. She leaves Germany with lower unemployment and healthier finances, but also with well-documented shortcomings in digitization — many health offices resorted to fax machines to transmit data in the pandemic — and what critics say was a lack of investment in infrastructure.

She made progress in promoting renewable energy, but also drew criticism for moving too slowly on climate change. After announcing in 2018 that she wouldn’t seek a fifth term, she failed to secure a smooth transition of power in her own party, which slumped to defeat in Germany’s September election.

The incoming governing coalition under Scholz says it wants to “venture more progress” for Germany after years of stagnation.

But Germans’ overall verdict appears to remain favorable. During the election campaign, from which she largely was absent, Merkel’s popularity ratings outstripped those of her three would-be successors. Unlike her seven predecessors in postwar Germany, she is leaving office at a time of her choosing.

Merkel’s body language and facial expressions sometimes offered a glimpse of her reactions that went beyond words. She once lamented that she couldn’t put on a poker face: “I’ve given up. I can’t do it.”

She wasn’t intimidated by Putin’s style. The Russian president once brought his Labrador to a 2007 meeting with Merkel, who later said she had a “certain concern” about dogs after having once been bitten by one.

She was never the most glamorous of political operators, but that was part of her appeal — the chancellor continued to take unglamorous walking holidays, was occasionally seen shopping at the supermarket and lived in the same Berlin apartment as she did before taking the top job.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 33 of 69

Named "The World's Most Powerful Woman" by Forbes magazine for the past 10 years in a row, Merkel steps down with a legacy of breaking through the glass ceiling of male dominance in politics — although she also has faced criticism for not pushing harder for more gender equality.

Obama said that "so many people, girls and boys, men and women, have had a role model who they could look up to through challenging times."

Former President George W. Bush, whose relationship with Merkel's predecessor, Gerhard Schroeder, soured over the latter's opposition to the U.S.-led war in Iraq, said that "Angela came in and changed that completely."

"Angela Merkel brought class and dignity to a very important position and made very hard decisions ... and did so based upon principle," Bush told German broadcaster Deutsche Welle in July. He described her as "a compassionate leader, a woman who was not afraid to lead."

Follow AP's coverage of Germany's transition to a new government at <https://apnews.com/hub/germany-election>.

Survivors gather to remember those lost at Pearl Harbor

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii (AP) — A few dozen survivors of Pearl Harbor are expected to gather Tuesday at the site of the Japanese bombing 80 years ago to remember those killed in the attack that launched the U.S. into World War II.

Herb Elfring, 99, said he's glad to return to Pearl Harbor considering he almost didn't live through the aerial assault.

"It was just plain good to get back and be able to participate in the remembrance of the day," Elfring told reporters over the weekend.

Elfring was in the Army, assigned to the 251st Coast Artillery, part of the California National Guard on Dec. 7, 1941. He recalled Japanese zero planes flying overhead and bullets strafing his Army base at Camp Malakole, a few miles down the coast from Pearl Harbor.

Elfring, who lives in Jackson, Michigan, said he has returned to Hawaii about 10 times to attend the annual memorial ceremony hosted by the Navy and the National Park Service.

About 30 survivors and about 100 other veterans of the war were expected to join him this year.

They will observe a moment of silence at 7:55 a.m., the same minute the attack began decades ago. Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro is expected to deliver the keynote speech.

The bombing killed more than 2,300 U.S. troops. Nearly half — or 1,177 — were Marines and sailors serving on the USS Arizona, a battleship moored in the harbor.

Several women who helped the war effort by working in factories have come to Hawaii to participate in the remembrance this year.

Mae Krier, who built B-17s and B-29s at a Boeing plant in Seattle, said it took the world a while to credit women for their work.

"And we fought together as far as I'm concerned. But it took so long to honor what us women did. And so of course, I've been fighting hard for that, to get our recognition," said Krier, who is now 95. "But it was so nice they finally started to honor us."

This year's ceremony takes place as a strong storm packing high winds and extremely heavy rains hits Hawaii, flooding roads and downing power lines. Navy spokesperson Brenda Way told The Associated Press in an email Monday that she has heard of no discussion of canceling the event because of the storms.

'Cheugy,' 'omicron' among 2021's most mispronounced words

By WILLIAM J. KOLE Associated Press

"Cheugy" is apparently a lot to chew on. Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter Billie Eilish and Philadelphia Eagles center Jason Kelce have something in common — broadcasters butcher their names.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 34 of 69

And virtually everyone is having trouble with "omicron."

All four made it onto this year's list of most mispronounced words as compiled by the U.S. Captioning Company, which captions and subtitles real-time events on TV and in courtrooms.

The list released Tuesday identifies the words that proved most challenging for newsreaders and people on television to pronounce this year.

The caption company said it surveyed its members to generate the list, which is now in its sixth year and was commissioned by Babbel, a language-learning platform with headquarters in Berlin and New York.

"Newscasters in the U.S. have struggled with 2021's new words and names while reporting on key sporting events, viral internet trends and emerging celebrities," said Esteban Touma, a standup comedian and teacher for Babbel Live.

"As a language teacher, it's always interesting to see that some of these terms are usually new colloquialisms, or are rooted or borrowed from another language," he said. "As a non-native speaker, I must confess it's fun to see English speakers stumbling a bit for a change."

Here's how Touma breaks down the proper pronunciations for the most commonly misspoken words:

— Cheugy (CHOO-gee): A trendy term popularized by Gen Z and used to mock an outdated and unfashionable aesthetic typically associated with millennials, such as "Live, Laugh, Love" signs.

— Chipotle (chih-POHT-lay): The American fast food chain became the center of a viral trend this year challenging Baby Boomers to pronounce the name.

— Dalgona (tal-goh-NAH): A Korean treat made with melted sugar and baking soda, popularized in Netflix's "Squid Game." (Touma notes that some speakers seem to produce a "K" instead of the "G" in the middle syllable.)

— Dogecoin (DOHJ-coin): A divisive cryptocurrency that began somewhat ironically before being popularized by Elon Musk, causing its value to dramatically increase.

— Eilish (EYE-lish): The singer Billie Eilish, whose album "Happier Than Ever" was released this year to critical acclaim and nominated for the Grammy Awards' Album of the Year.

— Ethereum (ih-THEE-ree-um): Another cryptocurrency that skyrocketed in value this year amid the decentralized-currency boom.

— Ever Given (EV-er GIV-en): The name of the ship that blocked the Suez Canal in March, costing billions of dollars in lost trade. Many newscasters mistook the name of the ship as "Evergreen," the name of the company that owns the vessel, which was printed on its hull.

— Glasgow (GLAHZ-go): The host city of November's United Nations Climate Conference was mispronounced by both President Joe Biden and former president Barack Obama.

— Kelce (KELs): The Philadelphia Eagles center Jason Kelce revealed on radio this year that his teammates and the media had been mispronouncing his name for years.

— Omicron (AH-muh-kraan / OH-mee-kraan): A new variant of COVID-19 first identified in November, named in keeping with the World Health Organization's system of identifying variants with Greek letters. (Touma notes it's pronounced differently in the U.S. and the U.K.)

— Shein (SHEE-in): The Chinese fast fashion company at the center of the "Shein haul" trend, in which participants record themselves trying on numerous different outfits from the company.

— Stefanos Tsitsipas (STEH-fuh-nohs TSEE-tsee-pas): Currently ranked as the world's No. 4 tennis player, the Greek athlete rose to international prominence when he lost to Novak Djokovic in the final of the French Open in June.

— Yassify (YEAH-sih-fai): A popular trend in which multiple beauty filters are applied to well-known pictures or portraits for comic effect.

New York City poised to give voting rights to noncitizens

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City, long a beacon for immigrants, is on the cusp of becoming the largest places in the country to give noncitizens the right to vote in local elections.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 35 of 69

Legally documented, voting-age noncitizens comprise nearly one in nine of the city's 7 million voting-age inhabitants. Under a bill nearing approval, some 800,000 noncitizens would be allowed to cast ballots in elections to pick the mayor, City Council members and other municipal officeholders.

Noncitizens still wouldn't be able to vote for president or members of Congress in federal races, or in the state elections that pick the governor, judges and legislators.

Little stands in the way of the effort becoming law. The measure has broad support within the City Council, which is expected to ratify the proposal Thursday. Mayor Bill de Blasio has raised concerns about the wisdom and legality of the legislation, but said he won't veto it.

The law would give an electoral voice to the many New Yorkers who love the city and have made it their permanent home, but can't easily become U.S. citizens or would rather remain citizens of their home nations for various reasons.

It would also cover "Dreamers" like Eva Santos, 32, who was brought to the U.S. by her parents at age 11 as an unauthorized immigrant, but wasn't able to vote like her friends or go to college when she turned 18.

"It was really hard for me to see how my other friends were able to make decisions for their future, and I couldn't," said Santos, now a community organizer.

More than a dozen communities across the United States currently allow noncitizens to vote, including 11 towns in Maryland and two in Vermont.

San Francisco, through a ballot initiative ratified by voters in 2016, began allowing noncitizens to vote in school board elections — which was also true in New York City until it abolished its boards in 2002 and gave control of schools to the mayor.

The move in Democrat-controlled New York City is a counterpoint to restrictions being enacted in some states, where Republicans have espoused unsupported claims of rampant fraud by noncitizens in federal elections.

Last year, voters in Alabama, Colorado and Florida ratified measures specifying that only U.S. citizens can vote, joining Arizona and North Dakota in adopting rules that would preempt any attempts to pass laws like the one being considered in New York City.

"I think that there's people in our society that go to sleep with so much fear of immigrants that they try to make an argument to disqualify their right to elect their local leaders," said New York City Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez, who is originally from the Dominican Republic and was unable to vote until he became a naturalized U.S. citizen.

"This is about whether we are living in New York City, we are contributing to New York City and paying taxes in New York City," said Rodriguez, a Democrat.

De Blasio, though, has questioned whether the measure would survive a legal challenge. Federal law allows states and local governments to decide who can vote in their elections, but some, including the mayor, have raised concerns about whether state lawmakers must first act to grant the city the authority to extend voting rights to noncitizens.

"Look, there's obviously an argument: We want people involved, we want to hear people's voices," de Blasio recently said on the television news program "Inside City Hall."

"I still have a concern about it. Citizenship has an extraordinary value. People work so hard for it," he said. "We need people in every good way to want to be citizens."

The minority leader of the City Council, Joseph Borelli, a Republican from Staten Island, said the measure will undoubtedly end up in court.

"It devalues citizenship, and citizenship is the standard by which the state constitution issues or allows for suffrage in New York state elections at all levels," Borelli said.

The proposal would allow noncitizens who have been lawful permanent residents of the city for at least 30 days, as well as those authorized to work in the U.S., including so-called "Dreamers," to help select the city's mayor, city council members, borough presidents, comptroller and public advocate.

The law would direct the Board of Elections to draw up an implementation plan by July, including voter registration rules and provisions that would create separate ballots for municipal races to prevent non-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 36 of 69

citizens from casting ballots in federal and state contests. Noncitizens wouldn't be allowed to vote until elections in 2023.

Giving nonresidents the right to vote could empower them to become a political force that can't be easily ignored, said Anu Joshi, the vice president of policy of the New York Immigration Coalition.

New York City, with more than 3 million foreign-born residents, would be a fitting place to anchor a national movement to expand immigrant voting rights, said Ron Hayduk, now a professor of political science at San Francisco State University but who spent years in New York steeped in the movement for noncitizen voting rights.

"New York, the home of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, prides itself on being the place of immigration," he noted. "So there's this question of what's the place of immigrants in our city — are they really New Yorkers, are they full New Yorkers in the sense of qualifying and deserving the power of the vote and to shape its political future?"

The answer should be a "resounding yes," he said.

Patriots out-run Bills in 14-10 win in blustery conditions

By JOHN WAWROW AP Sports Writer

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. (AP) — Linebacker Matt Judon praised the Patriots offense while taking a playful swipe at rookie quarterback Mac Jones.

"Hats off to the offense. Really everybody, probably besides Mac," Judon said breaking into a smile. "He didn't really do nothing besides hand the ball off."

No offense taken. With 40 mph wind gusts placing an emphasis on running the ball, Jones was more than content in being relegated to handoff duty in New England's 14-10 win over the Buffalo Bills on Monday night.

Jones completed just two of three pass attempts for 19 yards in essentially standing back and watching the Patriots backfield literally run away with their seventh consecutive win and shore up New England's familiar place atop the AFC.

"Just a crazy game to be a part of," Jones said.

"We knew it was going to be windy. You can't control it. There is no on and off switch," he added. "You just have to go out there and do your job, and for us to run the ball like we did was incredible."

Damien Harris scored on a 64-yard run in an outing the Patriots out-gained Buffalo 222 to 99 in yards rushing. Nick Folk hit both field goal attempts from 34 and 41 yards with the wind at his back, and the Patriots defense limited the Bills to a season-low 230 yards offense.

Defensive back Miles Bryant sealed the victory by batting down Josh Allen's pass at the goal line with Buffalo facing fourth-and-14 at New England's 18 with 1:55 remaining. It came a series after Buffalo's Tyler Bass missed a 34-yard attempt wide right into the wind in a game the Bills managed 10 points on four drives inside the New England's 20..

"What a memorable game that will be for me in my career," center David Andrews said. "One, it's a win. Two, I don't know if I've ever played in a game where we've thrown the ball three times. And I've been playing football since I was 6 years old, so that's 23 years."

New England (9-4) improved to 6-0 on the road this season and now has a two-win edge over the Bills (7-5) in the AFC East standings.

The Bills continued their inconsistencies by losing four of their past seven, and have not won consecutive games since capping a 4-0 run spanning Sept. 19 to Oct. 10.

Though the two teams meet once more in Foxborough, Massachusetts, on Dec. 26, Buffalo's path to repeat as division champions, never mind earn a third straight postseason berth, is suddenly muddled. The AFC's wild-card race now features four teams with seven wins. The Bills also dropped to 5-5 against AFC opponents and 3-1 against division opponents.

Buffalo continues resembling the shell of a team which swept the season-series against New England last year for the first time since 1999, en route to its first 13-win season in 29 years.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 37 of 69

"No excuse for it," middle linebacker Tremaine Edmunds said. "They came in and they beat us. We've just got to get better. We've got to finish off the season strong."

Easier said than done for a team which continues to have difficulty running the ball and stopping the run. Take away Allen's six carries for 39 yards, and the Bills trio of running backs finished with 60 yards on 19 carries.

Buffalo's defense has now allowed 200-plus yards rushing in two of its past three, after giving up a season-worst 264 in a 41-15 loss to Indianapolis two weeks ago.

Harris finished with a season-best 111 yards rushing and opened the scoring on New England's ninth play from scrimmage. Facing third-and-5, Harris burst through a gaping hole up the middle and was untouched on his way to the end zone.

