

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

### Friday, Jan. 14

Silver Bowl Debate at Sioux Falls  
No School - Faculty In-Service at Warner School  
Girls' Basketball hosts Aberdeen Roncalli. C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and then varsity.

### Saturday, Jan. 15

Silver Bowl Debate at Sioux Falls  
Boys Basketball Classic at Redfield. Groton Area vs. Deubrook at 7:30

10 a.m.: Junior High boys basketball jamboree in Groton with Aberdeen Christian, Britton-Hecla and Webster Area.

10 a.m.: Wrestling at Potter County (Gettysburg) Invitational.

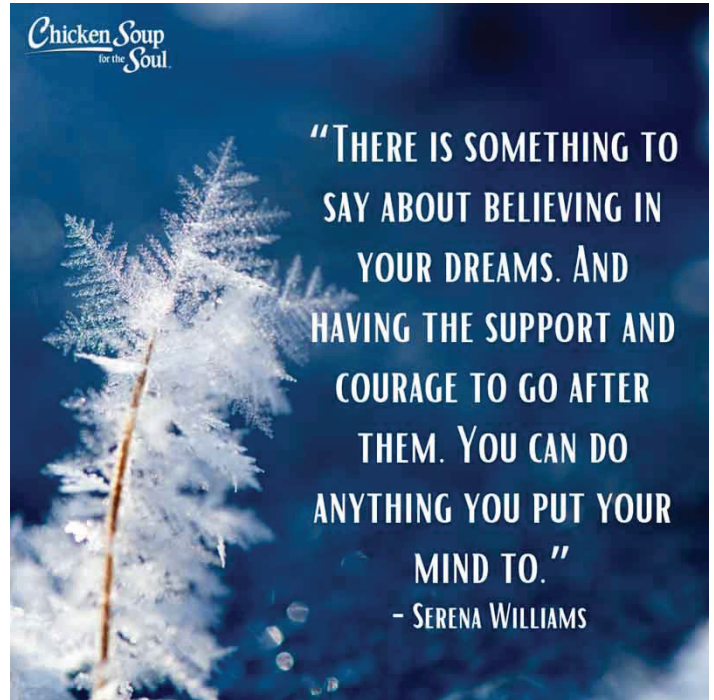
### Monday, Jan. 17

Junior High Wrestling Invitational at Redfield  
Girls basketball hosting Langford Area (JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity)

### Tuesday, Jan. 18

Wrestling Tournament at Hamlin  
Junior High Boys Basketball at Mobridge. 7th at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.  
Junior High Wrestling Invitational at the Aberdeen

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
**Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460**



Civic Arena, 4 p.m.

The Junior High boys basketball game in Groton scheduled for Jan. 18th is cancelled.

City Council Meeting at 7 p.m.

### Thursday, Jan. 20

Girls Basketball at Clark/Willow Lake. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

## Surplus Van for Sale

The Groton Area School District is accepting sealed bids for the sale of a 1994 Chevy Beauville Van with liftgate. For more information or to see the vehicle, contact Transportation Director, Damian Bahr, at 605-397-8117 or Damian.Bahr@k12.sd.us. Bids can be dropped off at the high school office (502 N 2nd Street, Groton, SD) or mailed to Groton Area School District PO Box 410, Groton, SD 57445. Envelopes should be marked "Van Bid." Bids will be opened on Friday, January 28 at 2:00 PM. (0112.0119)

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

In not particularly happy news, we now have about two and a half times as many new cases per day on average as we have people initiating vaccination: about 781,000 to 333,000. There's another close to a million doses going out each day, but those are boosters and second doses. The daily counts for new cases have been mind-blowing as well. Sunday was low due to weekend reporting, but Monday more than made up for it, clocking in at 1,419,890. The past two days have come in at 784,031 and 854,291. If you're not shocked by that, have someone check you for a pulse.

And we've managed to pass 60, 61, 62, and 63 million total cases, just in the four days since we last talked. Our current total is 63,222,737. Here's an abbreviated look at our recent history—just short of the past six weeks—you know, back in the good old days when we were still under 50 million:

- December 4 – 49 million – 10 days
- December 13 – 50 million – 9 days
- December 20 – 51 million – 7 days
- December 25 – 52 million – 5 days
- December 28 – 53 million – 3 days
- December 30 – 54 million – 2 days
- January 2 – 55 million – 3 days
- January 3 – 56 million – 1 day
- January 4 – 57 million – 1 day
- January 6 – 58 million – 2 days
- January 7 – 59 million – 1 day
- January 9 – 60 million – 2 days
- January 10 – 61 million – 1 day
- January 11 – 62 million – 1 day
- January 12 – 63 million – 1 day

US military cases of Covid-19 more than doubled in the last week. This trajectory began over the holidays and continues today. As of yesterday, we had reported 32,912 cases in the last week compared with 13,940 the prior week. Before Christmas, weekly cases were at 5185. Hospitalizations did not increase as dramatically, similarly to the rest of the country, but this is still cause for concern in this young and very healthy segment of the population.

There are some signs of a slow-down in new-case reports in the hard-hit Northeast. Positivity rates and case increases are slowing in New York City, virus levels in Boston wastewater are falling, emergency room visits for Covid-19 showed a sharp decline, and teachers' positivity rates in Philadelphia are dropping from 25 percent before Christmas to two percent this week. The Southeast seems to be following closely behind, and the Midwest seems to be a week to so behind. The West Coast has not peaked yet, but they did get a later start. Although we can't be sure because case rates are still crazy-high, these are all preliminary signs this variant might act here in much the way it has in South Africa and the United Kingdom—hitting hard and fast and receding almost as fast. Let's all hope, but keep our feet on the ground until we're sure this is a trend, not a glitch. That means we can all contribute by acting as though this isn't over until (1) it's actually over or at least (2) we have a little more evidence we're even on the way. We've jumped too soon time and time again, and the result has been this never-ending pandemic. I, for one, am tired to death of that; so let's maybe hold back a bit longer this time and act like grown-ups. Jeffery Shaman, epidemiologist at Columbia University, mentioned a new worry to the New York Times, that people who've stayed home

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during the worst of this will be susceptible to infection as we all return to normal; if we get careless too soon, that could spark a very protracted course in this wave of the pandemic. So even if we've peaked, we're not out of the woods. If you take a look at a graph, you can see a bunch of cases occur yet after a peak; they're not dropping to zero next week.

US hospitalizations have passed last winter's record. Just about a year ago on January 14, the previous peak average occurred at 142,315, and we hit 142,388 on Sunday. The seven-day average is now at 142,454, an increase of 79 percent from two weeks ago. The raw number late yesterday was 151,261. We have thirty percent of ICU beds with Covid-19 patients in them. If you're thinking that's no big deal since we still have 70 percent of those beds left, you will want to remember that these beds existed before the pandemic and they existed for a reason; they're beds that were already needed for people with all kinds of other health conditions. Those people are still coming in too, so 70 percent of ICU beds are not sitting empty, just waiting around for another Covid-19 patient. Yesterday, 19 states had less than 15 percent of their ICU capacity available; four—Indiana, Kentucky, Alabama, and New Hampshire—had less than 10 percent. The other 15 are Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, Ohio, Mississippi, Vermont, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Delaware, North Carolina, and Georgia. I think we should note that many states report ICU capacity without breaking out those beds dedicated for newborns and children, beds you can't fill with an adult; so the problem is likely much worse in those states. We're still seeing hospitals with critical staffing shortages and all kinds of responses to the problem, from deploying National Guard to canceling elective surgeries. More federal health care teams are being deployed as well. We have health care workers on the job after positive tests and even when experiencing symptoms because our need is so great. As hospitalizations continue to soar for weeks to come, I remain deeply concerned about the system's ability to hold together.

Some hospital officials estimate that as many as half of their patients have Covid-19. These folks are not all sick with Covid-19—some are identified by routine admissions testing for the virus; but that is an enormous proportion nonetheless and gives us a window on just how many unrecognized infections might be out walking around infecting others. What we don't have is any idea how many of the folks who were hospitalized specifically for Covid-19 and not something else are severely ill or receiving mechanical ventilation; we also don't have length-of-stay figures for Omicron. Some of this gets tracked by the federal health authorities, but due to the structure of the reporting system, it is not yet up-to-date, so doesn't include much information about the new variant. We can get at some of this from the ICU tracking, and right now about a quarter of hospitals with ICUs report at least 95 percent occupancy of those beds. That's a lot. The gap between outcomes for vaccinated and unvaccinated patients is growing, and the raw numbers of patients needing intensive care or ventilation is inching closer and closer to those seen in last winter's ugly surge. This effect is, of course, more pronounced in low-vaccination areas like the South, the Midwest, and the Mountain West, as well as rural areas in general. With fewer workers to care for those patients, we're in some difficult terrain.

I saw a social media post from the Kansas Hospital Association that highlighted an effect of these ridiculous hospitalization numbers with graphs. It says, in part, "The All Missions by Month graph shows 88 percent of patients needing transferred are requesting help to find an available hospital because many hospitals are at a critical staffing level." The next graph is "Patient Expirations by Month" and clearly shows a "five-fold increase in the last few months with some patients dying while waiting up to 20+ hours for a bed." These are ugly graphs.

It is going to be important to pay attention to deaths numbers as we go along here. We become more persuaded as time goes on that these Omicron infections are less severe, and it would be reasonable to conclude they're going to result in a lower mortality rate; but as we've discussed more than once here,

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a lower rate doesn't necessarily mean lower numbers. When you have this many people sick and in the hospital, we could still have significant mortality. Janet Hamilton, executive director of the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, said to the New York Times, "Are we going to see deaths increase? Yes, we are, and they are going to go up if cases keep increasing this way." Some of the Northeast states that saw Omicron first—New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey—are reporting increasing deaths. We're not sure how much they'll rise because we're still working out just how different the mortality rate is likely to be for this variant; but some epidemiologists are predicting we could see the numbers triple over the next three weeks. That would put us above last winter's peak. Right now, the increase in deaths is becoming more stark. Today's seven-day average is 1827, which is a 51 percent increase from two weeks ago. Today's raw count is 2746, not all that far off last winter's record deaths. The CDC's ensemble forecast is projecting more than 62,000 new deaths in the upcoming four weeks, which would bring us over 900,000 total deaths. Average daily deaths would increase by almost 1000. That's a lot of funerals. I'm kind of hoping that was a worst-case sort of estimate and that we don't see the worst case materialize. Remains to be seen. The smart money would be on assuming that's possible and doing what we can to mitigate. I kind of doubt there's any smart money at the table these days though, to be honest.

The CDC, in response to criticism that they have not been clear in their guidance, has posted their guidelines for exposed and test-positive individuals. This does seem to me to be much easier to follow; I encourage you to check it out. You can clearly locate on their charts your status: up-to-date on vaccines or not/ exposed or tested positive. Then you can read the guidance for isolating or quarantining, testing, masking, etc. It all is very clear and straightforward. Here's a link to that guidance; you can bookmark it to keep current with updates. [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/quarantine-isolation.html?fbclid=IwAR1OZB\\_oS5XSYvLDTTAsnkauJ0OjronD5GTwFQBpii-PvM7yL-lb1Ovrce](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/quarantine-isolation.html?fbclid=IwAR1OZB_oS5XSYvLDTTAsnkauJ0OjronD5GTwFQBpii-PvM7yL-lb1Ovrce). Please note the actual guidance hasn't changed since we last talked about it on January 5.

We've been anticipating the new federal rules for insurance coverage of Covid-19 testing, and they were announced Monday. Insurance companies are required to cover up to eight at-home tests per month for each individual, effective Saturday. This doesn't cover tests you've already purchased, just those going forward from Saturday. Some pharmacies will provide them at no cost to folks who submit their insurance cards; others will require you to file a claim for reimbursement. You do not need a doctor's order to access payment for at-home test kits; but we should note that there is no limit to the number of tests you can have paid for if they are ordered or administered by a health care provider following an individual clinical assessment, including for those people with underlying medical conditions. There's a strong incentive for insurers to pay up-front at any, not just an in-network, pharmacy; those that do this will be billed a maximum of \$12 per test; otherwise, they have to pay the full price, whatever that is. This should be enormously helpful to many households needing tests.

State Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance (CHIP) programs are already required to cover tests at no cost to the patient. I am not clear on how Medicare plays into this. As I understand it, Medicare itself is not covering these costs. I know it pays for tests performed by a laboratory when the test is ordered by a health care provider, but it doesn't look like the plan will cover tests purchased at the pharmacy. The Medicare Advantage (Part C) plans that bundle Parts A and B have a bit different rules, and it looks as though some or all of those will cover them. I'm going to suggest that those enrolled in these plans contact their plan provider to see if and how these will be covered.

For those without insurance and those on Medicare, tests administered by a health provider will continue to be provided at no out-of-pocket cost as well. Meanwhile, a large purchase of home tests by the government, recently doubled from 500 million to one billion, will be distributed to those who order them; these will be free irrespective of your insurance status. And there is also a plan afoot to provide tests in

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various locations for pick-up at no cost, but I am not yet clear on where these will be or how that will work. The wording I've seen is "community health centers and Medicare-certified health clinics." When I understand this better, I'll update. I believe that, once any start-up bugs are worked out, at-home tests will be available, one way or another, to all at no cost. Now we just have to hope manufacturers can keep up with demand; it doesn't matter how cheap tests are if you can't get them.

Public health authorities are expressing alarm at low vaccination rates in children ages 5 to 11. We're at just over 17 percent at the moment, and that leaves a whole lot of kids vulnerable to infection. Dr. Robert Murphy, executive director for the Institute for Global Health at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, called the low rate "very disturbing" when speaking with the AP, adding that parents waiting to vaccinate these kids "are taking an enormous risk and continuing to fuel the pandemic." They are. Wish they could believe that or care.

Here's a good reason why this is becoming so evident. I read a study that is part of a larger research collaboration between the CDC and pediatric hospitals. In it, they took a look at admissions of patients between 12 and 18 years old at 31 hospitals in 23 states, identifying 1222 adolescent patients who were hospitalized from June to October, 2021. Of these, 445 were hospitalized for Covid-19, and 777 were hospitalized for other reasons. Forty percent (180) of the Covid-19 patients were admitted to ICU; two (one of whom was immunosuppressed) were vaccinated and the other 178 were not. Twenty-nine percent (127) required life-supporting interventions, including 13 who needed extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO); of these one was vaccinated, and 126 were not. Seven died, all unvaccinated. Vaccine effectiveness against requiring ICU care and against requiring life support was 98 percent. Still, we have less than two-thirds of this age group who have received only one dose of vaccine and around half fully vaccinated.

Additionally, a CDC study was posted as an early release for the agency's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly last week looking at the effectiveness of vaccination in preventing multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), that inflammatory condition seen in children post-Covid-19 that can be very serious, even life-threatening. This one, involving 24 pediatric hospitals, looked at patients aged 12 to 18 with MIS-C "which included a clinically severe illness requiring hospitalization, temperature  $\geq 100.4^{\circ}\text{F}$  ( $38^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) for  $\geq 24$  hours or subjective fever, evidence of inflammation (demonstrated by elevated levels of inflammatory markers), involvement of two or more organ systems, no alternative plausible diagnosis, and current or recent SARS-CoV-2 infection, indicated by a positive result from an RT-PCR test, serologic test, or antigen test." There were 117 MIS-C case patients in the study and 181 controls, all hospitalized between July 1 and December 9, 2021. Seventy of the patients were fully vaccinated at least 28 days before hospitalization; among the MIS-C case patients, five were fully vaccinated and 97 were unvaccinated. Sixty-two of the case patients were admitted to an intensive care unit, and 38 of those required life support while hospitalized—mechanical ventilation, vasoactive infusions [drugs intended to raise blood pressure sufficiently that an adequate oxygen supply to tissues can be maintained], or ECMO. All of the 38 were unvaccinated. Vaccine effectiveness against MIS-C was 91 percent. Clearly, this vaccine prevents bad outcomes in children too.

Pfizer and BioNTech announced earlier this week that they have an Omicron-specific vaccine ready for human testing, plan to begin those trials by the end of the month, and have already begun manufacturing doses at risk. (At-risk manufacturing, a thing since this pandemic began, involves starting to manufacture before you know regulatory approvals are forthcoming. Think of it as manufacturing on spec. This is a potentially costly gamble, but makes the vaccine available far sooner than waiting for the approval before ramping up production.) The companies acknowledge that this vaccine may never be needed, but they anticipate being ready to put it on the market by March if it is needed; between now and then, they'll be running their trials and seeking authorization if Omicron is still the primary threat by then. This new candidate also includes the earlier variants still circulating, so it will likely cover them if circumstances

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unexpectedly change. It sounds as though their expectation is to sell it primarily in countries where it would serve as an initial series or perhaps a booster dose; I don't think they're planning on being able to get fourth doses out in the US, although this wasn't entirely clear from the announcement. US health authorities are still not sounding like they're convinced we need a specific vaccine yet. The companies are also working with various governments in identifying new variants in Africa and Asia so that they will be prepared for the next wave instead of waiting to react. For the record, Moderna is looking at fall for their Omicron vaccine.

Public transit is another basic societal function faltering under the weight of this wave of infections. There are slowdowns and altered schedules in many major cities across the country. Detroit had to cancel as much as a quarter of their city bus schedule; Washington, DC, buses have gone to a weekend schedule on weekdays too, about the same reduction as Detroit's; Portland has had a smaller reduction, around nine percent; and New York City, although its picture is slowly improving, still has three subway lines suspended.

We have some additional data on Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine effectiveness in adolescents in the US; this is based on hospitalization data collected by the CDC and was published yesterday in the New England Journal of Medicine. I did not have access to the paper, so I am working here from a summary. The work is based on medical records from 445 adolescents hospitalized with Covid-19 and 777 hospitalized without infection in 31 hospitals in 23 states between July 1 and October 25 of last year. What we have supports the clinical trial results reported before eligibility was extended to this younger group. Findings were that the vaccine provides 94 percent effectiveness against hospitalization. The team put it this way: "Despite eligibility for Covid-19 vaccination, 96% of the patients who were hospitalized with Covid-19 and 99% of those who received life support had not been fully vaccinated. When you set this against data showing 55 percent of adolescents are fully vaccinated, that tells the story.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we talked about work being done at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, the so-called Spike Ferritin Nanoparticle vaccine that is broadly protective against multiple variants of SARS-CoV-2 and maybe some other coronaviruses too. If you missed that, check out my Update #498 posted on December 24 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5459941567355538>.

Thing is, we have another research group working on a similarly broadly protective vaccine, this team at the Duke Human Vaccine Institute. They've designed what they're calling a pan-coronavirus vaccine that elicits responses to SARS-CoV-2 and variants, the original SARS-CoV-1, and some related bat coronaviruses which are likely candidates to set off the next pandemic. They've just announced substantial support from NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for development of the next-generation vaccine to include more coronaviruses and enable the Institute to respond rapidly to new coronaviruses that might jump to humans. This is work for the next pandemic, and the very best time to respond to the next pandemic is before it happens. So we're getting that right.

If you're wondering whether vaccine mandates do any good or about real-world effectiveness of our vaccines, here's a case study. United Airlines set a requirement for all of its employees to be vaccinated for Covid-19 in August. By September half were fully vaccinated, and the rest were signed up for their first doses or facing unemployment. Before that, the airline was averaging one employee death from Covid-19 per week. Since the mandate became effective, their virus-related hospitalization rate among employees is one percent of the average for the US population as a whole, and even though they currently have 3000 employees infected—which plays hell with flight schedules, they haven't had any deaths at all in the past eight weeks. And if you were curious about my opinion on the matter, damned right I support employer mandates.

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Another data point around vaccination is this one: Dr. Esmaeil Prosa CEO of Harris Health System in Houston, Texas, dropped these data in a CNN interview: Since last January, his health system has had 282 Covid-19 deaths. Nine of these people have been vaccinated. None were vaccinated and boosted. It doesn't get a whole lot more stark than this. You do not need fancy statistical procedures to see the importance of these numbers.

Still on the subject of vaccines, you will recall that last summer the CDC guidelines were modified to permit a third dose of vaccine for immunocompromised people. This third dose was not to be considered a booster, but part of the primary series for these compromised people. Well, the first of those folks is coming up next week on five months since that third dose, and so in accordance with guidance modified in October (to allow a booster after a third dose) and other guidance modified just a week ago (to shorten the booster interval to five months from six), they're going to be eligible to receive a fourth (booster) dose five months after the third one. There are around seven million such people in the US. I hope they avail themselves of this opportunity to make themselves safer.

I read a Canadian study from McMaster University and some others assessing mobility losses in adults 50 and older who survive mild-to-moderate cases of Covid-19. They looked at 24,114 older adults living in the community, that is, not in long-term care. Most were not sick enough with Covid-19 to be hospitalized. This cohort study began in April, 2020, and completed exit questionnaires between September and December of that year. It's not great news. Findings were that "receiving a COVID-19 diagnosis was significantly associated with worse mobility and functioning outcomes even in the absence of hospitalization." The probability of worsening of functioning was nearly doubled in those who'd had Covid-19. There's another good reason to avoid infection.

I am sure you will be delighted to see I am bringing you another thrilling episode in the Debunking Chronicles. And I have to say these wild claims are soaring to heretofore unattainable heights of stupid. I guess we're getting more gullible.

Here's the latest claim: Drinking your own urine is an "antidote" to Covid-19. It may be that drinking someone else's urine works too; but I was unable to establish whether this is part of the claim. (Going to say that if I was going to drink urine I believe mine would be—you know—marginally preferable to someone else's; but overall, I think I would prefer a nice unassuming glass of a bubbly wine, even the really cheap stuff.) A gentleman named Christopher Key who has, as nearly as I can determine, no credentials of any kind in any scientific or health-related field, nonetheless maintains a website called Vaccine Police which purports to inform the public about vaccines. I'm sure you can imagine what you can find there. I do not plan to provide a link; if you're curious, you'll have to find it yourself, although I would prefer you don't give them any traffic. He also at one point last spring embarked on a cross-country journey to arrest Democratic governors for unspecified crimes against humanity, but was interrupted lengthily by an arrest for trespassing (at a Whole Foods where he would neither stop pestering the customers nor leave when asked) and some charges relating to disrespect for the court. Turns out judges don't appreciate being ignored while a person in the courtroom refuses to follow the court's policies and insists against orders on recording the proceedings. Who knew?

Anyhow, Mr. Key is touting urine-drinking as a cure, claiming it's been around for centuries and citing one Dr. Edward Group ("world renowned natural health expert" according to his website which I am also not going to link) who will, for the low, low price of only \$97 dollars, sell you a video course on "urotherapy, the ancient art of self-healing," using "your own perfect medicine to heal the body from the inside out" (and also, for an additional payment, ongoing, I presume, "raw herbal extracts" for much the same purpose). Key says in a video, "The antidote that we have seen now, and we have tons and tons of research,

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is urine therapy. I know to a lot of you this sounds crazy, but guys, God's given us everything we need." He also claims this vaccine is "the worst bioweapon" he's ever seen. I believe urine is also the antidote to the vaccine, just in case you thought it was too late to save yourself after you were duped into receiving it. And I probably don't have to say it, but nope. This is false, has no research support, and may be safely ignored as a part of your personal health planning.

There's another spate of misinformation going around about tests; you'll find it—of course—online. The latest is actually two claims. The first is that the CDC has withdrawn all of the PCR (polymerase chain reaction—gold standard) tests from the market. This is nonsense; you can get a PCR test yet today. If you doubt this, call around; I assure you these tests are still out there waiting for you.

The second is that you can make your home test read positive by variously soaking the test strip in water, juice, and a number of household liquids. (Maybe urine?? It is, after all, an antidote to the virus, right?) The claims go further—that these home tests are a plot to drive up the case numbers artificially to stoke the public's fears and create a false narrative to support further restrictions of your God-given rights. Experts acknowledge there may be ways to treat the test strip so to produce a false positive test result, although I haven't found one who is weighing in on each of these substances. I have a number of thoughts on this.