Rather than attempt the extra point into the wind, coach Bill Belichick succeeded on a 2-point conversion, with Brandon Bolden scoring just inside the left pylon.

Each team capitalized on the other's mistakes in trading touchdowns in the opening quarter.

Harris' TD came three plays after New England's Lawrence Guy recovered Matt Breida's fumble at the Patriots 31.

Buffalo responded on its next possession which was extended after N'Keal Harry slipped and had Matt Haack's punt glance off his helmet, with Siran Neal recovering the ball at New England's 14. Allen hit Gabriel Davis on a slant route on the next play to cut the lead to 8-7.

Allen finished 15 of 30 for 145 yards.

"You don't plan on losing games, you know. It's not part of the gig," Bills center Mitch Morse said. "We understand the magnitude of what this meant and what this loss meant so it's not lost on us. We understand that we have a lot of work to do to put ourselves in a position where we think this team can be."

MILESTONES:

According to Elias Sports, the Patriots had the fewest yards passing and became the first team to attempt just one pass in the first half since at least 1978. ... Jones became the NFL's third quarterback to win nine games in his rookie season, joining Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger in 2004, and Dallas' Dak Prescott in 2016. He also joined Roethlisberger and Prescott in becoming the NFL's third rookie QB to win his first six road starts. ... Bass' 35-yard field goal with 6:35 left in the third quarter ended New England's four-game streak of not allowing a point in the second half.

THE ELEMENTS

The elements were at times overwhelming, including a wind-chill that dropped the temperature into the mid-20s.

One of New England's Jake Bailey's punts went sideways into the wind for 15 yards. Members of ESPN's pre-game broadcast crew were blown off their chairs along the sideline, and the orange flags was ripped off the top of the left upright in the east end of the stadium.

UP NEXT

Patriots: Enter bye week off, and return to play at Indianapolis Colts on Dec. 18.

Bills: Travel to play Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Sunday, with Tom Brady, 32-3 against Buffalo, holding the NFL record for most career wins by a quarterback against one opponent.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/hub/nfl> and <https://apnews.com/hub/pro-32> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

Beyond Ukraine, plenty of issues for Biden-Putin talks

By ZEKE MILLER and DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russia's military buildup on the border with Ukraine will be the top focus of talks between President Joe Biden and Russia's Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, but there are plenty of other thorny issues on the table as well, including cyberattacks, human rights, and US-Russian relations that a Kremlin spokesman says are overall in "a rather dire state."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 38 of 69

Fyodor Lukyanov, a leading Moscow-based foreign policy expert, suggested that progress on nuclear arms control and cybersecurity since the summit in Geneva will be discussed, and that regional topics like Syria, Afghanistan and North Korea might get a cursory mention, but mostly it will be about tensions over Ukraine.

"All conversations these days are held in a Cold War fashion — the Cold War fashion meaning that we don't solve problems together, the only thing we do is defusing tensions where they grow. Ukraine and eastern Europe — there is this effect of rising tensions, or at least it is perceived. In all other places, Russia-U.S. tensions aren't growing, so there's nothing to talk about," Lukyanov told the AP in an interview on Monday.

Both the White House and the Kremlin have tried to lower expectations for the call, with both sides saying they don't expect any breakthroughs on Ukraine or the other issues up for discussion. But the two powers maintain that the conversation — the leaders' first since the summer — is progress in and of itself.

U.S. officials said the call would not be confined to just the Ukraine issue because other matters "critical" to national security need to be discussed.

A look at what else is on the agenda for Putin and Biden when they speak Tuesday:

IRAN

After the latest round of talks meant to bring Iran back into compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal went nowhere, the international community is facing key decisions in the coming months on what to do about that country's fast-advancing atomic program. Former President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the agreement, but Biden has made rehabilitating the accord a top priority as Iran enriches uranium closer to the purity level required for a weapon. Russia is still a party to the accord and the two leaders may discuss the next steps in trying to convince Iran to return to compliance with the deal.

SPACE

A Russian anti-satellite missile test last month sent a cloud of debris across low-earth orbit forcing astronauts on the International Space Station to take shelter and NASA to delay a space walk. The test, which the U.S. condemned as "recklessly conducted," sparked new fears about the militarization of space, and the prospects that such tests could pose hazards to space exploration and development for generations to come. The Biden-Putin discussion will also come weeks after China was revealed to have tested a hypersonic sub-orbital weapon. The White House says Biden will raise the importance of "strategic stability in the nuclear and space domains" on the call.

PRISONERS

Two former U.S. Marines, Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed, are imprisoned in Russia on charges the U.S. government contends are unjust. Both the U.S. and Russian governments have previously expressed openness to discussions about potential prisoner swaps that could result in the Americans' release, and Biden has pledged to continue to raise their plight with Putin.

DIPLOMATS

The U.S. and Russia are in the midst of a years-long tussle over staffing at diplomatic outposts in one another's country, but talks have been under way for months to ease tensions. The U.S. shuttered two Russian compounds in 2016 in retaliation for Russian election meddling and also expelled some Russian diplomats on spying charges. Russia retaliated by shuttering U.S. outposts and curtailing America's ability to hire local workers in Moscow to staff its embassy. The row escalated in recent months over visas for U.S. diplomats in Russia, resulting in critical staffing issues. An agreement to ease tensions could be reached as a "deliverable" from the call, officials said

CYBERSECURITY

On Monday, one year since the disclosure of the massive SolarWinds cyberespionage campaign traced to Russia, the security firm Mandiant said hackers associated with Russia's SVR foreign intelligence agency continued to steal data "relevant to Russian interests" with great effect. In their first in-person meeting in June, Biden pressed Putin to crack down on malicious cyber actors and earlier this year sanctioned some companies and individuals associated with the effort. The Biden administration has tried to develop "rules of the road" for activity in cyberspace, but there has been little progress on the matter since the

June summit.

Litvinova reported from Moscow.

In and outside court, Smollett fights for reputation, career

By SARA BURNETT and CHARLES REX ARBOGAST Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Outside the courtroom where former “Empire” actor Jussie Smollett is fighting charges accusing him of lying to Chicago police about being the victim of an anti-gay, racist attack, his publicist has introduced a roster of supporters to the assembled TV cameras.

Renowned opera singer Lauren Michelle, who also appeared on “Empire,” spoke of how one of her best friends from high school has maintained his humanity despite the attacks on his character. Smollett’s pastor from New York, Damon Marks, said the person prosecutors are portraying in court is not “the Jussie I know.”

And activist Bella BAHHS, who met Smollett while protesting the police murder of a 16-year-old, said she doesn’t trust Chicago police not to make things up — including the allegations against her friend.

The daily turns at the microphone are part of a broader strategy underway since Smollett’s trial started at the Chicago courthouse roughly one week ago: trying to ensure the 39-year-old emerges from this scandal and legal troubles with his reputation and career intact, or at least having suffered as little damage as possible, whatever the outcome.

The charges against Smollett — six counts of disorderly conduct for lying to police about the January 2019 attack — are low-level felonies and carry a possible sentence of three years in prison. Legal experts say if convicted he would most likely get probation and be ordered to perform community service.

The impact on his livelihood could be far more serious. Taking the witness stand Monday, Smollett testified that “I’ve lost my livelihood.” His media relations team, which is led by a former Chicago TV reporter, released a statement to The Associated Press from family friend Fania Davis, who said Smollett already has lost income and “many professional opportunities” due to a “character assassination and disinformation campaign” by Chicago police.

“This is an injury to his personal reputation, to his career and his soul,” said Davis, whose sister is civil rights activist Angela Davis. “He could easily have copped a plea, with a slap on the wrist and then moved on with his life. But he chose instead to stand up to injustice.”

Publicist Danny Deraney, who works with entertainment figures and often takes on crisis PR clients but is not working with Smollett, said the performer will be hurt in any attempt to return to his career because he was far from a household name before, and so many learned his identity because of the alleged attack and charges against him.

“Nobody really knew who he was, unless you watched the show,” Deraney said. “For the time being, I don’t see any other way of people seeing him and not knowing him for this.”

The atypical accusations, the absurdity of his alleged crime and his tendency to be fodder for comedians may hurt him more than accusations, even of serious crimes.

“Being in the public eye as far as being on television or film or whatever it is, that’s going to be hard for him. I don’t think people are going to take him seriously,” Deraney said. “People who become the butt of jokes, of doing things as ridiculous and absurd as what allegedly happened, have a harder time working.”

Some of the Smollett strategy is playing out in the court proceedings, where Smollett testified he was a victim of a hate crime after two brothers said the actor recruited them to carry out the attack on him so he could publicize it via social media. Police testified they were able to corroborate the siblings’ accounts.

Smollett’s defense attorneys have argued that the brothers committed the attack because they are homophobic and don’t like Smollett, who is gay. They say the men told police it was all staged by the actor so they could shake him down for \$1 million each to not testify.

Smollett’s legal team also has said Judge James Linn is biased against them, at one point asking for a mistrial — which Linn denied — after he cut off her questioning of one of the brothers about homophobic

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 40 of 69

language he used, calling it “collateral” material. A defense attorney also claimed Linn “lunged” at her — all of which they could use as grounds for appeal if Smollett is convicted, and to argue in the court of public opinion that the legal system unfairly wronged him.

And separate from the trial, Smollett’s team and his family — which includes five siblings, most of whom are also actors and a mother who was active in fighting for civil rights — have been promoting both the man and his talents.

On the first day of his trial, Smollett learned that a film he wrote, directed and produced, “B-Boy Blues,” won the “fan favorite narrative feature” award in the American Black Film Festival Awards. His publicist blasted the news out to journalists, along with a link to a 2016 New York Times article about the Smollett family’s acting chops and activism — supporting causes like HIV/AIDS and the Black Lives Matter movement — and a letter of support from activist and artists, including Davis and Danny Glover.

On Monday, his team sent out a photograph of Smollett and his family meeting with civil rights leader the Rev. Jesse Jackson over the weekend.

Early in his acting career, Smollett starred along with his brothers and sisters in the TV series “On Our Own,” about a group of orphaned siblings, that aired for one season. He had other roles in TV and movies, including playing Langston Hughes in “Marshall,” about Thurgood Marshall, the first Black Supreme Court justice.

His biggest role was on “Empire,” a musical drama about an entertainment company that was filmed in Chicago. Smollett starred on the program for four years starting in 2015. Producers renewed his contract for the sixth and final season in 2019, but he never appeared in an episode.

Deraney said it can be difficult to predict who will be accepted back into public life. A supportive family in the entertainment industry like Smollett has — sister Jurnee’s acting career is thriving — might not be a huge career advantage initially, but if they get into prominent positions and can hire him for roles, it might.

“If you’ve got people behind you that are financially secure, this whole industry is built on nepotism, it’s all about who you know. If his family stands behind him, that’s going to be fine for him,” Deraney said.

Fania Davis said in her statement to AP that Smollett comes from “a family of justice warriors” like her family and her sister’s family.

“We are very proud that even in this difficult period, Jussie has persevered and created art at the highest level and we are confident he will continue to do so,” she said.

Check out the AP’s complete coverage of the Jussie Smollett case.

Associated Press entertainment writer Andrew Dalton contributed to this story from Los Angeles.

Smollett back on stand after calling hoax claim ‘100% false’

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Jussie Smollett will return to the witness stand Tuesday at his trial in Chicago, where the former “Empire” actor called claims that he staged an anti-gay, racist attack on himself “100% false.”

Prosecutors will continue cross-examining the 39-year-old, who appeared calm through several hours of testimony Monday. He told jurors “there was no hoax” and that he was the victim of a hate crime in his downtown Chicago neighborhood.

Smollett, who faces charges that he lied to Chicago police about the January 2019 attack, sought to refute damaging testimony from two brothers last week. They said Smollett, who is gay and Black, orchestrated the hoax to get publicity, giving them \$100 for supplies and instructing them to place a noose around his neck and yell homophobic slurs. They also said Smollett gave them a \$3,500 check to carry it out.

Smollett said he wrote the \$3,500 check to Abimbola Osundairo for nutrition and training advice. Asked by his defense attorney if he gave Osundairo payment for some kind of hoax, Smollett replied: “Never.” Attorney Nenyue Uche asked again if he planned a hoax.

“No,” Smollett said, “there was no hoax.”

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 41 of 69

Smollett told jurors he had just returned from a trip and was walking home after buying a sandwich around 2 a.m. on Jan. 29, 2019, when someone yelled a racist, homophobic remark. Smollett said he turned around to confront the person, who he said towered over him.

Standing up in the Chicago courtroom, Smollett demonstrated how he said the man walked quickly toward him, then pointed to his left temple to show where the man hit him.

"I would like to think I landed a punch. But I don't know if it landed," Smollett said. He said they tussled on the ground for up to 30 seconds and he saw a second attacker as that person ran away.

Smollett said he assumed the person who attacked him was white because he used a racial slur and shouted "MAGA country," an apparent reference to then-President Donald Trump's campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again." The brothers, Abimbola and Olabingo Osundairo, who are Black, testified last week that Smollett instructed them to yell "this is MAGA country" during the fake assault.

Smollett said he picked up his phone and told the person he had been talking to that he "got jumped." He testified that he noticed he had a noose around his neck as he returned to his apartment. Smollett said he removed the noose but a friend who was at his apartment called police and told him to put the noose back on so officers could see it. Smollett said he was upset police had been called because he would never have done so.

"I am a Black man in America. I do not trust the police," Smollett said. "I am also a well known figure at that time and I am an openly gay man."

Under cross-examination, Smollett said he refused to give Chicago police his cellphone for their investigation because he wanted his privacy. Asked by special prosecutor Dan Webb if he was concerned the phone would show several calls to Abimbola Osundairo, Smollett said no.

Smollett also testified that Osundairo told him he could get an herbal steroid that encourages weight loss but is illegal in the U.S. "on the low" — or secretly — while he was on an upcoming trip to Nigeria.

Osundairo testified that Smollett sent him a text message about talking "on the low," and that during the conversation Smollett asked him about helping to stage the attack. Smollett said Monday that message was in reference to the illegal steroid.

When Webb asked about Osundairo's testimony that Smollett recruited him for a hoax, Smollett replied: "Fully false, 100% false."

Defense attorneys have suggested that the Osundairo brothers accused Smollett of staging the hoax because they disliked him and then saw an opportunity to make money. They suggested that after the brothers were questioned by police about the alleged attack, they asked Smollett for \$1 million each to not testify against him.

Smollett said he met Abimbola Osundairo in 2017 at a club, where he learned Osundairo also worked on the "Empire" set. He said the two men did drugs together and went to a bathhouse, where Smollett said they "made out." He said the two men later did more drugs and participated in sex acts together. Osundairo testified last week that he and Smollett did not have a sexual relationship.

Smollett testified that he met Abimbola's brother, Olabingo, but that they didn't speak. He said Abimbola Osundairo made it seem like they needed to "sneak off" when they were together around his brother. Smollett said he never trusted Olabingo Osundairo.

Prosecutors say Smollett staged the attack because he was unhappy with the "Empire" studio's response to hate mail he received. The letter included a drawing of a stick figure hanging by a noose, with a gun pointed at it, and the word "MAGA."

Smollett, 39, is charged with six counts of felony disorderly conduct for making what prosecutors say was a false police report about the alleged attack — one count for each time he gave a report — to three different officers. The class 4 felony carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if Smollett is convicted he likely would be placed on probation and ordered to perform community service.

Check out the AP's complete coverage of the Jussie Smollett case.

US plans diplomatic boycott of Beijing Winter Olympics

By AAMER MADHANI and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. will stage a diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing to protest Chinese human rights abuses, the White House confirmed Monday, a move that China has vowed to greet with “firm countermeasures.”

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said U.S. athletes will continue to compete and will “have our full support,” but added “we will not be contributing to the fanfare of the games.”

“U.S. diplomatic or official representation would treat these games as business as usual in the face of the PRC’s egregious human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang, and we simply can’t do that,” Psaki told reporters during Monday’s briefing.

“We have a fundamental commitment to promoting human rights. And we feel strongly in our position and we will continue to take actions to advance human rights in China and beyond,” Psaki added.

The announcement came as Biden prepares to host a White House Summit for Democracy, a virtual gathering of leaders and civil society experts from more than 100 countries that is set to take place Thursday and Friday. The administration has said Biden intends to use the meeting “to announce both individual and collective commitments, reforms, and initiatives to defend democracy and human rights at home and abroad.”

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez, D-N.J., called such a diplomatic boycott “a necessary step to demonstrate our unwavering commitment to human rights in the face of the Chinese government’s unconscionable abuses.”

He called on “other allies and partners that share our values to join with the United States in this diplomatic boycott.”

Sen. Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, however, said the diplomatic boycott amounted to a “half measure.” American officials, including Biden, have criticized Beijing for human rights abuses against Uyghurs in northwest Xinjiang province, suppression of democratic protests in Hong Kong, military aggression against the self-ruled island of Taiwan and more. President Donald Trump’s administration in its final days declared the abuses in northwest China “genocide.”

“The United States should fully boycott the Genocide Games in Beijing,” Cotton said. “American businesses should not financially support the Chinese Communist Party and we must not expose Team USA to the dangers of a repugnant authoritarian regime that disappears its own athletes.”

Cotton appeared to be referring to former Grand Slam doubles champion Peng Shuai, who dropped from sight after publicly accusing a former top Communist Party official of sexual assault. Concerns over her safety prompted the Women’s Tennis Association to suspend events in China and provided added fuel to opponents of China’s hosting of the games.

Psaki would not comment whether Biden weighed pulling athletes from the games — many of whom have been training for years for the moment to compete on the global stage. In 1980, in the midst of the Cold War, Jimmy Carter kept U.S. athletes home from the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

“I don’t think that we felt it was the right step to penalize athletes who have been training and preparing for this moment, and we felt that we could send a clear message by not sending an official U.S. delegation,” Psaki said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian accused U.S. politicians of grandstanding over the issue of not sending dignitaries to attend events that China hopes will showcase its economic development and technological prowess.

Speaking to reporters at a daily briefing, Zhao said such a move would be an “outright political provocation,” but gave no details on how China might retaliate.

Human rights advocates and lawmakers in the U.S. who support a boycott say it is a necessary step. They cite China’s poor record on human rights as justification, saying China is using the games to white-wash its ill treatment of civil rights activists, political dissidents and ethnic minorities.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 43 of 69

"Without being invited, American politicians keep hyping the so-called diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics, which is purely wishful thinking and grandstanding," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing. "If the U.S. side is bent on going its own way, China will take firm countermeasures."

The International Olympic Committee in a statement called the decision to keep dignitaries away from the game a "political decision for each government" that it "fully respects."

"At the same time, this announcement also makes it clear that the Olympic Games and the participation of the athletes are beyond politics and we welcome this," the IOC statement said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who had been advocating for a diplomatic boycott for months, applauded Biden for taking the step. Still, she said the IOC "allowing a country notorious for its appalling human rights record to host the Olympics makes a mockery of the Olympic Charter, which states that the Games should seek to foster respect for universal and fundamental ethical principles."

The dispatching of high-level delegations to each Olympics has long been a tradition among the U.S. and other leading nations. Then-President George W. Bush attended the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Summer Games. First lady Jill Biden led the American contingent to the Summer Olympics in Tokyo this year and second gentleman Doug Emhoff led a delegation to the Paralympic Games.

The diplomatic boycott comes as the U.S. attempts to stabilize turbulent relations with Beijing, even as it maintains a tough approach toward trade and conflicts over China's actions on Taiwan, human rights, Hong Kong and the South China Sea. CNN was first to report that an announcement was expected this week.

Beijing has mounted a stiff response to all U.S. criticisms, denouncing them as interference in its internal affairs and slapping visa bans on American politicians it regards as anti-China.

It wasn't clear whom the U.S. might have sent to Beijing for the games and Zhao's comments appeared to indicate that China has not extended any invitations.

Australia, whose ties with China have nosedived over a range of disputes, has also raised the possibility of a diplomatic boycott.

Psaki said Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping did not discuss a potential diplomatic boycott of the games when they spoke last month. She said Biden's decision to keep U.S. dignitaries home was conveyed to Beijing by aides before it was formally announced by the White House.

Justice Department sues Texas over new redistricting maps

By ACACIA CORONADO and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — The Justice Department sued Texas on Monday over its new redistricting maps, saying the plans discriminate against minority voters, particularly Latinos, who have fueled the state's population boom.

The lawsuit claims the Republican-controlled state violated part of the Voting Rights Act in drawing new district boundaries for its congressional delegation and state legislature. It's the Biden Justice Department's first legal action challenging a state's maps since states began redrawing their maps this year to account for population changes.

The lawsuit notes that most of Texas' population growth over the past decade came from Black, Latino and Asian people, but alleges that the new maps scatter these voters across districts, diluting their votes and denying them opportunities to choose their representatives. It also argues the maps pack Black and Latino communities into bizarre-shaped districts — a Dallas-area one is described as "seahorse" shaped — while preserving seats for white Republicans.

"This is not the first time that Texas has acted to minimize the voting rights of its minority citizens," Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta said during a news conference with Attorney General Merrick Garland. "Decade after decade, courts have found that Texas has enacted redistricting plans that deliberately dilute the voting strength of Latino and Black voters and that violate the Voting Rights Act."

The litigation comes as Republicans and Democrats jockey for an edge in the once-a-decade redistricting process, which has already reached new levels of gerrymandering. The lawsuit also plays out during a changed legal landscape for redistricting challenges. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2019 that it won't referee partisan gerrymandering disputes — maps drawn to benefit a political party.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 44 of 69

A spokeswoman for Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, condemned the lawsuit.

"It's no surprise that Democrats in Washington are attacking our state's redistricting plans," Renae Eze said. "We are confident that Texas' redistricting plans will be upheld by the courts, and our office continues working with the Office of the Attorney General to ensure Texans are represented fairly."

Monday's lawsuit, filed in the Western District of Texas, cites several congressional districts in which Republicans drew tortured lines to lower the share of Black and Latino voters in their party's congressional districts.

In west Texas' competitive 23rd District, the map trimmed out areas near El Paso and San Antonio to lower the share of Latino voting-age residents by 9%. In the Dallas area, it pulled Black and Latino residents in the northwest suburbs out of the district of Republican Rep. Beth Van Duyne, who narrowly defeated Candace Valenzuela, a Democratic Black Latina candidate last year. In the Houston area, where the share of the white population is dwindling, the map kept six of 10 House districts as white-majority or plurality districts.

Texas has had to defend its maps in court after every redistricting process since the Voting Rights Act took effect in 1965. But this will be the first time since a 2013 U.S. Supreme Court ruling gutted a provision of the Voting Rights Act that had required Texas and other states with a history of racial discrimination to have the Justice Department approve the maps before they went into effect.

The case is the second civil rights lawsuit the Biden administration has filed against Texas recently. Last month, it sued to overturn the state's new voting law, part of a wave of GOP-backed voting changes, claiming the new restrictions would disenfranchise citizens in the state.

The lawsuit, and others that civil rights groups and Democrats have previously filed challenging Texas' maps, may not change things before next year's election. Redistricting litigation can take several years and the Biden administration case will be heard in the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, one of the most conservative in the country.

It remains illegal for mapmakers to discriminate on the basis of race while drawing legislative lines. Additionally, Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act prohibits line-drawers from diluting the voting power of minorities by scattering them among districts and preventing them from choosing their preferred candidates.

"The Legislature refused to recognize the state's growing minority electorate," the lawsuit alleges. "Although the Texas congressional delegation expanded from 36 to 38 seats, Texas designed the two new seats to have Anglo voting majorities."

The lawsuit notes that Texas' congressional map was drawn with heavy input from its Republican congressional delegation, which is all white except for one Latino representative. Statehouse Democrats at the time objected strongly to the process and the results.

Although the federal lawsuit alleges Black voters are also treated improperly by the map, the bulk of the case centers around the map's treatment of Latinos.

The focus on Latinos could complicate the case. To prove that Latinos were denied their choice, the government has to prove that they vote as a bloc, and not in line with the majority of the voters in the district. While most Latinos in Texas vote Democratic, many have shifted to Republicans recently, with President Donald Trump gaining ground in 2020.

"That does complicate the narrative," said Josh Blackman, a law professor at the South Texas College of Law in Houston, noting that the Voting Rights Act claim depends on the group voting as a bloc.

Michael Li, senior counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice in New York, said the legal analysis should consider Latino voting patterns over several elections, not just in 2020. He said he expects Republicans to argue they are only being partisan, now that the Supreme Court has appeared to greenlight that behavior in redistricting.

"Texas drew a really aggressive map this decade," Li said. "One of the most aggressive maps we have seen so far this cycle and one that heavily targets communities of color."

Former Rep. Beto O'Rourke, a Democrat who is challenging Gov. Abbott next year, tweeted, "Texas leaders would rather gerrymander election maps and hand pick their own voters than earn their place in power by listening and responding to the needs of Texans."

Riccardi reported from Denver. Coronado is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

This story has been corrected to delete an erroneous reference to Van Dwyne winning reelection. She won an open seat.

Pence's former top aide cooperating with Jan. 6 panel

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The former chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence is cooperating with the House panel investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Marc Short was at the Capitol on Jan. 6 and accompanied Pence as he fled his post presiding over the Senate and hid from rioters who were calling for his hanging. Short is cooperating with the panel after receiving a subpoena, according to the person, who was granted anonymity to discuss the private interactions.

Former President Donald Trump was openly criticizing his vice president even as the insurrectionists broke into the building because Pence had said he would not try to unilaterally reject the electoral count as Congress certified President Joe Biden's victory. Pence didn't have the legal power to do so, but Trump pressured him anyway.

As Pence's top aide, Short was also present for several White House meetings ahead of the insurrection. At one point, Trump banned Short from the White House grounds because he objected to the pressure on Pence to reject the legitimate election results.

CNN first reported Short's cooperation and subpoena.

Some people close to Pence were furious about the way that Trump tried to scapegoat the former vice president on Jan. 6 and became even more incensed after Pence, his closest aides and his family were put in physical danger by the rioters.

Alyssa Farah, who served as Pence's press secretary before taking on other roles and left her job at the White House before Jan. 6, voluntarily met with Republicans on the House select committee and provided information.

In a series of tweets as the insurrection unfolded, Farah urged Trump to condemn the riots as they were happening and call on his supporters to stand down. "Condemn this now, @realDonaldTrump," she tweeted. "You are the only one they will listen to. For our country!"

The panel in November subpoenaed Keith Kellogg, who was Pence's national security adviser, writing in the subpoena that he was with Trump as the attack unfolded and may "have direct information about the former president's statements about, and reactions to, the Capitol insurrection." The committee wrote that according to several accounts, Kellogg urged Trump to send out a tweet aimed at helping to control the crowd.

The Jan. 6 panel has spoken to more than 250 witnesses, most of them voluntarily, committee leaders said last week, and plans a series of open hearings next year to make many of their findings public.

The committee has deposed a wide range of people, from Trump's own aides to organizers of his massive rally that morning to allies outside the White House who strategized how to overturn Biden's legitimate victory.

The panel has also interviewed election officials in crucial swing states such as Georgia, Arizona, Michigan and Pennsylvania who were pressured by the former president and his allies as he pushed false claims of election fraud.

Trump has derided the committee's work and continued to make claims about fraud that have been widely rejected by courts and election experts.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 46 of 69

Heisman finalists: Young, Hutchinson, Pickett, Stroud

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Alabama quarterback Bryce Young, Michigan defensive end Aidan Hutchinson, Pittsburgh quarterback Kenny Pickett and Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud were announced Monday as finalists for the Heisman Trophy.

The Heisman will be presented Saturday in New York, returning to its usual routine and date — second Saturday in December — after it was forced to delay and go virtual last year due to the pandemic.

There are some changes this year. The site of the presentation is moving from a theater in Midtown Manhattan, near Times Square, to a smaller venue on the West Side near Lincoln Center.

The process by which Heisman finalists are determined has also been modified. The Heisman Trust announced that starting with this season, there will be four finalists — no more, no fewer — invited to the award presentation ceremony.

In the past the Heisman has invited at least three and as many as six players to the presentation. The number was determined by distribution of vote, with the cut-off decided by the gap between vote-getters.

After a 2021 season in which a Heisman front-runner took a while to emerge and the race seemed wide-open into November, Young closed strong to become the favorite.

The sophomore led a 97-yard, game-tying touchdown drive against rival Auburn two weeks ago, helping the Crimson Tide rally to win the Iron Bowl in overtime.

Then Young broke the Southeastern Conference championship game record with 421 yards passing in a victory against Georgia's vaunted defense on Saturday. For the season, Young has thrown for 4,322 yards, 43 touchdowns and just four interceptions while guiding the top-ranked Crimson Tide to the College Football Playoff.

As good as Young has been in his first season as Alabama's starting quarterback, following Heisman finalists Mac Jones and Tua Tagovailoa, an argument could be made he is not even the clear best player on his own team.

Will Anderson Jr. appeared to be the Tide's top Heisman contender until Young went off against Georgia. The sophomore outside linebacker leads the nation in tackles for loss with 31.5 and sacks with 15.5, but he didn't get an invitation to New York.

Nether did Michigan State running back Kenneth Walker III, who is second in the nation in rushing at 136 yards per game with 19 touchdowns. The Wake Forest transfer jumped to the top of the Heisman watch lists after scoring five touchdowns in the 11th-ranked Spartans' victory against Michigan on Oct. 30.