First, I can't imagine why people would bother to soak their test strips in water or whatever it takes to fake a result. You do the home test—you know—at home. No one can see you. If you think this can create false positives to serve the greedy motives of Big Pharma and helps the evil government in its plan to control your life, why would you soak your test strip? You don't want to produce a false positive, do you? That would hurt you and the others who are clued-in to the conspiracy. You'd just run a legit test to prove them wrong—or you'd skip the test entirely and lie about the result. And if you are part of the evil cabal that seeks to establish government control over everyone's life, how would this help them to do that? If you live in a state where you report your home test results, they're just taking your word for it, aren't they? So you could just get in touch with "the authorities" and lie about it. Or you could not report anything at all; that would serve them right, wouldn't it? If you're just a helpless dupe of the conspiracy innocently taking your home test, you wouldn't know enough to soak your test strip in the first place; you'd just run the test, and so this claim has nothing to do with you. And if your state doesn't accept and report home test results, then there's no point anyway. No need to fake the test results. No logical reason to do so. So even if it is possible to produce a false positive result, no one's shown me any logical reason anyone would.

It will help when you encounter a new claim to think about a few things: (1) Does the claim seem reasonable? (2) Do you think there's really someone who would even do what's alleged? (3) If so, what would be their motive for doing so? If you can't think of a way this action would benefit the interests of the folks who undertake it, then maybe they wouldn't do that. (4) What would be the motives of the people who are spinning this yarn? Have they been anti-science? Anti-vax? Since when? Weigh these things and make your decision about credibility.

And that's it for tonight. There was so much news that I held back a whole bunch of stuff for another day. That likely means I'll be back sooner rather than later. In the meantime, be careful and stay well. We'll talk again.



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## Tigers have triple win over Aberdeen Roncalli

The Groton Area boys basketball team came home with a triple win over Aberdeen Roncalli Thursday at Roncalli.

It was a lucky 13 night as both the varsity and the junior varsity teams had 13-point rallies on January 13. Groton Area varsity had a 12-7 lead after the first quarter. A 13-point rally in the first half propelled the Tigers to a 31-19 lead at half time and a 50-28 lead after three quarters of play.

Four players hit double figures for the Tigers with Kaden Kurtz leading the way with 16 points, five rebounds, one assist and three steals. Wyatt Hearnen had 12 points, six rebounds, three assists and two steals. Jayden Zak had 11 points, one rebound, five assists and three steals. Lane Tietz had 11 points, three rebounds, two assists and one steal. Jacob Zak had nine points, five rebounds, one assist, one steal and one block. Tate Larson had two rebounds. Cole Simon had one rebound and three steals. Holden Sippel had one rebound.

The Tigers made 18 of 32 field goals for 56 percent, three of 17 three-pointers for 18 percent, 14 of 19 free throws for 74 percent off of Roncalli's 21 team fouls, had 24 rebounds, seven turnovers, 12 assists, 13 steals, 17 fouls and one blocked shot.

Darwin Gambler and Maddox May led the Cavaliers with seven points each while Aiden Fisher had five, Caden Shelton and ZeeZrom Mouna each had four points, Maddox Miller and Keegan Stewart each had there points and Jayden Munroe added two points.

The Cavaliers made 13 of 39 field goals for 33 percent, was five of 13 from the line for 38 percent, and had 22 turnovers.

The junior varsity team trailed for most of the game until the final quarter when a 13-point rally boosted the Tigers to a 36-31 win. The Cavaliers held a 2-1 lead after the first quarter with the scoring happening in the last 60 seconds of the quarter. Roncalli led at half time, 17-8, and after three quarters, 27-16. Groton Scored 13 unanswered points to take a 32-29 lead with 23 seconds left in the game and scored the final four points for the win.

Cole Simon led the Tigers with 14 points while Taylor Diegel had 11, Colby Dunker five, Cade Larson three, Logan Ringgenberg two and Holden Sippel one. Darwin Gambler led the Cavaliers with 15 points while Aiden Fisher had six, Jayden Munroe had five, Hunter Binder three and Parker Grieben two.

Groton Area won the C game, 40-37. The Tigers held a 6-4 lead after the first quarter. Roncalli tied the game at 12 and 15 before the Tigers took a 17-15 lead at half time. The Tigers went on to a 31-24 lead after three quarters. Aberdeen Roncalli took a 33-32 lead with 2:40 left in the game but Groton Area scored six straight points to take the lead and secure the win.

Keagan Tracy and Ryder Johnson each had nine points, Blake Pauli had seven, Carter Simon six, Gage Sippel five, and Turner Thompson and Karter Moody each had two points.

Parker Grieben led the Cavaliers with 14 points while Carter Samson had 11, Jackson Lewno five, Brody Weinmeister four and Danny Schumacher added three points.

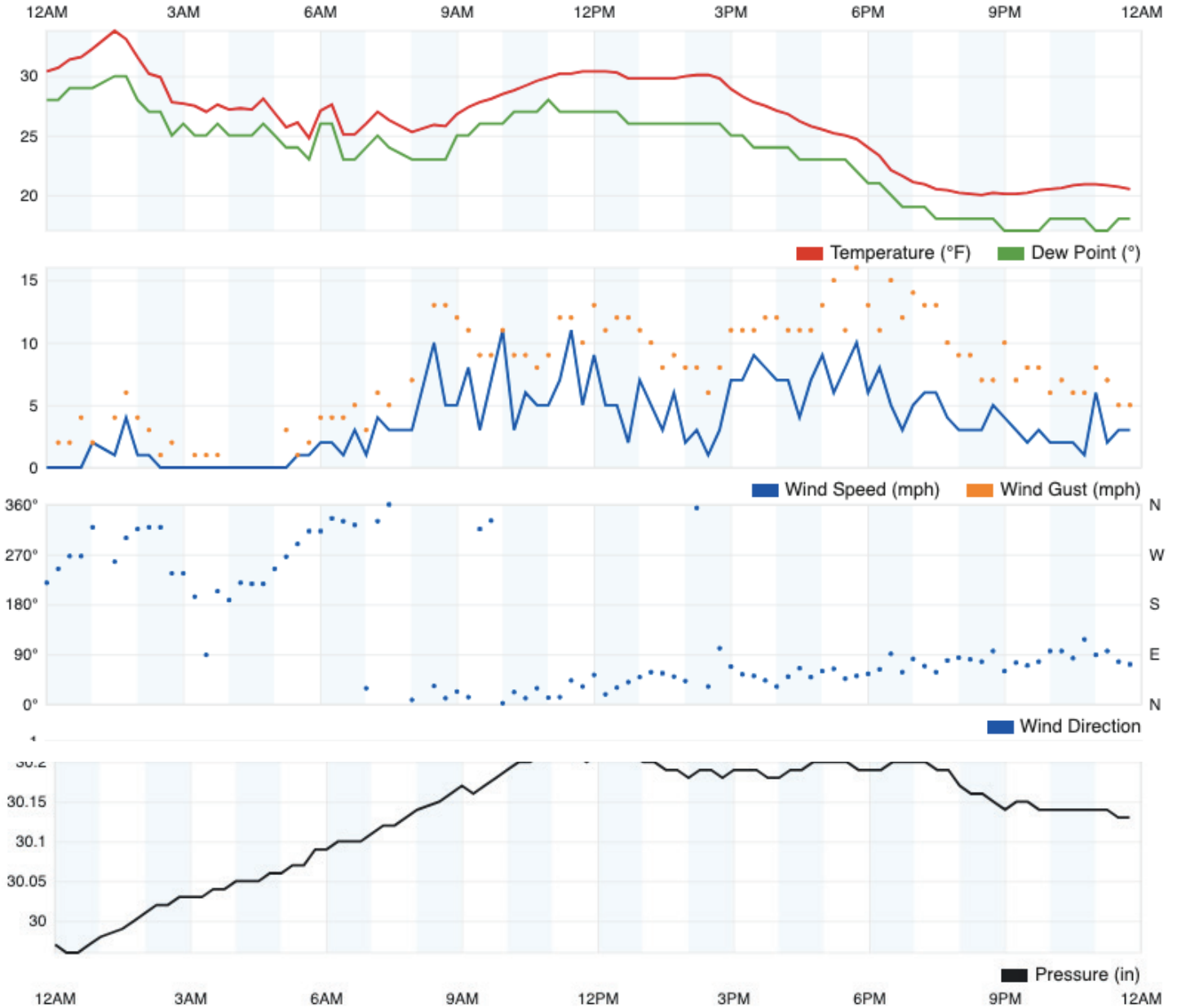
The JV and C games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Rutgear605. The varsity game was also broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Groton Ford, Dacotah Bank, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, John Sieh Agency and Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls.

- Paul Kosel

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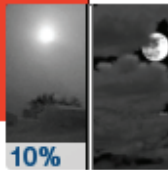
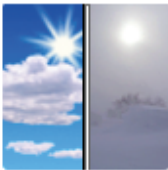
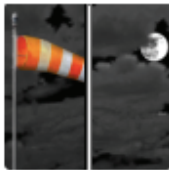

## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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**Winter Storm Warning**

Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow	Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery then Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny then Patchy Blowing Snow and Breezy	Mostly Cloudy and Breezy then Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny



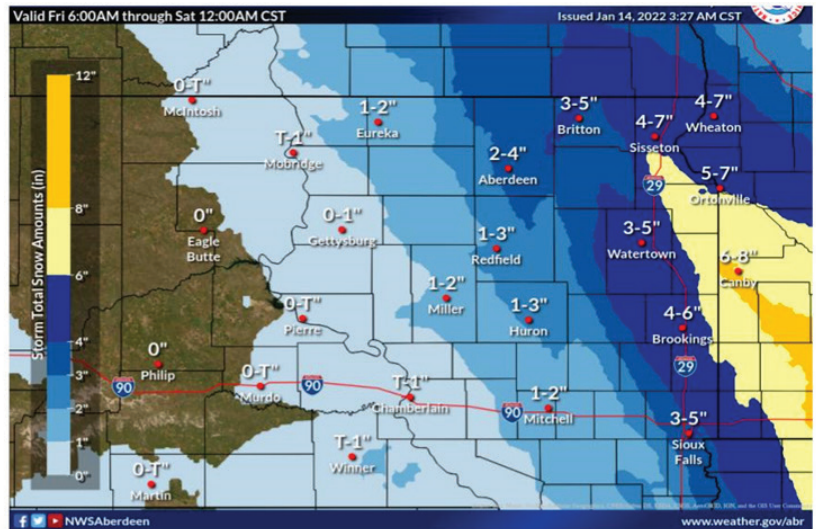
## Additional Snowfall For Today

January 14, 2022  
5:12 AM

Adjustments to the snowfall forecast are still possible

Several inches of snow have fallen early this morning in the east with additional amounts of 2 to 7 inches expected into the early evening.

Freezing drizzle will bring some light ice accumulations west of the James Valley.



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Accumulating snow expected around midnight Friday and continuing through the day, especially in northeastern SD and western MN.

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## Today in Weather History

1863 - The greatest snowstorm of record for Cincinnati OH commenced, and a day later twenty inches of snow covered the ground. That total has remained far above the modern day record for Cincinnati of eleven inches of snow in one storm. (David Ludlum)

1882 - Southern California's greatest snow occurred on this date. Fifteen inches blanketed San Bernardino, and even San Diego reported a trace of snow. (David Ludlum)

1979 - Chicago, IL, was in the midst of their second heaviest snow of record as, in thirty hours, the city was buried under 20.7 inches of snow. The twenty-nine inch snow cover following the storm was an all-time record for Chicago. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Arctic cold invaded the north central U.S. By evening blustery northwest winds and temperatures near zero at Grand Forks ND were producing wind chill readings of 50 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary)

1988 - A powerful Pacific storm produced rain and high winds in the western U.S. In Nevada, a wind gust to 90 mph at Reno was an all-time record for that location, and wind gusts reached 106 mph southwest of Reno. A wind gust to 94 mph was recorded at nearby Windy Hill. Rainfall totals in Oregon ranged up to six inches at Wilson River. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A winter storm spread snow and sleet and freezing rain from the Middle Mississippi Valley to the northeastern U.S. Freezing rain in West Virginia caused fifteen traffic accidents in just a few minutes west of Charleston. Tennessee was deluged with up to 7.5 inches of rain. Two inches of rain near Clarksville TN left water in the streets as high as car doors.

1990 - A winter storm in the southwestern U.S. blanketed the mountains of southwest Utah with 18 to 24 inches of snow, while sunshine and strong southerly winds helped temperatures warm into the 60s in the Central Plains Region. Five cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including North Platte NE with a reading of 63 degrees. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

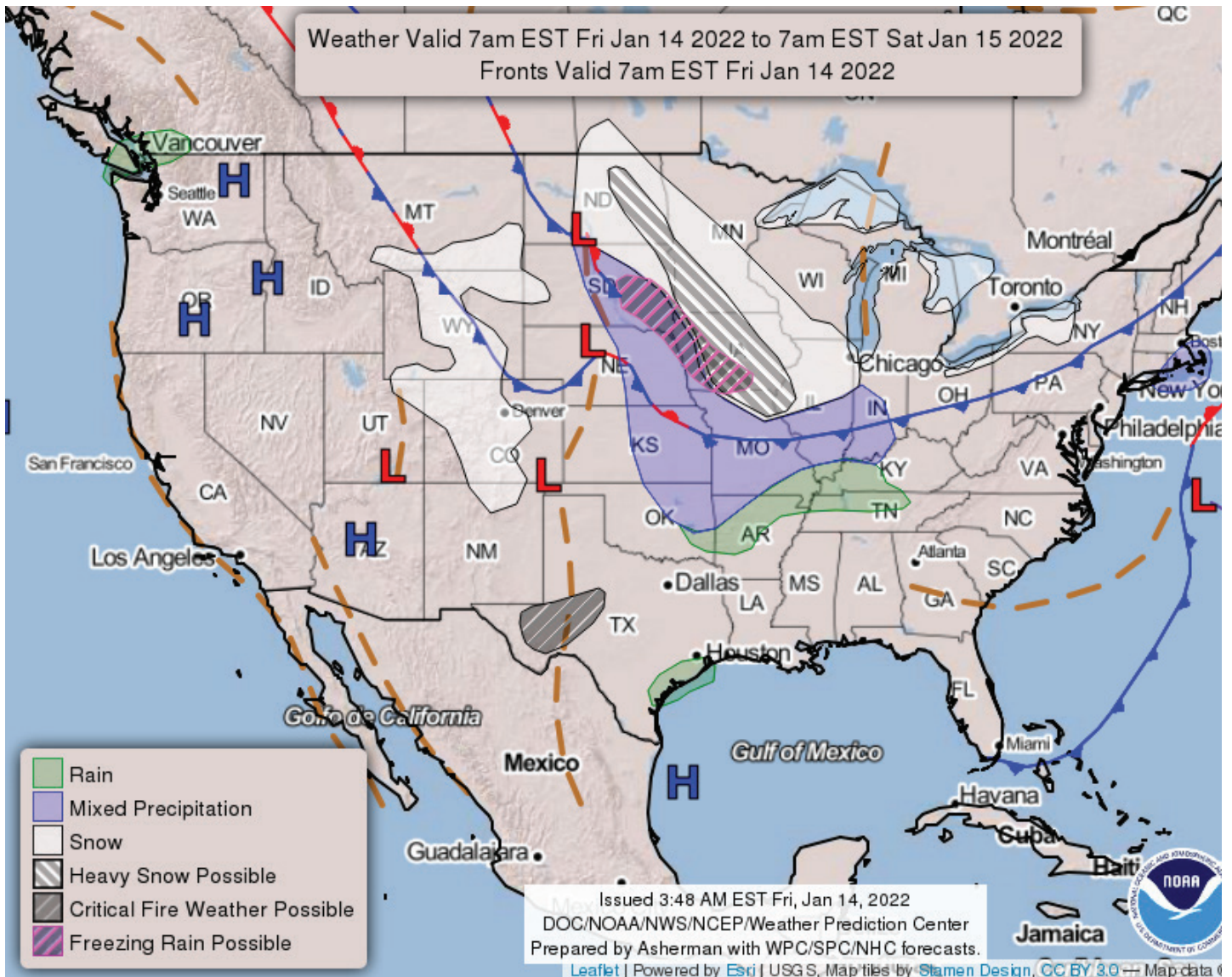
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

**High Temp: 34 °F at 1:24 AM**  
**Low Temp: 20 °F at 8:08 PM**  
**Wind: 16 mph at 5:38 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

**Record High: 50 in 1901**  
**Record Low: -36 in 1916**  
**Average High: 23°F**  
**Average Low: 2°F**  
**Average Precip in Jan.: 0.28**  
**Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00**  
**Average Precip to date: 0.28**  
**Precip Year to Date: 0.00**  
**Sunset Tonight: 5:16:00 PM**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:06:30 AM**



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## NEW BEGINNINGS

"There's nothing left for me. I've made such a mess out of my life that I have nothing to look forward to. And the tragedy of it all is that things looked great for so many years. Now, when I look into the future all I see is gloom and darkness. Where can I find anything to look forward to?" he asked.

"There is an answer - I can assure you of that," I said. Turning to Psalm 112:4, I read, "Even in darkness light dawns for the upright."

God will always provide His Light for those who seek it. No matter how far we have fallen or how little hope we may have, God can take the bitterness of defeat and despair and turn them into stepping-stones of success. When we willingly face and acknowledge our faults and shortcomings, ask for and accept His forgiveness and surrender our lives to Him, He will bring victory out of defeat.

Consider the story of Peter. When someone asked if He was a follower of Jesus, he lied, saying, "I am not!" A few moments before His denial he attempted to protect Jesus with his sword. And there was Mark - the author of the second book of the New Testament. He started as a strong believer completely trusting the message of Jesus. Suddenly, things grew boring, and the excitement evaporated. So, he gave up the "call" and quit.

But despite their failures, He did not give up on them. And neither will He give up on us. He forgave them, as He will us, and bring His light back into our lives.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to understand that "failure is not final" because Your grace provides a new beginning. Teach us to begin again and rise when we fall. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: - Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous. Psalm 112:4

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## 2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)  
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)  
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm  
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)  
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)  
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)  
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)  
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS  
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.  
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove  
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament  
06/19/2021 **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

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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News from the  Associated Press

## Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 61, Wakpala 39  
Akron-Westfield, Iowa 67, Alcester-Hudson 33  
Arlington 62, Elkton-Lake Benton 33  
Avon 48, Scotland 37  
Beresford 58, Tri-Valley 57  
Bison 48, McIntosh 12  
Britton-Hecla 33, Deuel 30  
Brookings 50, Aberdeen Central 40  
Burke 62, Colome 22  
Castlewood 55, Great Plains Lutheran 35  
Centerville 53, Irene-Wakonda 52  
Chester 68, Baltic 66, OT  
Corsica/Stickney 53, Winner 40  
DeSmet 50, Lake Preston 15  
Dell Rapids St. Mary 48, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 32  
Deubrook 58, Estelline/Hendricks 32  
Flasher, N.D. 61, Lemmon 50  
Hamlin 65, Milbank 33  
Hanson 61, Parker 22  
Harding County 49, Sundance, Wyo. 17  
Kimball/White Lake 54, Gregory 50  
Leola/Frederick 50, Iroquois/Doland 41  
Mobridge-Pollock 68, Crow Creek 59  
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 46, Platte-Geddes 33  
Northwestern 49, Ipswich 35  
Rapid City Central 55, Sturgis Brown 39  
Sioux Falls Christian 55, Tea Area 48  
Sioux Falls Lincoln 47, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 35  
Sioux Falls Washington 65, Sioux Falls Jefferson 38  
Sioux Valley 50, McCook Central/Montrose 33  
Sully Buttes 41, Miller 23  
Tri-State, N.D. 69, Waubay/Summit 31  
Vermillion 53, Lennox 34  
Viborg-Hurley 50, Gayville-Volin 25  
Wagner 69, Parkston 41  
Watertown 55, Yankton 52, OT  
Webster 51, Clark/Willow Lake 44  
West Central 61, Crofton, Neb. 59  
Wyndmere-Lidgerwood, N.D. 55, Wilmot 34

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 67, Brookings 56  
Akron-Westfield, Iowa 48, Alcester-Hudson 43

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Arlington 67, Elkton-Lake Benton 60  
Castlewood 62, Great Plains Lutheran 36  
Chester 47, Baltic 42  
Dakota Valley 65, Hartington Cedar Catholic, Neb. 43  
DeSmet 88, Lake Preston 25  
Deubrook 57, Estelline/Hendricks 36  
Deuel 61, Britton-Hecla 39  
Flandreau 54, Madison 40  
Florence/Henry 56, Sisseton 36  
Groton Area 59, Aberdeen Roncalli 35  
Hamlin 72, Milbank 36  
Highmore-Harrold 66, Herreid/Selby Area 46  
Irene-Wakonda 53, Centerville 42  
Iroquois/Doland 57, Leola/Frederick 25  
Lemmon 74, Dupree 48  
Lennox 62, Vermillion 57  
Mitchell 69, Pierre 54  
Platte-Geddes 57, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 50  
Rapid City Central 47, Sturgis Brown 38  
Sully Buttes 57, Miller 45  
Viborg-Hurley 58, Gayville-Volin 35  
Wagner 65, Parkston 41  
Watertown 48, Yankton 46  
Waubay/Summit 70, Tri-State, N.D. 19  
Jones County Invite=  
First Round=  
Philip 44, Kadoka Area 35  
West River Tournament=  
First Round=  
Faith 59, Moorcroft, Wyo. 43  
Hot Springs 60, Wall 56  
New Underwood 44, Edgemont 32  
Upton, Wyo. 71, Newell 15

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

## Perrott-Hunt carries South Dakota past Denver 80-71

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Kruz Perrott-Hunt matched his career high with 25 points as South Dakota topped Denver 80-71 on Thursday night.

Boogie Anderson had 12 points for South Dakota (9-7, 2-3 Summit League). Hunter Goodrick added 10 points and 13 rebounds. Mason Archambault had 10 points.

KJ Hunt had 20 points and 10 rebounds for the Pioneers (6-13, 2-4). Jordan Johnson added 16 points. Michael Henn had 14 points.

## Scheierman, Dentlinger leads South Dakota State over Omaha

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Baylor Scheierman had 26 points plus 11 rebounds as South Dakota State defeated Nebraska Omaha 95-86 on Thursday night. Matt Dentlinger added 25 points for the Jackrabbits.

Scheierman converted all six of his 3-point attempts. He added six assists. Dentlinger also had seven rebounds.

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Charlie Easley had 13 points for South Dakota State (14-4, 5-0 Summit League), which won its fifth straight game. Zeke Mayo added 11 points and nine assists.

Nick Ferrarini had 17 points for the Mavericks (3-15, 2-5). Kyle Luedtke added 16 points. Darrius Hughes had 15 points.

## Tribal chairman gives South Dakota lawmakers history lesson

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The chairman of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate offered South Dakota's Legislature a history lesson on Thursday during the annual State of the Tribes address, as he emphasized tribal sovereignty and government-to-government relations.

Chairman Delbert Hopkins Jr. entered the House chamber to a beating drum, Dakota songs and with an honor guard of tribal veterans. After leading the chamber in a moment of silence for the people who have died from COVID-19, he reminded lawmakers that treaties between the U.S. government and tribal nations have always been a part of the country's history, starting with George Washington and the Constitution.

"In the state of South Dakota Admissions Act, the people of South Dakota promised that they would never lay claim to Indian lands as a condition of becoming a state," Hopkins told the Legislature.

State and tribal governments have long had an uneasy relationship in South Dakota, and the annual State of the Tribes address, which is delivered by one of the nine tribal leaders in the state, is meant to foster cooperation. Hopkins named several areas where the state and tribes could work together better, including education, economic development and law enforcement.

But he also made sure to remind lawmakers that they owed even the state's name to the tribes.

"Having adopted Dakota as the state's name, public schools should teach about our history and culture of our Dakota Oyate and our Oceti Sakowin Seven Council Fires," Hopkins said, referring to the tribes that are based in the state.

"That's not critical race, that's history of humanity," he added, taking a jab at Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, who has prioritized banning so-called "Critical Race Theory" from public school classrooms this year.

Noem has acknowledged that Native American history is an essential part of the state's history that should be taught. But last year, the state government faced protests by some Native American educators after the Department of Education removed more than a dozen references to Oceti Sakowin culture and history from a social studies standards proposal. Under pressure from Indigenous groups as well as fellow conservatives, Noem relaunched the standards review process.