Young could become Alabama's fourth Heisman winner, second consecutive, but first quarterback.

Tide receiver DeVonta Smith won the Heisman last year. Smith broke a streak of four straight quarterbacks to win the Heisman. Since 2000, 17 quarterbacks have won the trophy. Among the non-quarterback winners are Alabama running backs Mark Ingram (2009) and Derrick Henry (2015).

Hutchinson would be the first defensive player to win the Heisman since Michigan's Charles Woodson in 1997. Woodson was also Michigan's last Heisman winner.

The last Michigan player to be a Heisman finalist also played defense, though not exclusively. Defensive back Jabrill Peppers played some offense and returned kicks when he finished fifth in the voting in 2016.

Hutchinson is one of the nation's best pass rushers with 14 sacks. The senior led No. 2 Michigan to its first playoff appearance as Big Ten champions and helped end an eight-game losing streak to rival Ohio State.

Pickett returned to Pitt for a fifth season in 2021, taking advantage of the NCAA's eligibility give-back for playing through the pandemic in 2020, and had a record-breaking year. Pickett passed for 4,319 yards with 42 touchdowns to eclipse school marks and led the 13th-ranked Panthers to their first Atlantic Coast Conference title.

The last Pitt player to be a Heisman finalist was receiver Larry Fitzgerald in 2003.

Stroud completed 71% of his passes for 3,862 yards, 38 touchdowns and five interceptions as the seventh-ranked Buckeyes finished 10-2 in his first season as a starter.

He is the third straight Ohio State starting quarterback to be a Heisman finalist, joining Justin Fields

(2019) and Dwayne Haskins (2018).

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Omicron v. delta: Battle of coronavirus mutants is critical

By LAURA UNGAR and ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

As the omicron coronavirus variant spreads in southern Africa and pops up in countries all around the world, scientists are anxiously watching a battle play out that could determine the future of the pandemic. Can the latest competitor to the world-dominating delta overthrow it?

Some scientists, poring over data from South Africa and the United Kingdom, suggest omicron could emerge the victor.

"It's still early days, but increasingly, data is starting to trickle in, suggesting that omicron is likely to outcompete delta in many, if not all, places," said Dr. Jacob Lemieux, who monitors variants for a research collaboration led by Harvard Medical School.

But others said Monday it's too soon to know how likely it is that omicron will spread more efficiently than delta, or, if it does, how fast it might take over.

"Especially here in the U.S., where we're seeing significant surges in delta, whether omicron's going to replace it I think we'll know in about two weeks," said Matthew Binnicker, director of clinical virology at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

Many critical questions about omicron remain unanswered, including whether the virus causes milder or more severe illness and how much it might evade immunity from past COVID-19 illness or vaccines.

On the issue of spread, scientists point to what's happening in South Africa, where omicron was first detected. Omicron's speed in infecting people and achieving near dominance in South Africa has health experts worried that the country is at the start of a new wave that may come to overwhelm hospitals.

The new variant rapidly moved South Africa from a period of low transmission, averaging less than 200 new cases per day in mid-November, to more than 16,000 per day over the weekend. Omicron accounts for more than 90% of the new cases in Gauteng province, the epicenter of the new wave, according to experts. The new variant is rapidly spreading and achieving dominance in South Africa's eight other provinces.

"The virus is spreading extraordinarily fast," said Willem Hanekom, director of the Africa Health Research Institute. "If you look at the slopes of this wave that we're in at the moment, it's a much steeper slope than the first three waves that South Africa experienced. This indicates that it's spreading fast and it may therefore be a very transmissible virus."

But Hanekom, who is also co-chair the South African COVID-19 Variants Research Consortium, said South Africa had such low numbers of delta cases when omicron emerged, "I don't think we can say" it out-competed delta.

Scientists say it's unclear whether omicron will behave the same way in other countries as it has in South Africa. Lemieux said there are already some hints about how it may behave; in places like the United Kingdom, which does a lot of genomic sequencing, he said, "we're seeing what appears to be a signal of exponential increase of omicron over delta."

In the United States, as in the rest of the world, "there's still a lot of uncertainty," he said. "But when you put the early data together, you start to see a consistent picture emerge: that omicron is already here, and based on what we've observed in South Africa, it's likely to become the dominant strain in the coming weeks and months and will likely cause a surge in case numbers."

What that could mean for public health remains to be seen. Hanekom said early data from South Africa shows that reinfection rates are much higher with omicron than previous variants, suggesting the virus is

escaping immunity somewhat. It also shows the virus seems to be infecting younger people, mostly those who are unvaccinated, and most cases in hospitals have been relatively mild.

But Binnicker said things could play out differently in other parts of the world or in different groups of patients. "It'll be really interesting to see what happens when more infections potentially occur in older adults or those with underlying health conditions," he said. "What's the outcome in those patients?"

As the world waits for answers, scientists suggest people do all they can to protect themselves.

"We want to make sure that people have as much immunity from vaccination as possible. So if people are not vaccinated they should get vaccinated," Lemieux said. "If people are eligible for boosters, they should get boosters, and then do all the other things that we know are effective for reducing transmission -- masking and social distancing and avoiding large indoor gatherings, particularly without masks."

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Jussie Smollett testifies at his trial: 'There was no hoax'

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Former "Empire" actor Jussie Smollett denied Monday that he staged an anti-gay, racist attack on himself, testifying at his trial that "there was no hoax" and that he was the victim of a hate crime in his downtown Chicago neighborhood.

Smollett, who faces charges that he lied to Chicago police about the January 2019 attack, sought to refute damaging testimony from two brothers last week. They said Smollett, who is gay and Black, orchestrated the hoax to get publicity, giving them \$100 for supplies and instructing them to place a noose around his neck and yell homophobic slurs. They also said Smollett gave them a \$3,500 check to carry it out.

Smollett appeared calm throughout several hours of testimony, saying he wrote the \$3,500 check to Abimbola Osundairo for nutrition and training advice. Asked by his defense attorney if he gave Osundairo payment for some kind of hoax, Smollett replied: "Never."

Attorney Nenyue Uche asked again if he planned a hoax.

"No," Smollett said, "there was no hoax."

He also said "absolutely not" when asked if he gave Osundairo and his brother \$100 to pay for supplies for the fake attack.

Smollett told jurors he had just returned from a trip and was walking home after buying a sandwich around 2 a.m. on Jan. 29, 2019, when someone yelled a racist, homophobic remark. Smollett said he turned around to confront the person, who he said towered over him.

Standing up in the Chicago courtroom, Smollett demonstrated how he said the man walked quickly toward him, then pointed to his left temple to show where the man hit him.

"I would like to think I landed a punch. But I don't know if it landed," Smollett said. He said he slipped and they tussled on the ground for up to 30 seconds. Smollett said he saw a second person — who he believes kicked him on his side — as that person ran away.

Smollett said he assumed the person who attacked him was white because he used a racial slur and shouted "MAGA country," an apparent reference to then-President Donald Trump's campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again." The brothers, Abimbola and Olabingo Osundairo, who are Black, testified last week that Smollett instructed them to yell "this is MAGA country" during the fake assault.

Smollett said he picked up his phone and told the person he had been talking to that he "got jumped." He testified that he noticed he had a noose around his neck as he returned to his apartment. Smollett said he removed the noose but a friend who was at his apartment called police and told him to put the noose back on so officers could see it. Smollett said he was upset police had been called because he would never have done so.

"I am a Black man in America. I do not trust the police," Smollett said. "I am also a well known figure at that time and I am an openly gay man."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 49 of 69

Smollett said after news broke that everyone — including Trump — had an opinion about what happened, and that he hated the attention.

"I've lost my livelihood," he added.

Under cross-examination, Smollett said he refused to give Chicago police his cellphone for their investigation because he wanted his privacy. Asked by special prosecutor Dan Webb if he was concerned the phone would show several calls to Abimbola Osundairo, Smollett said no.

Smollett also testified that Osundairo told him he could get an herbal steroid that encourages weight loss but is illegal in the U.S. "on the low" — or secretly — while he was on an upcoming trip to Nigeria.

Osundairo testified that Smollett sent him a text message about talking "on the low," and that during the conversation Smollett asked him about helping to stage the attack. Smollett said Monday that message was in reference to the illegal steroid.

When Webb asked about Osundairo's testimony that Smollett recruited him for a hoax, Smollett replied: "Fully false, 100% false."

Defense attorneys have suggested that the Osundairo brothers accused Smollett of staging the hoax because they disliked him and then saw an opportunity to make money. They suggested that after the brothers were questioned by police about the alleged attack, they asked Smollett for \$1 million each to not testify against him at trial.

Smollett's lawyers also have argued that Chicago police rushed to judgment when they brought charges against Smollett.

Smollett said he met Abimbola Osundairo in 2017 at a club, where he learned Osundairo also worked on the "Empire" set. He said the two men did drugs together and went to a bathhouse, where Smollett said they "made out." He said the two men later did more drugs and participated in sex acts together. Osundairo testified last week that he and Smollett did not have a sexual relationship.

Smollett testified that he met Abimbola's brother, Olabingo, but that they didn't speak. He said Abimbola Osundairo made it seem like they needed to "sneak off" when they were together around his brother. Smollett said he never trusted Olabingo Osundairo.

Prosecutors say Smollett staged the attack because he was unhappy with the "Empire" studio's response to hate mail he received. The letter included a drawing of a stick figure hanging by a noose, with a gun pointed at it, and the word "MAGA."

Brett Mahoney, who produced "Empire" in Chicago, testified Monday that law enforcement was contacted and the letter turned over to authorities. He said Smollett agreed to added on-set security, but didn't want anyone following him home because it was too intrusive.

Smollett testified that he thought the studio was doing or suggesting too much security, such as wanting someone to drive him to and from the set. He said Abimbola Osundairo joked about becoming his security, but that he didn't take it seriously.

Also Monday, security guard Anthony Moore said that around the time of the alleged assault, he saw a person on the ground at the end of the block and two men running, one of whom was white. Moore said he told police what he saw, but when he was later questioned by the special prosecutor he felt pressured to change his story. Moore testified that he signed a statement that said the person was "possibly" a Black man, but that he felt "pressure and threatened to put something out there that I didn't see."

Under cross-examination, Moore said he only saw the man for one to two seconds. He also said he thought the men were fooling around, and that the two men were laughing as they ran by him.

Smollett, 39, is charged with six counts of felony disorderly conduct for making what prosecutors say was a false police report about the alleged attack — one count for each time he gave a report — to three different officers. The class 4 felony carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if Smollett is convicted he likely would be placed on probation and ordered to perform community service.

Check out the AP's complete coverage of the Jussie Smollett case.

Fired CNN anchor Chris Cuomo steps away from SiriusXM show

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Fired CNN anchor Chris Cuomo said he's dropping his SiriusXM radio show, a decision that followed a sexual harassment allegation.

"While I have a thick skin, I also have a family, for whom the past week has been extraordinarily difficult," Cuomo said in a Twitter post Monday. He said he's stepping back to "focus on what comes next."

After the announcement, SiriusXM said that Cuomo's "Let's Get After It" will no longer air and thanked him for his work. The show began in 2018.

Cuomo was criticized for breaching journalism ethics by trying to help his older brother, former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, deal with his own harassment allegations. CNN had suspended the younger Cuomo after learning that his actions were more extensive than previously thought, then fired him Saturday.

Chris Cuomo has said he was simply trying to help his brother.

The harassment claim became known shortly after CNN cut ties with him. The woman, who has chosen to remain anonymous, took her allegations to CNN on Wednesday through her lawyer, Debra Katz.

Katz did not give any specifics about the alleged behavior which, if it happened, may have occurred before Cuomo joined CNN in 2013. Prior to that, he worked at ABC News, which didn't immediately respond Monday to questions about Cuomo's tenure there.

Chris Cuomo, through a spokesman, has said the harassment claims were untrue. "If the goal in making these false and unvetted accusations was to see Mr. Cuomo punished by CNN, that may explain his unwarranted termination," the spokesman said.

Katz also tied Cuomo's firing to the accusations, saying in a statement that "CNN acted promptly on my client's complaint and fired Mr. Cuomo."

In his post Monday, Cuomo said the way his time at CNN ended was "hard." He was grateful for the support he's received from SiriusXM, Cuomo said, thanking his "loyal listeners" and adding that he looks forward to "being back in touch with you all in the future."

Biden-Putin talks on Ukraine crisis rooted in older dispute

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Cold War ended 30 years ago this month, but one unresolved issue — how closely Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, can ally with the West — is now creating some of the deepest U.S.-Russian tensions in years.

The dispute over Ukraine's status and its growing alignment with U.S.-led NATO will be at the center of President Vladimir Putin's video meeting Tuesday with President Joe Biden, whose administration says an extensive Russian military buildup near Ukraine points to a potential invasion.

Russia denies any intention of invading and says Washington and Kyiv are the ones stirring up trouble.

Putin has his own demands: A binding assurance that Ukraine will not join NATO and that the Western alliance will not add forces in states near Russia.

"I want to make it crystal clear: Turning our neighbors into a bridgehead for confrontation with Russia, the deployment of NATO forces in the regions strategically important for our security, is categorically unacceptable," Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said last week, echoing Putin.

That demand is a non-starter for Biden.

A key principle of the NATO alliance is that membership is open to any qualifying country. And no outsider has membership veto power. While there's little prospect that Ukraine would be invited into the alliance anytime soon, the U.S. and its allies won't rule it out.

"NATO member countries decide who is a member of NATO, not Russia. And that is how the process has always been and how it will proceed," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Friday.

Ahead of his Putin meeting, Biden conferred by phone Monday with the leaders of France, Germany, Britain and Italy. They discussed a "shared concern about the Russian military buildup on Ukraine's borders and Russia's increasingly harsh rhetoric," according to a White House statement. They agreed to continue pursuing diplomacy, including through the so-called Normandy Format that brings together Ukraine, Rus-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 51 of 69

sia, Germany and France in search of a political solution, so far to no avail.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on Twitter that he had coordinated positions with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. "Agreed to continue joint & concerted action," Zelenskyy wrote, saying he was grateful for the "continued support of our sovereignty & territorial integrity."

Blinken last week said the U.S. would work with allies to impose "severe costs and consequences" on Russia if it attacks.

On Friday Biden said he has developed, with allies, the "most comprehensive and meaningful set of initiatives to make it very, very difficult for Mr. Putin" to invade. That likely would be significant U.S. and allied economic and financial sanctions against Moscow. The administration also has been considering providing additional defensive weaponry to Ukraine, though Biden has given no indication he would respond to an incursion with direct U.S. military force.