Peri Pourier, a Democratic representative who is a member of the Oglala Lakota tribe, slammed the governor for not attending the event.

"Showing up to South Dakota's own State of the Tribe's Address would have been an essential part of repairing tribal relations for Governor Noem," she said in a statement.

Hopkins drew a direct line from the abuses of Indian boarding schools that removed children from their families and stamped out Native languages to the problems plaguing reservations today, including high unemployment, aging school buildings and drug addiction.

"For decades, the poorest counties in America have always been our Sioux Reservations," Hopkins said, as he advocated for economic development such as tourism.

Hopkins ended with a renewed call for cooperation, saying that the state and tribes could "accomplish great things with mutual respect and understanding."

## Man charged with storming Capitol made rap videos about riot

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

A South Dakota man charged this week with storming the U.S. Capitol last year performed rap songs about the riot in videos posted on his YouTube channel, federal authorities say.

A relative told the FBI that Billy Knutson was a rapper who sold his music online and has a YouTube channel under the username "Playboythebeast," an FBI agent said in a court filing. Knutson, 36, of Mitchell, South

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Dakota, said on social media that he was at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and posted photos of himself outside the building, the relative said.

One of the songs on Knutson's YouTube channel is called "Patriots: Message To The World" and has more than 60,000 views.

"We been fighting for y'all, and this how you treat us? Calling us traitors and claim we not peaceful?" he sang on the video, which included video clips of the riot.

Messages posted on Knutson's YouTube channel under the username "Playboy The Beast" expressed support for the far-right Proud Boys. More than three dozen people linked to the Proud Boys have been charged with riot-related offenses.

A surveillance video showed Knutson enter the Capitol by climbing through a broken window near the doors of the Senate wing, according to the agent. The video shows Knutson talking to other people, including police officers, and apparently using a cellphone to record images inside the building. He exited through a set of doors after several minutes, the FBI said.

A cellphone number that Knutson used on an economic application submitted to the state of North Carolina matched the number for a cellphone that was near the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, according to the FBI.

A federal magistrate judge in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, ordered Knutson released after his initial court appearance on Wednesday, court records show. Prosecutors didn't seek his pretrial detention.

Posts on Knutson's YouTube channel said he moved from North Carolina to South Dakota last year.

The charges against Knutson in a criminal complaint include disorderly conduct in a Capitol building and entering and remaining in a restricted building or grounds.

A federal public defender who represented Knutson at the hearing said he referred a request for comment to his supervisor.

More than 700 people have been charged with federal crimes related to the Jan. 6 riot. Knutson isn't the only riot defendant to record a rap song about the riot.

A Florida man, Felipe Marquez, posted a YouTube video in which he rapped about his riot experience to the tune of Shaggy's "It Wasn't Me." with lyrics that included, "We even fist-bumped police," and "We were taking selfies." Last month, a judge sentenced Marquez to three months of home confinement.

Antionne Brodnax, a Virginia man who raps under the name Bugzie the Don, pleaded guilty to riot-related charges in October and is scheduled to be sentenced on Jan. 27. A photograph of Brodnax sitting on the hood of police truck during the riot was on the cover of his rap album, "The Capital," according to a Washington Post report.

## Illinois court sends pipeline plans back to regulators

By JAMES MacPHERSON Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — An Illinois appellate court has set aside a decision by state regulators that would allow the Dakota Access oil pipeline to double capacity to 1.1 million barrels daily.

In a 60-page decision filed Wednesday, the appellate court's three-judge panel ordered the Illinois Commerce Commission to review the public need for the project that moves North Dakota oil to a shipping point in Illinois. The court said the commission must consider the public need "for the people of the United States, not the world."

The court said regulators must also consider regulatory violations in Pennsylvania by Sunoco, one of the pipeline's owners.

It ordered Illinois regulators to issue a new decision within 11 months, while restricting the pipeline's capacity to 570,000 barrels per day.

The \$3.8 billion, 1,172-mile (1,886 kilometer) underground pipeline has been moving oil since 2017. It was subject to prolonged protests and hundreds of arrests during its construction in North Dakota in late 2016 and early 2017 because it crosses beneath the Missouri River, just north of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. The tribe draws its water from the river and fears pollution.

Texas-based Energy Transfer, which built the pipeline, has insisted it would be safe and that the expansion

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would be, too.

Opponents argue that moving more oil through the pipeline increases the probability of a disastrous oil spill. North Dakota regulators in 2020 unanimously approved expanded capacity for the Dakota Access pipeline from 570,000 barrels daily to 1.1 million barrels, saying they believed the project had met exhaustive state and federal requirements. Pipeline backers said the expansion was needed to meet the growing demand for oil shipments from North Dakota, without the need for additional pipelines or rail shipments.

Additional pump stations were needed in the Dakotas and Illinois to add horsepower to push more oil through the line. Regulators in those states approved the additional stations.

In Illinois, the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council and others protested the commission's approval, sending it to the appellate court.

Pipeline owners announced last summer that the line was able to transport 750,000 barrels a day along the line. But North Dakota Pipeline Authority Director Justin Kringstad said Thursday that amount likely has not been achieved to date.

North Dakota's oil production is 1.1 million barrels daily at present. Rail and other pipelines ship oil that doesn't move on the Dakota Access pipeline.

Kringstad said the ruling in Illinois won't have any immediate impact on North Dakota's oil production or the ability to ship it. But the "long-term outlook remains uncertain," he said.

The biggest obstacle for the pipeline's operation remains in federal court. A Washington, D.C., Circuit Court of Appeals panel last year supported the Standing Rock Sioux and other tribes' argument that the project deserves a thorough environmental review and is currently operating without a key federal permit.

The study will determine whether the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reissues a permit for the line to cross the Missouri River in south-central North Dakota.

## Rapid City woman given 25 years for fatally striking friend

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A Rapid City woman accused of driving drunk and fatally hitting her friend with her vehicle during an argument has been sentenced to 25 years in prison.

According to Pennington County prosecutors, 51-year-old Rochelle Seminole had a blood alcohol content of more than three times the legal limit in May of 2019 when she argued with 37-year-old Kimberly Clifford in the parking lot of a Rapid City Walmart.

Witnesses said Seminole attempted to run over Clifford, but missed and then backed up and struck her. Originally charged with first-degree murder, Seminole pleaded guilty last month to vehicular homicide and aggravated assault in Clifford's death, KOTA-TV reported.

Seminole's attorney, John Murphy, said Seminole was not the instigator in the argument with Clifford. Murphy said Seminole did not hit her with the car intentionally but takes full responsibility for what happened.

But, Chief Deputy State's Attorney Lara Roetzel said most of the 23 witnesses to what happened said they felt the act was intentional.

Seminole told Clifford's family that she was sorry, saying she never meant for this to happen and that she would never run over somebody. She asked them to forgive her.

Judge Craig Pfeifle on Wednesday sentenced Seminole to consecutive sentences of 15 years each on the vehicular homicide and assault charges, suspending five years of the assault sentence.

## UK leader's office apologizes for party before royal funeral

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Boris Johnson's office on Friday apologized to the royal family for holding a staff party in Downing Street on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral last year — the latest in a string of allegedly lockdown-breaching gatherings that are threatening to topple the British prime minister.

The farewell party for Johnson's departing spin doctor, complete with late-night drinking and dancing, took place on April 16, 2021, the night before Queen Elizabeth II sat alone at the funeral of her husband because

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of social distancing rules in place to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Johnson spokesman Jamie Davies said the government acknowledged that the party had caused "significant public anger."

"It's deeply regrettable that this took place at a time of national mourning and No. 10 has apologized to the palace," he said, using a term for the prime minister's 10 Downing St. office.

Johnson's former communications director James Slack said the party "should not have happened at the time that it did."

"I wish to apologize unreservedly for the anger and hurt caused," Slack said in a statement.

"I am deeply sorry, and take full responsibility," added Slack, who left the government last year and is now deputy editor-in-chief of tabloid newspaper The Sun.

Johnson isn't alleged to have attended the leaving party, disclosed by the Daily Telegraph newspaper. Earlier this week, he apologized for going to a gathering in the garden of Downing Street, his office and home, in May 2020, when the U.K. was under strict lockdown.

The latest party has appalled many in Britain because of the symbolism of its timing. The Daily Telegraph said Downing Street staff drank, danced and socialized at leaving parties for Slack and another staff member late into the night. The next day, the widowed queen sat alone in the church during her husband's funeral service at Windsor Castle in order to adhere to social distancing rules that barred indoor mixing.

Photos of the monarch, clad in black and wearing a face mask, became a powerful image of the isolation and sacrifice endured by many during the pandemic.

Members of Johnson's Conservative government have expressed support for the prime minister following his admission on Wednesday that he attended a "bring your own booze" staff party in the garden of his Downing Street office in May 2020.

At the time people in Britain were banned by law from meeting more than one person outside their households as part of measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Millions were cut off from family and friends, and even barred from visiting dying relatives in hospitals.

Many Conservatives fear the "partygate" scandal could become a tipping point for a leader who has weathered a series of other storms over his expenses, and his moral judgment.

The latest revelations are likely to prompt more Conservatives to join opponents and demanding that Johnson resign for flouting the rules the government imposed on the country as the coronavirus swept the U.K.

In a sign of growing anger in party ranks, the Conservative association in the staunchly Tory district of Sutton Coldfield in central England voted unanimously on Thursday night to withdraw its support from Johnson.

"The culture starts at the top, doesn't it?" said Simon Ward, a Conservative local councillor. "And that's the really disappointing point.

"We were asking people all over our country to make massive sacrifices, people in rural Sutton Coldfield to make massive sacrifices, over the last two years. I think we have the right to expect everybody in government and in those positions of leadership to follow those same rules and guidelines as well."

Johnson said in his apology on Wednesday that he understood public "rage," but stopped short of admitting wrongdoing, saying he had considered the gathering a work event to thank staff for their efforts during the pandemic.

Johnson urged people to await the conclusions of an investigation by senior civil servant Sue Gray into multiple alleged rule-breaking parties by government staff during the pandemic. Gray, a respected public servant who has investigated past allegations of ministerial wrongdoing, is expected to report by the end of the month.

The government says Gray's inquiry is independent, but she is a civil servant and Johnson is, ultimately, her boss. Gray could conclude that Johnson broke the code of conduct for government ministers, though she does not have the power to fire him. Johnson has not said what he will do if she found he was at fault.

Johnson does not have to face voters' judgment until the next general election, scheduled for 2024. But his party could seek to oust him sooner if it judges he has become toxic.

Under Conservative rules, a no-confidence vote in the leader can be triggered if 15% of party lawmakers write letters demanding it.

Roger Gale, a Conservative lawmaker who has long been critical of Johnson, said he had already submitted

a letter calling for a leadership challenge.

"I do think that minds are now, over this weekend, being focused upon the need to take the necessary action," he said. "I clearly don't know, and I shouldn't know, how many of my colleagues have put in letters ... but I believe that there is some momentum which is growing."

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss — often cited as a potential successor to Johnson — said she understood "people's anger and dismay" at the party revelations.

But she said "I think we now need to move on."

## Cyberattack in Ukraine targets government websites

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A huge cyberattack left a number of Ukrainian government websites temporarily unavailable on Friday, officials said.

While it wasn't immediately clear who was behind the cyberattack, the disruption came amid heightened tensions with Russia and after talks between Moscow and the West failed to yield any significant progress this week.

Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko told The Associated Press it was too soon to tell who could have been behind the attack.

"But there is a long record of Russian cyber assaults against Ukraine in the past," he said.

Moscow had previously denied involvement in cyberattacks against Ukraine.

The websites of the country's Cabinet, seven ministries, the Treasury, the National Emergency Service and the state services website, where Ukrainians' electronic passports and vaccination certificates are stored, were temporarily unavailable Friday as a result of the hack.

The websites contained a message in Ukrainian, Russian and Polish, saying that Ukrainians' personal data has been leaked into the public domain. "Be afraid and expect the worst. This is for your past, present and future," the message read, in part.

Ukraine's State Service of Communication and Information Protection said that no personal data has been leaked.

The country's minister for digital transformation, Mykhailo Fedorov, insisted that personal data was safe, since "the operability of the websites, not the registries," was affected by the hack. Fedorov said that some of the attacked websites were blocked by their administrators in order to contain the damage and investigate the attacks.