Putin's grievances with the West are longstanding and go beyond the Ukraine question. They date to the early post-Cold War years when Russia felt humiliated by the collapse of its economy and its loss of global clout. After Washington began a global war on terrorism, Putin lashed out at what he saw as American arrogance.

"One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way," he asserted at an international conference in Munich in 2007. "This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this?"

Russia has since rebuilt its military and become more assertive in the Middle East and in Ukraine.

The history of Ukraine's relations with Russia and the West is complex. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Ukraine agreed to give up the nuclear missiles that Moscow had deployed on its territory during the Cold War. It did so in line with the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which Russia and the West agreed to respect the "independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine."

Ukraine began establishing closer ties to NATO. It has never been explicitly promised membership, although in April 2008 NATO formally declared that Ukraine and Georgia "will become" members in the future. That future has not yet arrived.

Four months after the 2008 NATO declaration, Russia invaded Georgia. In 2014, Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and weeks later it threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region. A 2015 peace agreement brokered by France and Germany helped end large-scale battles in Donbas, but efforts to reach a political settlement have failed and sporadic skirmishes have continued along the tense line of contact. Russia has refused recent overtures for talks with France and Germany.

Ukraine has deep historical and cultural ties to Russia, and Putin has repeatedly asserted that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people." He has said that large chunks of Ukrainian territory are historic parts of Russia that were arbitrarily granted to Ukraine by Communist leaders under the Soviet Union.

Because Ukraine is not a NATO member, the United States has no treaty obligation to defend it.

The eastward expansion of NATO has from the start been a bone of contention not just with Moscow but also in Washington. In 1996, when President Bill Clinton's national security team debated the timing of membership invitations to former Soviet allies Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, his defense secretary, William J. Perry, advised that it be delayed in order to keep Russian relations on track. Perry wrote in his memoir that when he lost the internal debate he considered resigning.

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were formally invited in 1997 and joined in 1999. They were followed in 2004 by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the former Soviet states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Since then, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia have joined, bringing NATO's total to 30 nations.

Putin has now drawn the line at Ukraine, whose leader is promising a tough response to any test. Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian president, said his country's military is a "highly capable and highly organized force that is confident in its potential and is able to derail any expansionist plans by the enemy."

AP writers Amer Madhani and Sagar Meghani in Washington and Daria Litvinova in Moscow contributed

to this report.

Could others be charged, liable in Michigan school shooting?

By ED WHITE Associated Press

A prosecutor continues to criticize the decision to keep a teenager in a Michigan school before a shooting that killed four students last week, raising questions about whether staff and the school district will face liability — criminal or civil — in the tragedy.

"We should all be looking at the events that led up to that horrific event," Karen McDonald told ABC's "Good Morning America." "And as a community, as a school, as a nation talk about what we could have done different so that didn't happen. And in this case a lot could have been done different."

Ethan Crumbley, 15, is charged with shooting fellow students at Oxford High School after a meeting with counselors and his parents. A teacher was troubled by a drawing of a gun, a bullet and a person who appeared to have been shot, along with messages stating "My life is useless" and "The world is dead," investigators said.

A look at some of the issues:

COULD SCHOOL STAFF FACE CHARGES?

The prosecutor has sharpened her comments about the school. Two days after the Nov. 30 shooting, she said she hadn't seen any "criminal culpability" by staff and was reluctant to blame anyone besides Crumbley and his parents.

But her tone was different Monday.

"That's an investigative process that I'll leave to law enforcement. I can tell you that there is outrage in the community," said McDonald, questioning why Crumbley's parents were allowed to make the ultimate decision to keep him in school that day.

Oxford Superintendent Tim Throne said counselors met with the boy and his parents on the day of the shooting. They concluded he was not a risk to himself or others, according to Throne, but told James and Jennifer Crumbley to get him outside counseling within 48 hours or they would call child welfare officials.

The Crumbleys "flatly refused" to take their son home, said Throne, who plans a separate investigation of what happened that day.

"I see a lot of negligence, but I don't foresee charges against anyone in the school," said David Steingold, a Detroit-area defense attorney. "You would have to show specific intent. No one on the staff intended to commit a crime."

As for others, the gun was legally sold by a local dealer to James Crumbley, according to investigators. The gun manufacturing industry is protected from civil lawsuits for its products, according to the Giffords Law Center, which tracks gun issues.

WHAT IS A COUNSELOR'S ROLE?

When faced with the drawing and writings found in Oxford, a counselor would be concerned about suicidal thoughts, not signs of a possible mass homicide, said Carolyn Stone of the University of North Florida, an expert in ethical and legal issues for school counselors.

"When you see that, you call parents, and that's what this counselor did," Stone said. "When we share, the parents then exercise custody and control over the child and get them help. Our job is to make sure parents know their child is in trouble."

Crumbley's parents never told counselors about buying a gun just days earlier, the superintendent said.

"The counselors made a judgment based on their professional training and clinical experience and did not have all the facts we now know," Throne said, referring to keeping Crumbley in school instead of sending him home to an empty house.

The Crumbley parents are charged with involuntary manslaughter.

COULD THE SCHOOL FACE CIVIL LAWSUITS?

The shooting left four students dead and injured six more students and a staff member. Students barricaded themselves in classrooms and even fled through a first-floor window. The prosecutor said the

entire school was "terrorized."

Personal-injury lawyers expressed doubt that the Oxford district could be successfully sued for letting Crumbley stay in school. That's because Michigan law sets a high bar to wring liability out of public schools and other arms of government.

"You have to show that the administration or faculty members were grossly negligent, meaning they had a reckless disregard for whether an injury was likely to take place," said attorney A. Vince Colella.

Even if gross negligence can be demonstrated, someone who sues must also show it was a proximate cause of death or injury, he said.

"Because the staff didn't hold the trigger, they can't be held liable because of government immunity. ... They knew he was distraught. Immunity is counterintuitive to public safety," Colella said.

Follow Ed White at <http://twitter.com/edwritez>

For more of the AP's coverage of the Michigan school shooting: <https://apnews.com/hub/oxford-high-school-shooting>

Dems: Discovery, AT&T merger will hurt diversity, workers

By ASTRID GALVAN Associated Press

Congressional Democrats are raising concerns that the proposed merger of Discovery and AT&T's WarnerMedia, a \$43 billion effort to conquer the world of streaming, could affect diversity efforts in Hollywood and particularly hurt Latinos, who are already deeply underrepresented.

The Democrats, led by Rep. Joaquin Castro of Texas, wrote a letter to the Justice Department on Monday asking it to consider whether the merger will hurt competition and workers and diversity efforts in the entertainment industry.

Castro has long championed diversity in media, which can include everything from Hollywood movies to book publishers to news organizations. Last year, Castro and members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus tasked the government's watchdog agency with investigating Latino representation in media. The Government Accountability Office, which released its findings in September, found Latinos are vastly underrepresented in all aspects of media.

"Part of what's different about our argument is that we also center around the exclusion of many people of color in these companies as employees and often times in terms of content," Castro said.

Castro said Discovery in particular has a poor record of hiring Latinos in front of and behind the camera, concerns he expressed to company representatives during a meeting recently.

"I was clear that if you continue to exclude people from your company, then you don't deserve to merge and it's not in the country's best interest to allow for concentrated exclusion," Castro said.

In May, Discovery announced it was absorbing WarnerMedia from AT&T, combining giants like HBO, CNN and HGTV, along with Oprah Winfrey's network.

Experts have questioned whether this will hurt consumers, who may end up spending more money on streaming services in the long run.

In a news release, Discovery said the Warner acquisition will increase investment and capability in original content and programming and "create more opportunity for under-represented storytellers," although the company hasn't laid out how.

John T. Stankey, president and CEO of AT&T, addressed the concerns about antitrust violations expressed in the letter during a virtual global conference on Monday, according to a transcript of the call.

"Not to say that we won't get the dialogue and have a constructive conversation for people to understand that I think what's been articulated in those letters is really unfounded," Stankey said. "And I believe the context of our discussion with regulators up to this point have centered around those issues, and we feel very good about the data we've put on the table that it's clearly indicated that there's nothing unusual about this transaction."

Darnell Hunt, the dean of Social Sciences at UCLA who has spent years researching diversity in Hollywood, said the merger would be particularly troubling for diversity in executive level positions.

"Bigger is usually not better when it comes to these types of mergers, and there's less competition, there's less opportunity for access, because there are fewer gatekeepers. And that's not a good thing in an industry that's already exclusionary and very insular," Hunt said.

Mergers mean job cuts, leaving an even greater void for people of color to work in high-level positions in the industry, Hunt said.

When Comcast and NBC announced a merger in 2009, Hunt publicly opposed it, and says promises by executives to create more minority-owned networks largely fell flat.

He doubts the Discovery acquisition will result in more diversity.

"I would love to hear their plan for that, if they're thinking about it, but it doesn't sound like they're thinking about it," Hunt said.

Galván reported from Phoenix. She covers issues impacting Latinos in the U.S. for the AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/astridgalvan>

NYC to impose vaccine mandate on private sector employers

By MICHELLE L. PRICE, BOBBY CAINA CALVAN and KAREN MATTHEWS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — From big Wall Street banks to corner grocery stores, all private employers in New York City will have to require their workers to get vaccinated against COVID-19, the mayor announced Monday in the most sweeping vaccine mandate of any state or big city in the U.S.

The move by Mayor Bill de Blasio comes as cases are climbing again in the U.S. and the worrisome but little-understood omicron variant is gaining a toehold in the nation's largest city and elsewhere around the country.

"We in New York City have decided to use a preemptive strike to really do something bold to stop the further growth of COVID and the dangers it's causing to all of us," he said.

De Blasio, a Democrat with just weeks left in office, said the mandate will take effect Dec. 27, with in-person workers needing to provide proof they have received at least one dose of the vaccine. And they will not be allowed to get out of the requirement by agreeing to regular COVID-19 testing instead.

The measure will apply to roughly 184,000 businesses not covered by previous vaccine mandates, ranging from multinational corporations to mom-and-pop businesses in the city of 8.8 million people, according to a spokesperson for the mayor. The city's private-sector workforce is 3.7 million.

Also, anyone 12 or older who wants to dine indoors at a restaurant, go to a gym or see a show will have to produce proof of having received two shots of the vaccine, up from the current requirement of one dose, the mayor said. And children 5 to 11 will have to show proof of at least one shot.

De Blasio said the moves are aimed at staving off a spike of infections amid holiday gatherings and the cold weather, which drives more people indoors, where the virus can spread more easily.

Phil Penta, who runs a specialty grocery store called Three Guys from Brooklyn, said the impending mandate could put him in a bind by forcing him to fire valued employees who are holding out against the vaccine.

"Everybody wants to do the right thing, but the right thing is different for everybody," said Penta, who said the vast majority of his roughly three dozen employees have been vaccinated. He added: "I respect the right to say they don't want to take it."

Vaccine rules across states and cities vary widely, with some states resisting any mandates and others requiring the shots for government employees or certain sectors that run a particularly high risk, such as health care workers.

But no state has announced a broad private-sector mandate like New York City's, according to data compiled by the nonpartisan National Academy for State Health Policy.

President Joe Biden sought to impose a less far-reaching mandate nationally, requiring employees of

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 55 of 69

businesses with 100 or more workers to either get vaccinated or undergo regular testing. But federal courts have blocked that plan for now ahead of the Jan. 4 deadline.

De Blasio said he expects his mandate to survive any legal challenges. Employees will be able to ask for religious or medical exemptions.

The mayor said he will release more details next week about how the mandate will be enforced.

About 5.9 million adults in New York City have gotten at least a first dose, out of 7 million people age 18 and up. That translates to 84%. About 5.8 million New Yorkers of all ages are fully vaccinated.

Cases of the omicron variant have been reported in about one-third of the states, but scientists cannot say for certain yet whether it is more dangerous than previous versions.

U.S. health experts have strongly urged people to get their shots and a booster, saying they believe the vaccine will still offer protection against the new variant.

The delta variant still accounts for practically all infections in the U.S., and a rise in cases in recent weeks has swamped hospitals, especially in the Midwest and New England.

New York City is averaging just under 2,000 new cases of COVID-19 per day, up from about 820 a day at the start of November.

"Vaccination is the central weapon in this war against COVID. It's the one thing that has worked every single time across the board," de Blasio said at a virtual news conference.

"A lot of folks to me in the private sector have said to me they believe in vaccination, but they're not quite sure how they can do it themselves," he continued. "Well, we're going to do it."

Vaccinations are already required in New York City for hospital and nursing home workers and for city employees, including teachers, police officers and firefighters. A vaccination mandate for employees of private and religious schools was announced last week.

Some other private-sector employees, including those at restaurants, gyms, theaters and other entertainment sites, were also required to be vaccinated under rules issued earlier by the mayor.

De Blasio, who leaves office at the end of the month and has indicated he may seek the nomination for governor of New York next year, has sought to portray himself as a national leader in the fight against COVID-19. His other vaccine mandates have largely survived legal challenges, and he has credited the policy with raising vaccination rates among the reluctant.

The new mandate takes effect days before de Blasio leaves office and Democrat Eric Adams is due to be sworn in. Evan Thies, a spokesman for Adams, said in a statement that the mayor-elect "will evaluate this mandate and other COVID strategies when he is in office and make determinations based on science, efficacy and the advice of health professionals."

The Greater New York Chamber of Commerce, which includes some 30,000 businesses big and small, said it supports the tightened measures.

But other industry groups said the plan would add to the strain on businesses still struggling to recover from the pandemic and find enough employees.

Kathryn Wylde, president and CEO of the Partnership for New York City, a leading business group, said it is unclear who will enforce the mandate and whether it is even legal.

"It is hard to imagine that the mayor can do what the president is being challenged to accomplish," Wylde said.

This story has been corrected to reflect that the deadline for the mandate is Dec. 27.

Derby winner Medina Spirit collapses, dies in California

By BETH HARRIS AP Racing Writer

Medina Spirit, a 3-year-old colt whose Kentucky Derby victory in May came under scrutiny because of a positive drug test, collapsed and died after a workout Monday at Santa Anita in Southern California.

Trainer Bob Baffert said in a statement that the horse suffered a heart attack. The colt had just completed five furlongs in his second workout since finishing second in the Breeders' Cup Classic a month ago at

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 56 of 69

Del Mar.

"My entire barn is devastated by this news," Baffert said. "Medina Spirit was a great champion, a member of our family who was loved by all, and we are deeply mourning his loss. I will always cherish the proud and personal memories of Medina Spirit and his tremendous spirit."

Santa Anita said in a statement that the track veterinary team took blood, hair and urine samples from Medina Spirit and sent them to the California Horse Racing Board. The colt will undergo a full necropsy, as required by the racing board, to try to determine the exact cause of death.

No timeline for completing the necropsy has been given.

Medina Spirit tested positive after his May 1 Kentucky Derby win for betamethasone, a legal medication that is not allowed on race day. The victory was Baffert's record seventh win in the Derby.