He added that "a large part" of the affected websites have been restored.

The U.S. estimates Russia has massed about 100,000 troops near Ukraine, a buildup that has stoked fears of an invasion. Moscow says it has no plans to attack and rejects Washington's demand to pull back its forces, saying it has the right to deploy them wherever necessary.

The Kremlin has demanded security guarantees from the West that NATO wouldn't expand eastward.

Last month, Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. Washington and its allies have refused to provide such pledges, but said they are ready for the talks.

High-stakes talks this week between Moscow and the U.S., followed by a meeting of Russia and NATO representatives and a meeting at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, failed to bring about any immediate progress.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Friday that the 27-nation bloc is ready to mobilize all its resources to provide technical assistance to Ukraine and help it improve its capacity to weather cyberattacks.

Borrell told a meeting of EU foreign ministers in the French port city of Brest that the bloc would mobilize its cyber rapid response teams. Borrell added that he would ask member countries to allow Ukraine benefit from anti-cyberattacks resources within the framework of the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation

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(PESCO), even though the country isn't a member of the union.

"We are going to mobilize all our resources to help Ukraine cope with these cyberattacks," Borrell said. "Sadly, we expected this could happen."

Asked who could be behind the attack, Borrell said: "I can't point at anybody because I have no proof, but one can imagine."

## Double-fault: Visa revoked again, Djokovic faces deportation

By JOHN PYE and ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic faces deportation again after the Australian government revoked his visa for a second time, the latest twist in the ongoing saga over whether the No. 1-ranked tennis player will be allowed to compete in the Australian Open despite being unvaccinated for COVID-19.

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke said Friday he used his ministerial discretion to cancel the 34-year-old Serb's visa on public interest grounds — just three days before play begins at the Australian Open, where Djokovic has won a record nine of his 20 Grand Slam titles.

Djokovic's lawyers were expected to appeal at the Federal Circuit and Family Court, which they already successfully did last week on procedural grounds after his visa was first canceled when he landed at a Melbourne airport.

A court hearing Friday night heard Djokovic would not be detained or deported overnight, but would have to attend a meeting with his lawyers and immigration officials in Melbourne at 8 a.m. local time Saturday.

Deportation from Australia can lead to a three-year ban on returning to the country, although that may be waived, depending on the circumstances.

Hawke said he canceled the visa on "health and good order grounds, on the basis that it was in the public interest to do so." His statement added that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government "is firmly committed to protecting Australia's borders, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic."

Morrison himself welcomed Djokovic's pending deportation. The whole episode has touched a nerve in Australia, and particularly in Victoria state, where locals went through hundreds of days of lockdowns during the worst of the pandemic and there is a vaccination rate among adults of more than 90%.

Australia is currently facing a massive surge in virus cases driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant. On Friday, the nation reported 130,000 new cases, including nearly 35,000 in Victoria state. Although many infected people aren't getting as sick as they did in previous outbreaks, the surge is still putting severe strain on the health system, with more than 4,400 people hospitalized. It's also causing disruptions to workplaces and supply chains.

"This pandemic has been incredibly difficult for every Australian but we have stuck together and saved lives and livelihoods. ... Australians have made many sacrifices during this pandemic, and they rightly expect the result of those sacrifices to be protected," Morrison said in a statement. "This is what the Minister is doing in taking this action today."

Everyone at the Australian Open — including players, their support teams and spectators — is required to be vaccinated for the illness caused by the coronavirus. Djokovic is not inoculated and had sought a medical exemption on the grounds that he had COVID-19 in December.

That exemption was approved by the Victoria state government and Tennis Australia, apparently allowing him to obtain a visa to travel. But the Australian Border Force rejected the exemption and canceled his visa when he landed in Melbourne on Jan. 5.

Djokovic spent four nights in an immigration detention hotel before a judge on Monday overturned that decision. That ruling allowed Djokovic to move freely around Australia and he has been practicing at Melbourne Park daily to prepare to play in a tournament he has won each of the past three years.

He had a practice session originally scheduled for mid-afternoon Friday at Rod Laver Arena, the tournament's main stadium, but pushed that to the morning and was finished several hours before Hawke's decision was announced in the early evening.

After the visa cancellation from Hawke, media started gathering outside the building where Djokovic re-



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portedly was meeting with his lawyers.

An Australian Open spokeswoman said tournament organizers did not have any immediate comment on the latest development in Djokovic's situation, which has overshadowed all other story lines heading into the year's first Grand Slam event.

"It's not a good situation for anyone," said Andy Murray, a three-time Grand Slam champion and five-time runner-up at the Australian Open. "Just want it obviously to get resolved. I think it would be good for everyone if that was the case. It just seems like it's dragged on for quite a long time now — not great for the tennis, not great for the Australian Open, not great for Novak."

Tennis Australia announced that nine players would hold pre-tournament news conferences Saturday, and Djokovic's name was not on the list.

With his legal situation still in limbo, Djokovic was placed in the tournament bracket in Thursday's draw, slated to face Miomir Kecmanovic in an all-Serbian matchup in the first round.

According to Grand Slam rules, if Djokovic is forced to pull out of the tournament before the order of play for Day 1 is announced, No. 5 seed Rublev would move into Djokovic's spot in the bracket and face Kecmanovic.

If Djokovic withdraws from the tournament after Monday's schedule is released, he would be replaced in the field by what's known as a "lucky loser" — a player who loses in the qualifying tournament but gets into the main draw because of another player's exit before competition has started.

And if Djokovic plays in a match — or more — and then is told he can no longer participate in the tournament, his next opponent would simply advance to the following round and there would be no replacement.

Melbourne-based immigration lawyer Kian Bone said Djokovic's lawyers face an "extremely difficult" task to get court orders over the weekend to allow their client to play next week.

Speaking hours before Hawke's decision was announced, Bone said: "If you left it any later than he has done now, I think from a strategic standpoint, he's really hamstringing Djokovic's legal team, in terms of what sort of options or remedies he could obtain."

Djokovic's lawyers would need to go before a duty judge of the Federal Circuit and Family Court, or a higher judge of the Federal Court, to get two urgent orders. One order would be an injunction preventing his deportation, such as what he won in court last week.

The second would force Hawke to grant Djokovic a visa to play.

"That second order is almost notprecedented," Bone said. "Very rarely do the courts order a member of the executive government to grant a visa."

## Analysis: Biden overshoots on what's possible in divided DC

By ZEKE MILLER, COLLEEN LONG and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — He was supposed to break through the congressional logjam. End the pandemic. Get the economy back on track.

Days before he hits his one-year mark in office, a torrent of bad news is gnawing at the foundational rationale of President Joe Biden's presidency: that he could get the job done.

In the space of a week, Biden has been confronted by record inflation, COVID-19 testing shortages and school disruptions, and the second big slap-down of his domestic agenda in as many months by members of his own party. This time, it's his voting rights push that seems doomed.

Add to that the Supreme Court's rejection of a centerpiece of his coronavirus response, and Biden's argument — that his five decades in Washington uniquely positioned him to deliver on an immensely ambitious agenda — was at risk of crumbling this week.

Jeffrey Engel, director of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University, said Biden's sweeping promises have collided with the realities of enacting change in a divided Washington where his party has only the slimmest margins of control in Congress.

"I don't think there's any way to reach any other conclusion that he's overshoot here," Engel said. "It's important to separate the politically possible from the politically desirable."

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Biden's troubles extend back to August, when the administration executed a chaotic and deadly withdrawal from Afghanistan. And the president's professed competence was already under question as migrants multiplied at the southern border with no clear federal plan in sight. It deteriorated further as inflation that was supposed to be "transitory" only intensified at the end of the year.

"I've been hired to solve problems," Biden said last March during his first press conference in office. Yet they've proven persistent.

The difficulty of navigating Washington's vexing partisanship and the unpredictability of the presidency should have come as no surprise to Biden, a senator for more than three decades who also spent eight years as vice president.

Biden is unlikely to get much sympathy from the public for his predicament.

Even with the now widespread protection of vaccination, new scenes of long virus testing lines and sold-out grocery store shelves hark back to the chaotic earliest days of the pandemic and drag down the nation's psyche.

The administration is going all-out to counter that mindset and demonstrate it's on top of the virus.

A federal website to send free COVID-19 tests to Americans' doorsteps will launch next week — a speedy turnaround after Biden first announced the initiative in December — but one that nonetheless struck even allies as coming far too late to blunt the winter virus surge that should have been expected. And it was only after months of pressure that Biden finally came around to announcing Thursday that his administration will begin making "high-quality masks" available to Americans for free.

That announcement was overshadowed, on a day that brought nothing but bad news for Biden, by a Supreme Court ruling against the Biden administration's rule requiring large employers to have their workers get vaccinated or be subject to weekly COVID-19 testing. White House officials had always anticipated legal challenges, and many in the administration believe just the rollout of the rule helped drive millions of people to get vaccinated. Still, the ruling stung.

The day also brought new indications that Biden's voting rights push, like his social spending bill before it, appears to be doomed by a shortage of support in his own party and his inability to attract Republicans. In each case, Biden delivered a lofty speech on the need to get something done and traveled to Capitol Hill to rally his own party, only to be rebuffed.

Both pieces of legislation required all 50 Democratic votes to pass the Senate — and in the case of voting rights, a commitment from those same senators to change the chamber's rules to allow the bill to pass by simple majority.

But on Thursday, Democratic Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona didn't even give Biden the courtesy of hearing his pitch in person before saying she wouldn't get behind the change. She joined West Virginia's Joe Manchin in again deflating Biden's legislative dreams.

The two senators spent just over an hour at the White House on Thursday evening, but it looked nearly impossible to find a path forward for the legislation.

Rep. Peter Meijer, R-Michigan, said Biden had cultivated "sky-high expectations when he inevitably cannot meet them."

"If you want to be FDR," Meijer added, "it's probably a prerequisite that you have a mandate. On the same ballot that elected Joe Biden into office, the Dems nearly lost the House."

Biden's handling of the economy has brought its own set of challenges. The president has presided over record job creation but also over renewed fears of inflation.

Biden tried to tamp down concerns about inflation this summer, insisting that it was the predictable result of restarting the economy after the pandemic and that rising prices would soon fade.

"Our experts believe and the data shows that most of the price increases we've seen were expected, and expected to be temporary," he said in July. "The reality is, you can't flip the global economic light back on and not expect this to happen."

But inflation only multiplied as the summer ended and oil prices rose. That prompted the president who has promised a future without fossil fuels to make a record-setting release from the U.S. petroleum reserve to help tamp down the cost of gasoline. Even so, inflation in December reached a nearly 40-year high of 7%

annually.

And Friday marked the first time in half a year that families are going without a monthly deposit from the child tax credit, which had been seen as a legacy-making program for Biden but has emerged instead as a flash point over who is worthy of government support.

The high prices slashed into public confidence in Biden. Just 41% of Americans approved of his economic leadership last month, down from 60% in March, and below his overall approval rating of 48% in the same poll by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

At the same time, amid the rise of new COVID-19 variants — first delta and now omicron — Biden's approval rating on handling the pandemic fell from 70% early in his presidency to 57% in the December survey.

The White House shrugged off the setbacks as a part of the job for a president aims high.

"You do hard things in White Houses," press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday. "You have every challenge laid at your feet, whether it's global or domestically. And we could certainly propose legislation to see if people support bunny rabbits and ice cream, but that wouldn't be very rewarding to the American people."

## Goodbye 'godsend': Expiration of child tax credits hits home

By JOHN RABY, FATIMA HUSSEIN and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — For the first time in half a year, families on Friday are going without a monthly deposit from the child tax credit — a program that was intended to be part of President Joe Biden's legacy but has emerged instead as a flash point over who is worthy of government support.

Retiree Andy Roberts, from St. Albans, West Virginia, relied on the checks to help raise his two young grandchildren, whom he and his wife adopted because the birth parents are recovering from drug addiction.

The Robertses are now out \$550 a month. That money helped pay for Girl Scouts, ballet and acting lessons and kids' shoes, which Roberts noted are more expensive than adult shoes. The tax credit, he said, was a "godsend."

"It'll make you tighten up your belt, if you've got anything to tighten," Roberts said about losing the payments.

The monthly tax credits were part of Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package — and the president had proposed extending them for another full year as part of a separate measure focused on economic and social programs.

But Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, from Roberts' home state of West Virginia, objected to extending the credit out of concern that the money would discourage people from working and that any additional federal spending would fuel inflation that has already climbed to a nearly 40-year high.

According to IRS data, 305,000 West Virginia children benefited from the expanded credit last month.

Manchin's opposition in the evenly split Senate derailed Biden's social spending package and caused the expanded tax credits that were going out in the middle of every month to expire in January. This is whittling down family incomes at the precise moment when people are grappling with higher prices.

However, families only received half of their 2021 credit on a monthly basis and the other half will be received once they file their taxes in the coming months. The size of the credit will be cut in 2022, with full payments only going to families that earned enough income to owe taxes, a policy choice that will limit the benefits for the poorest households. And the credits for 2022 will come only once people file their taxes at the start of the following year.

West Virginia families interviewed by The Associated Press highlighted how their grocery and gasoline bills have risen and said they'll need to get by with less of a financial cushion than a few months ago.

"You're going to have to learn to adapt," said Roberts, who worked as an auto dealer for five decades. "You never really dreamed that everything would all of a sudden explode. You go down and get a package of hamburger and it's \$7-8 a pound."

By the Biden administration's math, the expanded child tax credit and its monthly payments were a policy success that paid out \$93 billion over six months. More than 36 million families received the payments in December. The payments were \$300 monthly for each child who was five and younger, and \$250 monthly for children between the ages of six and 17.

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The Treasury Department declined to address questions about the expiration of the expanded child tax credit, which has become a politically sensitive issue as part of Biden's nearly \$2 trillion economic package that has stalled in the Senate.

Manchin has supported some form of a work requirement for people receiving the payment, out of concern that automatic government aid could cause people to quit their jobs. Yet his primary objection, in a written statement last month, sidestepped that issue as he expressed concerns about inflation and that a one-year extension masked the true costs of a tax credit that could become permanent.

"My Democratic colleagues in Washington are determined to dramatically reshape our society in a way that leaves our country even more vulnerable to the threats we face," Manchin said. He added that he was worried about inflation and the size of the national debt.

The Census Bureau surveyed the spending patterns of recipients during September and October. Nearly a third used the credit to pay for school expenses, while about 25% of families with young children spent it on child care. About 40% of recipients said they mostly relied on the money to pay off debt.

There are separate benefits in terms of improving the outcomes for impoverished children, whose families could not previously access the full tax credit because their earnings were too low. An analysis by the Urban Institute estimated that extending the credit as developed by the Biden administration would cut child poverty by 40%.

The tax credits did not cause an immediate exodus from the workforce, as some lawmakers had feared. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the percentage of people with jobs increased from 58% the month before the monthly payments began to 59.5% last month. That same trend occurred in West Virginia, where the employment-population ratio rose to the pre-pandemic level of 52.9%.

There's an academic debate over whether the credit could suppress employment in the long term, with most studies suggesting that the impact would be statistically negligible.

Academics who study the tax credit are torn on how a permanent program would affect the economy and child welfare.

Katherine Michelmore, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, and two other researchers estimated that roughly 350,000 parents would exit the workforce, a figure that is not all that significant in an economy with roughly 150 million jobs.

Michelmore said the long-term effects of a permanent tax credit would have a positive impact on the economy, as children who grow up in families with higher incomes "tend to do better in school, they're more likely to graduate from high school. It might be 50 years down the road but there will be more cost savings in the future."

One of the key questions for policymakers is whether bureaucracies or parents are better at spending money on children. Manchin has proposed a 10-year, funded version of Biden's economic proposal that would scrap the child tax credits focus and instead finance programs such as universal pre-kindergarten, to avoid sending money directly to families.

"It's a moral question of do you trust families to make their own decisions," Michelmore said.

Hairdresser Chelsea Woody is a single mother from Charleston, West Virginia, who works six days a week to make ends meet. The extended child tax credit payments had helped pay for her son's daycare, as well as letting her splurge on clothes for him.

"It truly helps out a lot. It's an extra cushion, instead of me worrying how I'm going to pay a bill or if anything comes up," Woody said as she loaded groceries into her car. "It's helpful for a lot of people. It helps working families out because we struggle the most. I'm hardly home with my kid because I work all the time."

## Masks rules get tighter in Europe in winter's COVID-19 wave

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — To mask or not to mask is a question Italy settled early in the COVID-19 outbreak with a vigorous "yes." Now the onetime epicenter of the pandemic in Europe hopes even stricter mask rules will help it beat the latest infection surge.

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Other countries are taking similar action as the more transmissible — yet, apparently, less virulent — omicron variant spreads through the continent.

With intensive care units in Italy's hospitals rapidly filling with mostly unvaccinated COVID-19 patients, the government announced on Christmas Eve that FFP2 masks — which offer users more protection than cloth or surgical masks — must be worn on public transport, including planes, trains, ferries and subways.

That's even though all passengers in Italy, as of this week, must be vaccinated or recently recovered from COVID-19. FFP2s also must now be worn at theaters, cinemas and sports events, indoors or out, and can't be removed even for their wearers to eat or drink.

Italy reintroduced an outdoor mask mandate. It had never lifted its indoor mandate — even when infections sharply dropped in the summer.

On a chilly morning in Rome this week, Lillo D'Amico, 84, sported a wool cap and white FFP2 as he bought a newspaper at his neighborhood newsstand.

"(Masks) cost little money, they cost you a small sacrifice," he said. "When you do the math, it costs far less than hospitalization."

When he sees someone from the unmasked minority walking by, he keeps a distance. "They see (masks) as an affront to their freedom," D'Amico said, shrugging.

Spain reinstated its outdoor mask rule on Christmas Eve. After the 14-day contagion rate soared to 2,722 new infections per 100,000 people by the end of last week — from 40 per 100,000 in mid-October — Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez was asked whether the outdoor mask mandate was helping.

"Of course, it is. It's not me saying it. It's science itself saying it because (it's) a virus that is contracted when one exhales," Sanchez said.

Portugal brought masks back at the end of November, after having largely dropped the requirement when it hit its goal of vaccinating 86% of the population.

Greece has also restored its outdoor mask mandate, while requiring an FFP2 or double surgical mask on public transport and in indoor public spaces.

This week, the Dutch government's outbreak management team recommended a mask mandate for people over age 13 in busy public indoor areas such as restaurants, museums and theaters, and for spectators at indoor sports events. Those places are currently closed under a lockdown until at least Jan. 14.

In France, the outdoor mask mandate was partially reinstated in December in many cities, including Paris. The age for children to start wearing masks in public places was lowered to 6 from 11.

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer announced last week that people must wear FFP2 masks outdoors if they can't keep at least two meters (6.5 feet) apart.

In Italy, with more than 2 million people currently positive for the virus in a nation of 60 million and workplace absences curtailing train and bus runs, the government also sees masks as a way to let society more fully function.

People with booster shots or recent second vaccine doses can now avoid quarantine after coming into contact with an infected person if they wear a FFP2 mask for 10 days.

The government has ordered shops to make FFP masks available for 75 euro cents (\$0.85). In the pandemic's first year, FFP2s cost up to 10 euros (\$11.50) — whenever they could be found.

Italians wear them in a palette of colors. The father of a baby baptized this week by Pope Francis in the Sistine Chapel wore one in burgundy, with matching tie and jacket pocket square. But the pontiff, who has practically shunned a mask in public, didn't wear one.

On Monday, Vatican City State mandated FFP2s in all indoor places. The tiny, walled independent state across the Tiber from the heart of Rome also stipulated that Vatican employees can go to work without quarantining after coming into contact with someone testing positive if, in addition to being fully vaccinated or having received a booster shot, they wear FFP2s.

Francis did appear to be wearing a FFP2 when, startling shoppers in Rome on Tuesday evening, he emerged from a music store near the Pantheon before being driven back to the Vatican.

In Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson has focused on vaccination, masks have never been re-

quired outdoors.

This month, though, the government said secondary school students should wear face coverings in class. But Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said that rule wouldn't apply "for a day longer than necessary."

When the British government lifted pandemic restrictions in July 2021, turning mask-wearing from a requirement to a suggestion, mask use fell markedly.

Nino Cartabellotta, president of the Bologna-based GIMBE foundation, which monitors health care in Italy, says Britain points to what can happen when measures like mask-wearing aren't valued.

"The situation in the U.K. showed that use of vaccination alone wasn't enough" to get ahead of the pandemic, even though Britain was one of the first countries to begin vaccination, he said in a video interview.

## Djokovic ruling fits with Australia's tough immigration line

By NICK PERRY and STEVE McMORRAN Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — To people watching from afar, the treatment of tennis star Novak Djokovic by Australian immigration officials might have seemed harsh.

But Australia has long taken a severe stance on immigration, from the early days of its "White Australia" policy to its more recent practice of warehousing refugees in offshore detention camps. Many of its policies have been condemned by critics.

Djokovic, who is unvaccinated against the coronavirus, faces deportation from Australia after Immigration Minister Alex Hawke on Friday revoked his visa for the second time, citing health and "good order" considerations.

He isn't the first celebrity to face tough treatment.

British far-right commentator Katie Hopkins was deported from Australia last year after breaking quarantine rules. Back in 2007, American rapper Snoop Dogg was refused entry due to previous criminal convictions.

And in 2015, Australian authorities threatened to euthanize Pistol and Boo, the Yorkshire Terrier dogs owned by actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, which had been snuck into the country on the couple's private jet. The dogs survived; the couple's romance did not.

Djokovic's saga began earlier this month when he arrived in Melbourne to play in the Australian Open, hoping to cement his place in history as the first man to win 21 Grand Slam tournaments.

But he ended up spending four nights confined to an immigration detention hotel after officials rejected his exemption to Australia's strict vaccination rules and canceled his visa.

On Monday, he won a court fight on procedural grounds that allowed him to stay and practice, before Hawke made his decision on Friday. Djokovic is expected to appeal but is running out of time and options.

Australia gives unusual authority to its immigration minister, which many refer to as the minister's "god powers." Hawke can essentially overrule the courts to deport people, with only narrow grounds for any appeals.

Kian Bone, a migration lawyer at Macpherson Kelley, said Djokovic might not have time to mount an effective appeal before he's due to play, forcing him to forfeit.

"Australia has always had highly codified and highly legislated immigration policies," Bone said. "And compared to other countries, we confer extraordinary power to the minister of immigration."

Australia's modern history began with it as a recipient of harsh immigration policies, with Britain sending tens of thousands of criminals to Australian penal colonies for 80 years, before it stopped the practice in 1868.

When Australia formed its first federal government in 1901, one of its first orders of business was to pass the Immigration Restriction Act, which was designed to keep out people of color from Asia, the Pacific Islands and elsewhere.

The "White Australia" policy continued for decades before the last remnants were eliminated in the 1970s.

One victim was Filipino-American Lorenzo Gamboa, who enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1941 and was evacuated to Australia when the Philippines fell to Japan. He married an Australian woman and had two children. When he was discharged from the army he tried to return to Australia but was refused permanent residence and was forced to leave.

His case provoked outrage in the Philippines and caused a major diplomatic rift with Australia. He eventu-

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ally was allowed to settle in Australia in 1952.

In 2001 Australia put in place the "Pacific Solution" in which asylum seekers who attempted to reach Australia by boat were sent to detention centers in Papua New Guinea or Nauru, rather than being allowed to stay on the Australian mainland.

Hundreds of asylum-seekers were housed on the islands until the numbers were reduced in recent years. Scores still remain.

Journalist Behrouz Boochani, who had earlier fled from Iran, was held against his will on the islands for six years.

Using a smuggled phone and posting to social media, Boochani detailed unsanitary conditions, hunger strikes and violence in the detention camps, as well as deaths caused by medical neglect and suicide.

He eventually used his phone to write a book, sending snippets in Farsi to a translator over WhatsApp. Called "No Friend But the Mountains," the book won a prestigious Australian award, the Victorian Prize for Literature. But he's never been able to travel to Australia to collect his award.

In 2019 Boochani escaped to New Zealand, where he now lives.

New Zealand has close ties with its neighbor but Australia's tough stance on immigration has caused tension, especially in recent years after Australia began enforcing stricter policies on deporting criminals to New Zealand.