But in the wake of Medina Spirit's failed test, Baffert was suspended by Churchill Downs and barred from entering horses in the 2022 and 2023 Kentucky Derbies. He also was banned by the New York Racing Association from entering horses at its Belmont, Saratoga and Aqueduct tracks.

Last Friday, Craig Robertson, Baffert's attorney, released a statement saying that tests done by a New York lab have "definitely confirmed" Medina Spirit tested positive for the steroid — not through an injection but due to an ointment used to treat a skin rash.

The Kentucky Horse Racing Commission has been investigating the case, and has yet to hold a hearing that could possibly disqualify Medina Spirit.

In the \$6 million BC Classic last month, Medina Spirit couldn't muster the necessary late kick to threaten winner Knicks Go.

"I'm very proud of him. He ran a great race," Baffert said last month. "To me, he's the best 3-year-old. He showed it today. That's what racing is all about, proving it on the racetrack. And he proved it today that he's the real deal."

Baffert was allowed to enter horses in the season-ending world championships, but the event's money-leading trainer had to meet certain conditions, including stricter out-of-competition testing of his horses and greater security at his barn. He agreed to the extra scrutiny and was required to pay for it out of his own pocket.

Medina Spirit had five wins in 10 career starts and earnings of \$3,545,200, according to Equibase. The colt was owned by Amr Zedan, who competes as Zedan Racing Stables.

"Our most sincere condolences go out to Mr. Amr Zedan and the entire Zedan Racing Stables family," Baffert said in his statement Monday. "They are in our thoughts and prayers as we go through this difficult time."

More AP sports: <https://apnews.com/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Bob Dole to lie in state at Capitol as nation honors senator

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Bob Dole's casket will lie in state in the U.S. Capitol on Thursday as congressional leaders honor the former Republican presidential candidate and World War II veteran who served in Congress for 36 years.

Dole died Sunday at the age of 98. He was a leader known for his caustic wit, which he often turned on himself but didn't hesitate to turn on others, too. He shaped tax and foreign policy and worked vigorously to help the disabled, enshrining protections against discrimination in employment, education and public services in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The U.S. Capitol has been considered the most suitable place for the nation to pay final tribute to its most eminent citizens by having their remains lie in state. The commemoration will include a formal arrival and departure ceremony.

"Senator Dole was an extraordinary patriot, who devoted his entire life to serving our nation with dignity and integrity," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Dole, representing Kansas, served four terms in the House and more than four terms in the Senate. He won the Republican nomination in 1996, but was defeated when President Bill Clinton won a second

term. He was also 1976 GOP vice presidential candidate on the losing ticket with President Gerald Ford. "Those of us who were lucky to know Bob well ourselves admired him even more," said Sen. Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate. "A bright light of patriotic good cheer burned all the way from Bob's teenage combat heroics through his whole career in Washington and through the years since. We look forward to honoring his life and legacy at the Capitol."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said he didn't get to serve with Dole, but "his reputation and his achievements, and most of all his character preceded him."

Dole received two Purple Hearts for his valor in World War II. Throughout his political career, he carried the mark of war. Charging a German position in northern Italy in 1945, Dole was hit by a shell fragment that crushed two vertebrae and paralyzed his arms and legs. The young Army platoon leader spent three years recovering in a hospital and never regained use of his right hand.

Deal to make Scholz German chancellor clears final hurdle

By GEIR MOULSON and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — A three-party deal to form a new German coalition government under center-left leader Olaf Scholz cleared its final hurdle Monday, setting the scene for him to succeed longtime Chancellor Angela Merkel later this week.

Germany's environmentalist Greens said their members approved the agreement reached last month, with 86% voting for it in a ballot. The other two parties — Scholz's center-left Social Democrats and the pro-business Free Democrats — overwhelmingly backed the agreement at weekend conventions.

"We are going into a strong new government, with a very strong and diverse Cabinet, with strong tailwind from the ballot," said Green co-leader Annalena Baerbock, who is set to become Germany's first female foreign minister.

Her party made it clear that it sees efforts to curb climate change as the next government's top priority. Other priorities include modernizing Europe's biggest economy and introducing more liberal social policies.

Scholz will be elected as chancellor in parliament on Wednesday, ending the center-right Merkel's 16-year tenure. He will need the support of at least 369 lawmakers in the 736-seat lower house. The three coalition partners have 416 seats between them, so he should be assured of a comfortable majority.

Hours before the Greens cleared the path for that vote, Scholz presented his party's nominees for the Cabinet, completing his 17-member team.

The most closely watched appointment was that of health minister, as Germany struggles to bring down its highest coronavirus infection rates of the pandemic so far. Scholz chose Karl Lauterbach, an epidemiologist and media-savvy lawmaker who lacks executive experience but has been one of Germany's most prominent voices urging caution and strict measures against COVID-19.

"The pandemic is far from over," said Scholz. "Most people in this country certainly wanted the next health minister to be a specialist who can really do it well, and for him to be called Karl Lauterbach."

German federal and state leaders last week announced tough new restrictions that largely target unvaccinated people. In a longer-term move, parliament will consider a general vaccine mandate.

Asked about the Christmas holidays, Lauterbach said "an important aim must be to bring the case numbers down so far that we can recommend travel without endangering people."

Announcing his choices for the interior and defense portfolios, Scholz said Germany's "security will be in the hands of strong women."

Nancy Faeser, a lawyer who heads the party's branch in the central state of Hesse, was an unexpected choice to become Germany's first female interior minister, a post that includes oversight of federal police forces and the domestic intelligence agency. Faeser said a major focus will be fighting far-right extremism, which she called "the biggest threat" to the country.

Outgoing Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht will become the new defense minister.

The Greens and the Free Democrats already have named their ministers. Scholz's vice chancellor will be Robert Habeck, who leads the Greens along with Baerbock. He will head an economy and climate

ministry, a new combination.

The Greens' five Cabinet members include Cem Ozdemir, who will become the first federal minister of Turkish origin six decades since guest workers began coming to Germany from Turkey after World War II.

A long-time vegetarian, Ozdemir said that as agriculture minister he had no plans to force a meat-free lifestyle on others and emphasized that cutting Germany's greenhouse gas emissions should be the overarching goal for the next government.

"That's what we're going to be measured by," he said.

The Greens, however, will have to overcome resistance from the Free Democrats, whose leader Christian Lindner will become finance minister and effectively the No. 3 official in the new government. Lindner's party has a strong free market approach and successfully blocked putting a universal speed limit on German highways in the coalition agreement.

Habeck, the Greens' co-leader and future climate minister, acknowledged he would have liked to have seen a speed limit, which experts say would be an easy way to cut emissions. But in return for allowing Germans to speed along the Autobahn, the new coalition government is committed to measures that amount to ending the sale of gasoline-powered vehicles in the 2030s, he said.

Scholz had pledged a gender-balanced Cabinet — which it is, if one doesn't count the chancellor.

Follow AP's coverage of Germany's transition to a new government at <https://apnews.com/hub/germany-election>.

US religious group says Haitian gang releases 3 hostages

By PETER SMITH and EVENS SANON undefined

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — A religious group based in Ohio announced Monday that a violent gang in Haiti has released three more hostages, while another 12 remain abducted.

The statement from Christian Aid Ministries said the people were released on Sunday in Haiti and are "safe and seem to be in good spirits." The group provided no further details.

On Nov. 21, the religious organization announced that the 400 Mawozo gang had released the first two hostages of a group of 17 kidnapped in mid-October. There are 12 adults and five children in the group of 16 U.S. citizens and one Canadian, including an 8-month-old.

The leader of the 400 Mawozo gang has threatened to kill the hostages unless his demands are met. Authorities have said the gang was seeking \$1 million per person, although it wasn't immediately clear that included the children in the group.

"We are thankful to God that three more hostages were released last night," said the statement from Christian Aid Ministries, an Anabaptist missions organization based in Berlin, Ohio. "As with the previous release, we are not able to provide the names of the people released, the circumstances of the release, or any other details."

The group reiterated its request for supporters to devote Monday through Wednesday as days of prayer and fasting "to intercede for those who are still being held as well as those who have been released."

The release comes amid an ongoing spike in kidnappings in the capital of Port-au-Prince and elsewhere in Haiti, which is struggling to recover from the July 7 presidential assassination, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake that struck in mid-August and a severe fuel shortage.

On Sunday, a gang leader known as "Ti Lapli" posted a YouTube video warning people not to cross in upcoming days through the Martissant community, which has been the site of violent clashes between warring gangs.

"Insecurity has increased," the gang leader said. "I invite the people of Martissant to stock up on food and gasoline. The next few days will be difficult... We will not remain with our arms crossed in face of those who try to destroy us."

Smith reported from Pittsburgh.

2021's notable moments on TV: Capitol riot, 'Rust,' Shatner

By LYNN ELBER and DAVID BAUDER Associated Press

If a year can be accused of bait-and-switch, 2021 is fair game.

It was reasonable to believe, or hope, that the pandemic would steadily recede in the rear-view mirror, that a White House transition might mean less political rancor, that America could honorably end its "forever war" in Afghanistan.

Television, which helped shape our expectations, was there to witness them being upended. It also was our window when racism met its match in court; when the "Star Wars" franchise proved its enduring power and Oprah Winfrey did the same; Capt. Kirk soared into space, and a movie production turned deadly.

Here are some of the year's defining TV moments from the perspective of The Associated Press' television and media writers.

CAPITOL CHAOS

Every four years, Congress' certification of the presidential electoral vote is so routine it barely merits a footnote in the media. Not this year. Egged on by soon-to-be former President Donald Trump, a crowd of angry demonstrators demanding that the counting be stopped surrounded the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 and broke into the building. Lawmakers scattered, police were beaten and a woman was shot as she tried to climb through a window that led to the House floor. At first, images captured the horror largely from a distance. But countless cameras were watching — including those held by rioters — and as the days, weeks and months went by, new video emerged giving a fresh look at what happened.

"RUST" TRAGEDY

Hollywood make-believe has turned deadly before. But on the set of "Rust" in October it was a well-known actor, Alec Baldwin, who held the antique gun that killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounded director Joel Souza. The first wave of frenzied media coverage focused on photos, including one of Baldwin doubled over in anguished reaction to Hutchins' death and another, undated, of armorer Hannah Gutierrez Reed striking a pose with two guns in hand. But it was a snapshot posted by Hutchins' husband that conveyed the wrenching loss: In it, a relaxed, sunlit Hutchins stands with one arm wrapped around her young son, the other raised to the brim of a jaunty hat.

WAR'S AFTERMATH

America's two-decade war and reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, which cost thousands of U.S. and Afghan lives and billions of dollars, ended in chaos and more death in August. As the remaining American troops were evacuated and those who had aided them desperately sought a way out, there were flashbacks to the fall of Saigon in 1975. Then, U.S. military and other helicopters scrambled to airlift Vietnamese allies to safety. Among the indelible images this time: a father in a surging crowd handing his baby to soldiers over a razor-wire fence. Once again, Americans lamented the outcome of U.S. policies.

FIRST-CLASS TICKET

In the original space race, astronauts had the right stuff and the USA and USSR were rivals. In this summer's version, passengers had the right bank account or sway to get a seat, and a trio of billionaires — Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and Richard Branson — competed for space-tourism supremacy. Observers carped about galactic-sized egos and privilege, but TV couldn't resist the thundering rocket launches or William Shatner, 90, wisecracking his way where no "Star Trek" actor had gone before.

CHAUVIN ON TRIAL

Relief. That was the immediate emotion for many Americans in April when a jury found Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin guilty of murder for kneeling on the neck of George Floyd. For three weeks, television viewers followed the trial more closely than any other proceeding in years. The prosecution's repeated revisit to the disturbing video of Chauvin's refusal to move, despite the pleading of Floyd and bystanders, reopened a wound in the nation's psyche that hadn't really closed. The fear of what a different verdict might bring led to the collective exhale the verdict inspired.

OPRAH, HARRY AND MEGHAN

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 60 of 69

An interview with a photogenic young couple who gave up their rarefied royal life in Britain could have been merely a gossipy diversion. But with Oprah Winfrey doing the questioning, and Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, appearing ready and willing to be candid, the conversation proved newsworthy. One bombshell was delivered by Meghan about son Archie, now 2: Someone in the palace had wondered aloud how "dark his skin might be when he's born." Winfrey blurted out, "What? Hold up," reinforcing the power of the exchange between two Black women. At the time of the interview Meghan was pregnant with daughter Lili, who was born in June.

VACCINE'S PROMISE

Roll up your sleeve! In the early days of 2021, television screens were filled with images of people across the country getting shots of the COVID-19 vaccine. After the world had been altered by death and fear, it seemed a sign that the pandemic would soon be over and life would return to normal. Millions of people were vaccinated, but many more weren't, out of personal cautiousness or the unexpected view that refusal was a political statement. Between that and the emergence of new variants, hope for a quick end to the coronavirus faded.

"JEOPARDY!"

TV's smartest game show was clueless when it mattered: finding a successor for beloved host Alex Trebek. "Jeopardy!" made executive producer Mike Richards the surprise pick in August, then later that month bid him farewell because of unsavory past podcast remarks. Mayim Bialik, set to host prime-time "Jeopardy!" specials, filled in with an assist from an all-time champ, Ken Jennings. Stellar contestants Matt Amodio and Amy Schneider also came to the rescue, reaffirming the late Trebek's mantra that players, not the host, make the show. Trebek died in November 2020, shortly after taping his final shows.

RITTENHOUSE VERDICT

"Not guilty." Five times the phrase was repeated in court, and at the last one, Kyle Rittenhouse convulsed into sobs and his legs gave way. The November verdict in a Wisconsin courtroom ended the 18-year-old's murder trial, the jury believing he acted in self-defense in shooting three people during protests over racial injustice. Like so many things today, his trial became a proxy for political warfare, this time over guns and justice. Within days, Rittenhouse was telling his story to Tucker Carlson on Fox News Channel.

WE LOVE LUKE

It was a big reveal unequalled by any in reality TV. On "The Mandalorian" season two finale, The Child aka Grogu was in the clutches of Moff Gideon, backed by the Dark Troopers. Then a hooded, lightsaber-wielding Jedi emerged from a X-Wing spacecraft, saved the day and revealed his identity — young Luke Skywalker, as portrayed by a computer age-adjusted Mark Hamill, R2-D2 at his side. There were whoops of joy from "Star Wars" enthusiasts, and the universe smiled. The episode arrived in late December 2020, yes, but it's timeless, as is Hamill's response to fans.

Myanmar's Suu Kyi convicted in further blow to democracy

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Aung San Suu Kyi, the civilian leader of Myanmar who was ousted in a de facto coup this year, was convicted on two charges Monday and handed a four-year sentence that was quickly cut in half — in proceedings widely criticized as a further effort by the country's military rulers to roll back the democratic gains of recent years.

The verdict — on charges of incitement and violating coronavirus restrictions — serves to cement a dramatic reversal of fortunes for the Nobel Peace laureate, who spent 15 years under house arrest for resisting the Southeast Asian nation's generals but then agreed to work alongside them when they promised to usher in democratic rule.

The case is only the first in a series brought against the 76-year-old Suu Kyi since her arrest on Feb. 1 — the day the army seized power, claiming massive voting fraud in last year's election. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party won that vote in a landslide, and independent election observers did not detect any major irregularities.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 61 of 69

Just as the takeover has been met with fierce resistance, so too was the verdict, including a spirited protest in the central city of Mandalay, where demonstrators chanted slogans and sang songs popularized during pro-democracy protests in 1988.

They also took to social media, which has been an important arena for resistance to the military. Htoo Ko, a medical doctor and popular travel blogger who is also an activist, wrote: "They have expended their maximum effort in carrying out evil. The people will be free only if we win the revolution, so work harder for the revolution."

The cases against Suu Kyi are widely seen as contrived to discredit her and keep her from running in the next election — and many in the international community decried Monday's verdict as a farce. If found guilty of all the charges she faces, Suu Kyi could be sentenced to more than 100 years in prison. She is being held by the military at an unknown location — and state television reported that she would serve her sentence there.

That sentence was reduced hours after it was handed down in what the report said was an amnesty ordered by the country's military leader, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing.

Suu Kyi is widely revered at home for her role in the country's pro-democracy movement — and was long viewed abroad as an icon of that struggle, epitomized by her 15 years under house arrest.

But since her release in 2010, she has been heavily criticized for the gamble she made: showing deference to the military while ignoring and, at times, even defending rights violations — most notably a 2017 crackdown on Rohingya Muslims that rights groups have labeled genocide.

While she has disputed allegations that army personnel killed Rohingya civilians, torched houses and raped women and she remains immensely popular at home, that stance has tarnished her reputation abroad.

The incitement charge Suu Kyi faced centered on statements posted on her party's Facebook page after she and other party leaders were detained by the military. She was accused of spreading false or inflammatory information that could disturb public order. In addition, she faced a charge of violating coronavirus restrictions for her appearance at a campaign event ahead of the elections last year.

Dr. Sasa, spokesperson for the National Unity Government, an opposition group that has declared itself the country's shadow administration, called the verdict "a shameful day for the rule of law, justice and accountability in Myanmar" and said it represented an effort to "replace our dreams with military dictatorship forever." He uses only one name.

U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called the proceedings a "sham trial," while Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch, said it was just the beginning of a process that "will most likely ensure that Suu Kyi is never allowed to be a free woman again."

The United States joined others in calling for her release.

"The regime's continued disregard for the rule of law and its widespread use of violence against the Burmese people underscore the urgency of restoring Burma's path to democracy," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement, using a former name for Myanmar.

As is typical, China, a neighbor that has maintained friendly ties with Myanmar's military leaders, declined to criticize the verdict but urged all parties to work together to continue the democratic transition.

Suu Kyi's trials are closed to the media and spectators, and her lawyers, who had been a source of information on the proceedings, were served with gag orders in October forbidding them from releasing information. As a result, Monday's verdict was initially relayed to The Associated Press by a legal official who insisted on anonymity for fear of being punished by the authorities.

Defense lawyers are expected to file appeals in the coming days for Suu Kyi and two colleagues who were also convicted Monday, the legal official said. They have argued that Suu Kyi and a co-defendant, former President Win Myint, could not be held responsible for the statements on which the incitement charge was based because they were already in detention.

Win Myint's sentence was reduced along with Suu Kyi's.

February's seizure of power was met by nonviolent nationwide demonstrations, which security forces quashed with deadly force. They have killed about 1,300 civilians, according to a detailed tally compiled by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 62 of 69

Peaceful protests have continued, but amid the severe crackdown on them, an armed resistance has also grown, to the point that U.N. experts have warned the country is sliding into civil war. Monday's verdict could inflame tensions even further.

"It doesn't matter for the woman who doesn't need anything. But the fires will burn hotter and hotter for the one who wants everything," Zenn Khi, a well-known actor, wrote on Facebook, in a reference to Suu Kyi and her military antagonists.

Decisions in other cases against Suu Kyi are expected next week. The cases against her include the alleged unregistered import and use of walkie-talkies by her security guards; a violation of the Official Secrets Act, in which jailed Australian economist Sean Turnell is a co-defendant; and corruption charges.

The military says its takeover was lawful and not a coup because the 2008 constitution — implemented under military rule — allows it to take control in certain emergencies. It argues that the 2020 general election contained widespread irregularities and thus constituted such an emergency.

The state election commission and independent observers have disputed that there was substantial fraud. Critics also assert that the takeover bypassed the legal process for declaring an emergency.

101-year-old returns to Pearl Harbor to remember those lost

By AUDREY McAVOY and GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — When Japanese bombs began falling on Pearl Harbor, U.S. Navy Seaman 1st Class David Russell first sought refuge below deck on the USS Oklahoma.

But a split-second decision on that December morning 80 years ago changed his mind, and likely saved his life.

"They started closing that hatch. And I decided to get out of there," Russell, now 101, said in a recent interview.

Within 12 minutes his battleship would capsize under a barrage of torpedoes. Altogether 429 sailors and Marines from the Oklahoma would perish — the greatest death toll from any ship that day other than the USS Arizona, which lost 1,177.

Russell plans to return to Pearl Harbor on Tuesday for a ceremony in remembrance of the more than 2,300 American troops killed in the Dec. 7, 1941, attack that launched the U.S. into World War II.

About 30 survivors and 100 other veterans from the war are expected to observe a moment of silence at 7:55 a.m., the minute the attack began.

Survivors, now in their late 90s or older, stayed home last year due to the coronavirus pandemic and watched a livestream of the event instead.

Russell is traveling to Hawaii with the Best Defense Foundation, a nonprofit founded by former NFL Linebacker Donnie Edwards that helps World War II veterans revisit their old battlefields.

He recalls heading topside when the attack started because he was trained to load anti-aircraft guns and figured he could help if any other loader got hurt.

But Japanese torpedo planes dropped a series of underwater missiles that pummeled the Oklahoma before he could get there. Within 12 minutes, the hulking battleship capsized.

"Those darn torpedoes, they just kept hitting us and kept hitting us. I thought they'd never stop," Russell said. "That ship was dancing around."

Russell clambered over and around toppled lockers while the battleship slowly rolled over.

"You had to walk sort of sideways," he said.

Once he got to the main deck, he crawled over the ship's side and eyed the USS Maryland moored next door. He didn't want to swim because leaked oil was burning in the water below. Jumping, he caught a rope hanging from the Maryland and escaped to that battleship without injury.

He then helped pass ammunition to the Maryland's anti-aircraft guns.

After the battle, Russell and two others went to Ford Island, next to where the battleships were moored, in search of a bathroom. A dispensary and enlisted quarters there had turned into a triage center and place of refuge for hundreds of wounded, and they found horribly burned sailors lining the walls. Many

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 63 of 69

would die in the hours and days ahead.

"Most of them wanted a cigarette, and I didn't smoke at that time but I, uh, I got a pack of cigarettes and some matches, and I lit their cigarettes for them," Russell said. "You feel for those guys, but I couldn't do anything. Just light a cigarette for 'em and let 'em puff the cigarettes."

Russell still thinks about how lucky he was. He ponders why he decided to go topside on the Oklahoma, knowing most of the men who stayed behind likely were unable to get out after the hatch closed.

In the first two days after the bombing, a civilian crew from the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard rescued 32 men trapped inside the Oklahoma by cutting holes in its hull. But many others perished. Most of those who died were buried in anonymous Honolulu graves marked as "unknowns" because their remains were too degraded to be identified by the time they were removed from the ship between 1942 and 1944.

In 2015, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency exhumed 388 sets of these remains in hopes of identifying them with the help of DNA technology and dental records. They succeeded with 361.

Russell's brother-in-law was among them. Fireman 1st Class Walter "Boone" Rogers was in the fireroom, which got hit by torpedoes, Russell said. The military identified his remains in 2017, and he's since been reburied at Arlington National Cemetery.

Russell remained in the Navy until retiring in 1960. He worked at Air Force bases for the next two decades and retired for good in 1980.

His wife, Violet, passed away 22 years ago, and he now lives alone in Albany, Oregon. He drives himself to the grocery store and the local American Legion post in a black Ford Explorer while listening to polka music at top volume. When he's not hanging out with other veterans at the legion, he reads military history and watches TV. He keeps a stack of 500-piece puzzles to keep his mind sharp.

For decades, Russell didn't share much about his experiences in World War II because no one seemed to care. But the images from Pearl Harbor still haunt him, especially at night.

"When I was in the VA hospital there in San Francisco, they said, 'We want you to talk about World War II.' And I said, I told them, I said, 'When we talk about it, people don't believe us. They just walk away.' So now people want to know more about it so we're trying to talk about it. We're trying to talk about it, and we're just telling them what we saw," he said. "You can't forget it."

Flaccus reported from Albany, Oregon.

Fearing misuse, Israel tightens supervision of cyber exports

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's Defense Ministry on Monday announced that it was tightening supervision over cyber exports — a move that follows a series of scandals involving Israeli spyware company NSO Group.

The ministry said the countries purchasing Israeli cyber technology would have to sign a declaration pledging to use the products "for the investigation and prevention of terrorist acts and serious crimes only."

It said countries that violate the terms of use could be subject to sanctions, "including limiting the cyber system and/or disconnecting it."

The announcement made no mention of NSO. But it came just days after it was revealed that 11 U.S. State Department employees were hacked with NSO spyware. The employees were all located in Uganda and included some foreign service officers, said a person familiar with the matter, who was not authorized to speak publicly about an ongoing investigation.

It was the first known instance of NSO Group's trademark Pegasus spyware being used against U.S. government personnel.

Last month, the U.S. Commerce Department blacklisted NSO, barring the company from using U.S. technology. The blacklisting has raised questions about NSO's financial outlook and ability to survive, and the company has acknowledged that it is trying to reverse the decision.

Apple also sued NSO last week over its hacking of iPhones and other Apple products, calling the Israeli company "amoral 21st century mercenaries." Facebook has filed a lawsuit over similar allegations that it

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 64 of 69

intruded its popular WhatsApp messaging system.

Pegasus allows its operator to gain access to a target's mobile phone, including contacts, text messages and real-time communications.

NSO says it sells its technologies to governments only to battle crime and terrorism and that it has strict safeguards to prevent abuse. Company officials have acknowledged cutting off several customers due to misuse.

However, human rights groups and outside researchers have said the company's safeguards are insufficient. They say customers have abused Pegasus to keep tabs on journalists, human rights activists and political dissidents from Mexico to Saudi Arabia to the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Critics have also accused Israel of lax oversight over the digital surveillance industry.

NSO declined to comment on the Defense Ministry guidelines. Last week, however, it said it had immediately shut down customers "potentially relevant" to the Uganda case. It also vowed to take legal action against customers if a violation of their contract was found.

Israel has previously said that cyber exports are limited to fighting crime and terrorism. Under the new guidelines, the ministry said the definitions "have been sharpened, in order to avoid blurring boundaries in this context."

"The updated statement states that terrorist acts are, among other things, acts that are intended to threaten a population and may result in death, injury, hostage-taking and more," it said. It also said it was clarifying "the circumstances in which the operation of the cyber system is prohibited and explicitly clarifies the existence of the possibility of imposing sanctions in the event of a violation of the provisions."

Afghan museum reopens with Taliban security -- and visitors

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The National Museum of Afghanistan is open once again and the Taliban, whose members once smashed their way through the facility destroying irreplaceable pieces of the country's national heritage, now appear to be among its most enthusiastic visitors.

The museum in southwest Kabul, which hosts artifacts from the Paleolithic period to the 20th century, reopened just over a week ago for the first time since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in mid-August amid the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops.

Its director, Mohammad Fahim Rahimi, and his staff have so far been allowed to continue in their positions although they, like many of Afghanistan's civil servants, haven't received salaries since August. Only the security guards have changed, Rahimi said, with Taliban now replacing the police contingent who used to guard the building and providing women security guards to check female visitors. Currently about 50-100 people visit the museum each day.

Power cuts are frequent and the museum's generator has broken down, leaving many of the exhibition rooms plunged into darkness. On Friday several Taliban, some with assault rifles dangling from their shoulder, were among visitors using the lights of their cellphones to peer into display cases of ancient ceramics and 18th-century weapons.

"This is from our ancient history, so we came to see it," said Taliban fighter Mansoor Zulfikar, a 29-year-old originally from Khost province in southeastern Afghanistan who has now been appointed as a security guard at the Interior Ministry. "I'm very happy," he said of his first visit to the museum, marveling at his country's national heritage.

Zulfikar said he had spent 12 years in Kabul's notorious Pul-e-Charkhi prison, Afghanistan's largest. While there, he said, someone had told him about the museum and he dreamt of the day when the Taliban would rule Afghanistan again and he would be able to visit the museum.

But when Zulfikar was just a boy in 2001, the Taliban ransacked the museum, smashing priceless statues, especially ones considered un-Islamic. One of them, the remnants of a limestone statue believed to be of a king dating from the 2nd century, stands at the entrance to the museum building, now restored by experts from France and the museum's own restoration department.

In the same year, the Taliban dynamited two giant 6th-century buddha statues carved into a cliff-face

in Bamiyan in central Afghanistan on orders from Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, a move that was met with international outrage.

So as the Taliban swept through Afghanistan this summer, taking province after province, there were grave concerns that a similar fate awaited the country's cultural heritage, especially anything from pre-Islamic times. So far at least, this has not appeared to be the case.

Saifullah, a 40-year-old Taliban member from Wardak province and teacher in a madrassa, an Islamic religious school, said he believed the 2001 destruction of artifacts in the museum had been carried out by lower ranking Taliban members without orders from top-ranking officials.

Touring the museum for the first time, Saifullah, who goes by one name, said he would encourage his students, some of whom were now guards at the museum itself, to visit the National Museum of Afghanistan.

"Generations can learn from this, and what we had in the past," he said. "We have a rich history."

Perhaps Afghanistan's new rulers now agree with the inscription engraved on a plaque outside the museum building's entrance: "A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive."

How can I protect myself from the new omicron variant?

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

How can I protect myself from the new omicron variant?

The same way you guard against COVID-19 caused by any other variant: Get vaccinated if you haven't yet, get a booster if you're eligible and step up other precautions you may have relaxed, like wearing a mask and avoiding crowds.

For all the attention omicron is getting, the overwhelming cause of infections and deaths in many places remains the extra-contagious delta variant.

"Delta is the real risk right now. Omicron is an uncertain threat," Dr. Francis Collins, director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, told The Associated Press. Regardless of the coronavirus type, Collins said "we do know what to do."

It will take a few weeks to learn key aspects about this latest variant, including whether it's more contagious, causes more severe illness or evades immunity -- and if so, how by much.

In the meantime, "what we need to do is add more layers of protection," says Dr. Julie Vaishampayan of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. That's especially important with holiday travel and gatherings around the corner.

A booster shot is one of those layers. The added dose triggers a big jump in virus-fighting antibodies. Even if the antibodies don't prove quite as effective against omicron as they are against other variants, simply having more of them might compensate -- in addition to bolstering protection against delta.

In addition to masking, avoiding crowds and improving ventilation, testing is another protective step. That's recommended for anyone who has COVID-19 symptoms or was potentially exposed to the virus. But it also could help ensure safety before holiday gatherings, even if everyone attending has been vaccinated, Vaishampayan says.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org. Read more here:

Is travel safe during the pandemic this holiday season?

Why can't some COVID-19 vaccinated people travel to the US?

Can at-home COVID-19 tests make holiday gatherings safer?

Unvaccinated Italians face new restrictions as holidays near

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — Italy is making life more uncomfortable for unvaccinated people this holiday season, excluding them from indoor restaurants, theaters and museums starting Monday to reduce the spread of coronavirus and encourage vaccine skeptics to get their shots.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 66 of 69

Italian police have been empowered to check whether diners in restaurants or bars have a "super" green health pass certifying that they are either vaccinated or have recently recovered from the virus. Smart phone applications that verify people's health pass status have been updated to prevent entry to concerts, movies or performances to those who have merely tested negative in recent days. The measures run through Jan. 15.

Authorities also imposed a requirement that at least "basic" health pass, which can be obtained with a negative test, must be used to get on local transport and to check into hotels.

In the capital, Rome, dozens of police were out at transportation hubs checking both green passes and personal identification, finding a cooperative mood among commuters. Still, a 50-year-old Roman became the first to receive a 400-euro (\$450) fine after getting off the bus at the northern Flaminio station without the "basic" health pass, said Stefano Napoli, deputy chief of Rome's municipal police force.

"It was about time that they checked it," said Sara Ben, a Rome commuter, noting the absence of controls on the often -packed local transportation throughout the pandemic.

Milanese were enjoying the first long weekend of the season, including Tuesday's celebration for the patron saint of Saint Ambrose and Wednesday's national holiday, leaving commuter routes more empty than usual. But few checks were evident around the main Central Station, either for regional trains or local buses and subways.

Commuter Veronica Bianchi said her health pass wasn't checked on a regional train arriving in Milan. "But they didn't check the ticket either," she said.

She favors the government's moves to encourage more people to get vaccinated, and said she noted that people in their 20s like her are more apt to get the vaccine.

"Frankly, I think we are tired of being locked down. I work in a young company, and it was a race to get the vaccine," Bianchi said.

The number of new COVID-19 infections in Italy has been on a gradual rise for the past six weeks, even before concerns arose about the new omicron variant. That's a worrying trend as Italians look forward to holiday parties and getaways to spend time with friends and family, after being deprived of such festivities last year.

While both neighboring Germany and Austria are moving toward making vaccines obligatory for certain groups, Italy is instead tightening free-time restrictions on the unvaccinated at the most convivial time of the year — while allowing those who are vaccinated go about life more or less as usual.

European nations have found varying formulas to try to reduce infections during peak times.

With an eye on the holidays, Switzerland on Monday began allowing — but not requiring — event organizers to bar anyone who hasn't been vaccinated or hasn't recovered from COVID-19. Sweden introduced a vaccination requirement for indoor events with more than 100 people starting Dec. 1.

On Monday, the Netherlands reversed itself on plans to open indoor venues to vaccinated people only, sticking instead with a 5 p.m. closure for restaurants, cinemas and other public sites.

Italy's vaccination rate is higher than many of its neighbors, at 85% of the eligible population aged 12 and older and 77% of the total population. But people in their 30s, 40s and 50s have proved the most reluctant to get vaccinated, with nearly 3.5 million still not having received their first dose.

They are also the same age range that is now being hardest hit by the virus, according to Silvio Brusaferrero, head of Italy's National Health Institute.

So far the delta variant remains prevalent, with only seven confirmed cases of omicron in Italy, related to two businessmen returning from southern Africa.

With the holiday shopping season heating up, many cities including Rome and Milan have ordered mask mandates even outdoors.

Public health officials say vaccinations, along with prudent public behavior including wearing masks in crowds indoors or out, are key to reducing infection levels as winter weather pushes more activities indoors. They credit Italy's relatively high level of immunization as one reason that the infection curve is not as steep as last winter, when broad restrictions were imposed with the spread of the delta variant.

"It is clear that after two years of the pandemic, we cannot easily close schools to physical classes and

shut down economic activity," said Gianni Rezza, the health ministry's director of prevention.

"Therefore, you can try to keep the virus spread down with measures that are sustainable, and with proper use of the health pass. Then, the big bet is on the vaccinations," he said.

Paolo Santalucia in Rome, Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Jan M. Olsen in Copenhagen, Mike Corder in Amsterdam contributed.

Follow all AP stories on the pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>.

Pandemic stress weighs heavily on Gen Z: AP-NORC, MTV poll

By COLLIN BINKLEY and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

Isolation. Anxiety. Uncertainty. The stresses of the coronavirus pandemic have taken a toll on Americans of all ages, but a new poll finds that teens and young adults have faced some of the heaviest struggles as they come of age during a time of extreme turmoil.

Overall, more than a third of Americans ages 13 to 56 cite the pandemic as a major source of stress, and many say it has made certain parts of their lives harder. But when it comes to education, friendships and dating, the disruption has had a pronounced impact among Generation Z, according to a new survey from MTV Entertainment Group and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Among Americans in Gen Z — the survey included ages 13 to 24 — 46% said the pandemic has made it harder to pursue their education or career goals, compared with 36% of Millennials and 31% in Generation X. There was a similar gap when it came to dating and romantic relationships, with 40% of Gen Z saying it became harder.

Forty-five percent of Gen Z also reported greater difficulty maintaining good relationships with friends, compared with 39% of Gen X Americans. While many Millennials also said friendships were harder, Gen Z was less likely than Millennials to say the pandemic actually made that easier, 18% vs. 24%.

Roughly half of Americans across generations, including Gen Z, said the pandemic led to struggles having fun and maintaining mental health.

The findings are consistent with what health and education experts are seeing. After months of remote schooling and limited social interaction, teens and young adults are reporting higher rates of depression and anxiety. Many are also coping with academic setbacks suffered during online schooling.

The outsized impact on children and adolescents is partly linked to where they are in their brain development, said Dr. Cora Breuner, a pediatrician at Seattle Children's Hospital. Those periods are when humans see the most growth in executive function — the complex mental skills needed to navigate daily life.

"It's this perfect storm where you have isolated learning, decreased social interaction with peers, and parents who also are struggling with similar issues," Breuner said. It means that, while young people are falling behind in school, they're also behind on the skills needed to cope with stress and make decisions, she added.

For 16-year-old Ivy Enyenihi, just thinking about last school year is hard. While her parents continued working in person, she spent day after day alone at their home in Knoxville, Tennessee. Her high school's online classes included live interaction with a teacher just two days a week, leaving her totally isolated most days.

"I'm a very social person, and so not having people around was probably what made it the hardest," Enyenihi said. "It just made normal things hard to do. And it definitely made me depressed."

By the spring semester, she was skipping assignments and doing the bare minimum to get by. She felt cut off from the classmates and teachers at her school.

Things have improved since she returned to in-person classes this year, but she's still catching up on math lessons she missed last year, and she wonders if she's done enough to stand out on college applications. Overall, the sense of isolation has faded, but its memory lingers.

"It's still a part of me," she said. "If I think of it, it comes back up."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 68 of 69

Uncertainty around the pandemic this fall was a top concern across generations, with 35% citing it as a major source of stress. Another 29% said the fear of getting COVID-19 was a serious stressor.

Tanner Boggs, 21, says the pandemic has shaken up nearly every aspect of his life. The senior at the University of South Carolina says his academics, his mental health and his physical health all took hits.

He spent most of last school year in the bedroom of his apartment, with waning motivation to keep up with online classes. Some days he would wake up only to log into a Zoom lecture and then crawl back into bed. His anxieties worsened until tasks like going to the grocery store became unbearable.

He rarely went out but still ended up getting COVID-19 from a roommate, leaving him with symptoms that he still suffers from, he said.

After getting vaccinated and returning to in-person classes, his academics and mental health have improved. But some friendships seem to have faded, he said, and parts of his life are changed forever.

"The best I can describe it is tragic," Boggs said. "It has affected every aspect of my life from relationships with friends and peers to the way I get groceries. Just everything."

Compared with other generations, Gen Z is most likely to see education as a core part of their identity, according to the survey. About two-thirds in Gen Z said it was very or extremely important to their identity, compared to half of Millennials and about 4 in 10 in Gen X.

It's no surprise that young people see education as a potential obstacle, said Vilmaris González, who manages youth programs for the nonprofit Education Trust in Tennessee. As many confront learning setbacks, they're also emerging into a world where the future of work and higher education are as uncertain as ever, she said.

"I'm sure we won't understand the gravity of those impacts for years to come," she said. "This is going to mark their generation forever."

For some, the pandemic has been a time to rethink future plans. Before, Gabi Hartinger, 21, was studying to become a teacher. But the last year brought life-changing turmoil — her father spent more than 40 days hospitalized with COVID-19, and her own isolation and anxiety led her to seek mental health counseling.

Now, Hartinger, a senior at the College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Missouri, hopes to become a school counselor to help younger students coping with their own challenges.

"For a lot of high schoolers I knew, school during the pandemic was a big struggle," she said. "I think that that kind of changed my view on what I want to do when I get out of here."

The AP-NORC poll of 3,764 teens ages 13-17 and adults ages 18-56 was conducted Sept. 1-19 using a combined sample of interviews from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population, and interviews from opt-in online panels. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points. The AmeriSpeak panel is recruited randomly using address-based sampling methods, and respondents later were interviewed online or by phone.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 7, the 341st day of 2021. There are 24 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 7, 1941, the Empire of Japan launched an air raid on the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii as well as targets in Malaya, Hong Kong, Guam, the Philippines and Wake Island; the United States declared war against Japan the next day.

On this date:

In 1787, Delaware became the first state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

In 1909, chemist Leo H. Baekeland received a U.S. patent for Bakelite (BAY'-kuh-lyt), the first synthetic plastic.

In 1917, during World War I, the United States declared war on Austria-Hungary.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 153 ~ 69 of 69

In 1946, fire broke out at the Winecoff (WYN'-kahf) Hotel in Atlanta; the blaze killed 119 people, including hotel founder W. Frank Winecoff.

In 1972, America's last moon mission to date was launched as Apollo 17 blasted off from Cape Canaveral.

In 1982, convicted murderer Charlie Brooks Jr. became the first U.S. prisoner to be executed by injection, at a prison in Huntsville, Texas.

In 1987, 43 people were killed after a gunman aboard a Pacific Southwest Airlines jetliner in California apparently opened fire on a fellow passenger, the pilots and himself, causing the plane to crash. Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev set foot on American soil for the first time, arriving for a Washington summit with President Ronald Reagan.

In 1988, a major earthquake in the Soviet Union devastated northern Armenia; official estimates put the death toll at 25-thousand.

In 2001, Taliban forces abandoned their last bastion in Afghanistan, fleeing the southern city of Kandahar.

In 2004, Hamid Karzai (HAH'-mihd KAH'R'-zeze) was sworn in as Afghanistan's first popularly elected president.

In 2017, Democratic Sen. Al Franken said he would resign after a series of sexual harassment allegations; he took a parting shot at President Donald Trump, describing him as "a man who has bragged on tape about his history of sexual assault." Republican Rep. Trent Franks of Arizona said he would resign, after revealing that he discussed surrogacy with two female staffers.

In 2018, the man who drove his car into counterprotesters at a 2017 white nationalist rally in Virginia was convicted of first-degree murder; a state jury rejected defense arguments that James Alex Fields Jr. acted in self-defense.

Ten years ago: Rod Blagojevich (blah-GOY'-uh-vich), the ousted Illinois governor whose three-year battle against criminal charges became a national spectacle, was sentenced to 14 years in prison. (A pardon from President Donald Trump freed Blagojevich from prison in 2020, after he had served eight years.) Veteran character actor Harry Morgan, 96, died in California.

Five years ago: President-elect Donald Trump selected retired Marine Gen. John Kelly to head the Department of Homeland Security, Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt to lead the Environmental Protection Agency, the former chief executive of World Wrestling Entertainment, Linda McMahon, to run the Small Business Administration and Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad to be the new U.S. ambassador to China. Time magazine named Trump its Person of the Year.

One year ago: Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Charles "Chuck" Yeager, the World War II fighter pilot ace and quintessential test pilot who in 1947 became the first person to fly faster than sound, died at 97. A federal judge blocked President Donald Trump's attempts to ban TikTok, the latest legal defeat for the administration as it tried to wrest the popular app from its Chinese owners. U.S. servicemen and women and National Park Service officials gathered at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii to remember those killed in the 1941 Japanese attack, but elderly survivors stayed home to pay their respects from afar and avoid health risks from the coronavirus pandemic.

Today's Birthdays: Linguist and political philosopher Noam Chomsky is 93. Bluegrass singer Bobby Osborne is 90. Actor Ellen Burstyn is 89. Broadcast journalist Carole Simpson is 81. Baseball Hall of Famer Johnny Bench is 74. Actor-director-producer James Keach is 74. Country singer Gary Morris is 73. Singer-songwriter Tom Waits is 72. Sen. Susan M. Collins, R-Maine, is 69. Basketball Hall of Famer Larry Bird is 65. Actor Priscilla Barnes is 64. Former "Tonight Show" announcer Edd (cq) Hall is 63. Rock musician Tim Butler (The Psychedelic Furs) is 63. Actor Patrick Fabian is 57. Actor Jeffrey Wright is 56. Actor C. Thomas Howell is 55. Actor Kimberly Hebert Gregory (TV: "Kevin (Probably) Saves the World") is 49. Producer-director Jason Winer is 49. Former NFL player Terrell Owens is 48. Rapper-producer Kon Artis is 47. Pop singer Nicole Appleton (All Saints) is 46. Latin singer Frankie J is 45. Country singer Sunny Sweeney is 45. Actor Chris Chalk is 44. Actor Shiri Appleby is 43. Pop-rock singer/celebrity judge Sara Bareilles (bah-REHL'-es) is 42. Actor Jennifer Carpenter is 42. Actor Jack Huston is 39. Singer Aaron Carter is 34.