Last year New Zealand reluctantly agreed to repatriate alleged Islamic State militant Suhayra Aden and her two young children, who had been detained in Turkey.

Aden had lived most of her life in Australia and was a dual citizen of both Australia and New Zealand. But Australia stripped her citizenship under its anti-terrorism laws, leaving New Zealand to shoulder the responsibility for her repatriation.

Despite protests from New Zealand, Australia's government, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, stood by its decision on Aden. It has been equally resolute on Djokovic.

"The Morrison government is firmly committed to protecting Australia's borders, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic," Hawke said Friday in a statement.

## **TIMELINE: Novak Djokovic's bid to compete at Australian Open**

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

The Australian government on Friday revoked tennis star Novak Djokovic's visa for a second time, just three days before the Australian Open begins.

Djokovic's lawyers are expected to appeal the cancellation in the Federal Circuit and Family Court, as they successfully did the first time.

Melbourne-based immigration lawyer Kian Bone said that Djokovic's lawyers face an "extremely difficult" task to get court orders over the weekend to allow their client to play next week.

His exemption from a COVID-19 vaccination requirement to compete was approved by the Victoria state government and Tennis Australia, which apparently allowed him to receive a visa to travel.

Here is a look at the timeline of events involving Djokovic's trip to Australia:

April 2020: As the coronavirus pandemic rages, Djokovic issues a statement, saying, "Personally I am opposed to the vaccination against COVID-19 in order to be able to travel. But if it becomes compulsory, I will have to make a decision whether to do it, or not."

June 2020: With the professional tennis tours on hiatus because of the pandemic, Djokovic organizes a series of exhibition matches in Serbia and Croatia with no rules requiring social distancing or masking. The Adria Tour is called off after some players get COVID-19; Djokovic and his wife, Jelena, test positive.

Nov. 19, 2021: Confirming an edict made by the Victorian state government in late October, tournament director Craig Tiley says everyone at the 2022 Australian Open must be vaccinated for COVID-19. Djokovic's vaccine status is unknown at the time.

Dec. 8, 2021: Victoria state Deputy Premier James Merlino says medical exemptions for the vaccine policy

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would not be "a loophole for privileged tennis players" and would only be possible in "exceptional circumstances, if you have an acute medical condition."

Dec. 14, 2021: Djokovic attends a professional basketball game in Belgrade and is photographed hugging several players from both teams, including some who later tested positive.

Dec. 16, 2021: Djokovic tests positive for COVID-19 in Serbia, although that is not public knowledge until revealed by court documents in January. He later says he did not know the result until Dec. 17.

Dec. 17, 2021: Djokovic attends an event in Belgrade honoring youth tennis players. Parents post photos on social media showing Djokovic and the young players without masks. Djokovic later says he was asymptomatic, took an antigen test before the event that showed he was negative, and only received the positive PCR result after the event.

Dec. 18, 2021: Knowing he tested positive, Djokovic does an interview and photo shoot with the French newspaper L'Equipe. He acknowledges weeks later: "On reflection, this was an error of judgement."

Dec. 22, 2021: According to court documents, Djokovic tests negative for COVID-19 in Serbia.

Dec. 29, 2021: Djokovic withdraws from Serbia's team for the ATP Cup, days before the competition is due to begin in Sydney. No reason is given.

Jan. 1, 2022: Tiley is asked in a TV interview about Djokovic's status for the Australian Open and responds: "There's quite a bit to play out and I think it will play out in the coming days."

Jan. 4, 2022: Djokovic posts on Instagram a photo of himself at an airport with a caption that reads, in part: "I'm heading Down Under with an exemption permission." Tennis Australia follows with a statement confirming Djokovic is on his way to the country with a medical exemption "granted following a rigorous review process involving two separate independent panels of medical experts." Neither Djokovic nor Tennis Australia reveals the basis for his exemption. Tiley says a "handful" of exemptions had been granted out of 26 applications from players or others. A public outcry bubbles up on social media among Australians while Djokovic's flight to Melbourne is in the air.

Jan. 5, 2022: Djokovic arrives at Melbourne Tullamarine Airport.

Jan. 6, 2022: After being detained for about eight hours upon arrival, Djokovic is denied entry to the country and his visa is canceled. He is sent to an immigration hotel, where he remains for four nights. The Australian Border Force says Djokovic failed to meet entry requirements. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison tweets: "Rules are rules, especially when it comes to our borders."

Jan. 10, 2022: As part of his legal attempt to overturn the visa cancellation, Djokovic submits an affidavit that says he is not vaccinated for COVID-19. Federal Circuit Court Judge Anthony Kelly reinstates Djokovic's visa, ruling the player was not given enough time to speak to his lawyers before the decision to deny him entry was made at the airport. Kelly orders the government to release Djokovic from immigration detention. Hours later, Djokovic practices at Melbourne Park.

Jan. 11, 2022: With his status still uncertain, Djokovic is installed as the No. 1 seed for the men's field at the Australian Open. The tournament strictly follows the current rankings in determining seedings and Djokovic is ranked No. 1; he has spent more weeks atop the ATP than any other man in the history of the men's professional tour's computerized rankings.

Jan. 12, 2022: Djokovic's most extensive public comments on the matter come via a post on social media that is put up by someone while he is practicing at the Australian Open's main stadium. He acknowledges a mistake on his travel declaration for Australia, which failed to indicate that he had been in multiple countries over the prior two weeks. Djokovic blames his agent for checking the wrong box on the form, calling it "a human error and certainly not deliberate." He also clarifies the timing of his positive COVID-19 test from December and subsequent whereabouts.

Jan. 13, 2022: Djokovic is included in the Australian Open draw. He is slated to play fellow Serb Miomir Kecmanovic in the opening round next week.

Jan. 14, 2022: Immigration Minister Alex Hawke says he used his ministerial discretion to revoke Djokovic's visa on "health and good order grounds, on the basis that it was in the public interest to do so."

Jan. 17, 2022: Play is scheduled to begin at Melbourne Park. The men's singles final is Jan. 30.



## Afghan tradition allows girls to access the freedom of boys

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV and ELENA BECATOROS undefined

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — In a Kabul neighborhood, a gaggle of boys kick a yellow ball around a dusty playground, their boisterous cries echoing off the surrounding apartment buildings.

Dressed in sweaters and jeans or the traditional Afghan male clothing of baggy pants and long shirt, none stand out as they jostle to score a goal. But unbeknown to them, one is different from the others.

At not quite 8 years old, Sanam is a bacha posh: a girl living as a boy. One day a few months ago, the girl with rosy cheeks and an impish smile had her dark hair cut short, donned boys' clothes and took on a boy's name, Omid. The move opened up a boy's world: playing soccer and cricket with boys, wrestling with the neighborhood butcher's son, working to help the family make ends meet.

In Afghanistan's heavily patriarchal, male-dominated society, where women and girls are usually relegated to the home, bacha posh, Dari for "dressed as a boy," is the one tradition allowing girls access to the freer male world.

Under the practice, a girl dresses, behaves and is treated as a boy, with all the freedoms and obligations that entails. The child can play sports, attend a madrassa, or religious school, and, sometimes crucially for the family, work. But there is a time limit: Once a bacha posh reaches puberty, she is expected to revert to traditional girls' gender roles. The transition is not always easy.

It is unclear how the practice is viewed by Afghanistan's new rulers, the Taliban, who seized power in mid-August and have made no public statements on the issue.

Their rule so far has been less draconian than the last time they were in power in the 1990s, but women's freedoms have still been severely curtailed. Thousands of women have been barred from working, and girls beyond primary school age have not been able to return to public schools in most places.

With a crackdown on women's rights, the bacha posh tradition could become even more attractive for some families. And as the practice is temporary, with the children eventually reverting to female roles, the Taliban might not deal with the issue at all, said Thomas Barfield, a professor of anthropology at Boston University who has written several books on Afghanistan.

"Because it's inside the family and because it's not a permanent status, the Taliban may stay out (of it)," Barfield said.

It is unclear where the practice originated or how old it is, and it is impossible to know how widespread it might be. A somewhat similar tradition exists in Albania, another deeply patriarchal society, although it is limited to adults. Under Albania's "sworn virgin" tradition, a woman would take an oath of celibacy and declare herself a man, after which she could inherit property, work and sit on a village council - all of which would have been out of bounds for a woman.

In Afghanistan, the bacha posh tradition is "one of the most under-investigated" topics in terms of gender issues, said Barfield, who spent about two years in the 1970s living with an Afghan nomad family that included a bacha posh. "Precisely because the girls revert back to the female role, they marry, it kind of disappears."

Girls chosen as bacha posh usually are the more boisterous, self-assured daughters. "The role fits so well that sometimes even outside the family, people are not aware that it exists," he said.

"It's almost so invisible that it's one of the few gender issues that doesn't show up as a political or social question," Barfield noted.

The reasons parents might want a bacha posh vary. With sons traditionally valued more than daughters, the practice usually occurs in families without a boy. Some consider it a status symbol, and some believe it will bring good luck for the next child to be born a boy.

But for others, like Sanam's family, the choice was one of necessity. Last year, with Afghanistan's economy collapsing, construction work dried up. Sanam's father, already suffering from a back injury, lost his job as a plumber. He turned to selling coronavirus masks on the streets, making the equivalent of \$1-\$2 per day. But he needed a helper.

The family has four daughters and one son, but their 11-year-old boy doesn't have full use of his hands

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following an injury. So the parents said they decided to make Sanam a bacha posh.

"We had to do this because of poverty," said Sanam's mother, Fahima. "We don't have a son to work for us, and her father doesn't have anyone to help him. So I will consider her my son until she becomes a teenager."

Still, Fahima refers to Sanam as "my daughter." In their native Dari language, the pronouns are not an issue since one pronoun is used for "he" and "she."

Sanam says she prefers living as a boy.

"It's better to be a boy...I wear (Afghan male clothes), jeans and jackets, and go with my father and work," she said. She likes playing in the park with her brother's friends and playing cricket and soccer.

Once she grows up, Sanam said, she wants to be either a doctor, a commander or a soldier, or work with her father. And she'll go back to being a girl.

"When I grow up, I will let my hair grow and will wear girl's clothes," she said.

The transition isn't always easy.

"When I put on girls' clothes, I thought I was in prison," said Najieh, who grew up as a bacha posh, although she would attend school as a girl. One of seven sisters, her boy's name was Assadollah.

Now 34, married and with four children of her own, she weeps for the freedom of the male world she has lost.

"In Afghanistan, boys are more valuable," she said. "There is no oppression for them, and no limits. But being a girl is different. She gets forced to get married at a young age."

Young women can't leave the house or allow strangers to see their face, Najieh said. And after the Taliban takeover, she lost her job as a schoolteacher because she had been teaching boys.

"Being a man is better than being a woman," she said, wiping tears from her eye. "It is very hard for me. ... If I were a man, I could be a teacher in a school."

"I wish I could be a man, not a woman. To stop this suffering."

## In Washington, a day of snapshots of divisions and futility

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — There was a closed-door huddle by an embattled President Joe Biden with his own party's senators, apparently for naught. An eyebrow-raising speech on the Senate floor by a recalcitrant Democrat. And a defiant news conference by the top House Republican.

Each event occurred Thursday. None was helpful for Democrats. And all were snapshots from a day that underscored the divisiveness and futility washing over a largely gridlocked Washington during this jaggedly partisan time.

"I hope we get this done. The honest to God answer is I don't know whether we can get this done," Biden admitted to reporters after a lunchtime meeting with Senate Democrats, where he sought support for the party's latest foundering priority: voting rights legislation.

Biden said that even if the voting measure failed — as seemed certain — he'd stay in the fight "as long as I have a breath in me." Even so, the day's events illustrated his limited political capital at a time when his polling numbers are in the dumps and Democrats have almost no margin for error in a Congress they control by a hair's breadth.

Biden's party is focusing much of its energy these days on the voting rights bill and an investigation of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol by supporters of then-President Donald Trump trying to prevent lawmakers from certifying his reelection defeat. Both efforts are running headlong into GOP opposition.

In the case of the voting legislation — aimed at blunting GOP-passed state laws limiting access to voting, often by minorities — Democrats have pushed it through the narrowly divided House. But things are different in the 50-50 Senate, where they need unanimity before Vice President Kamala Harris can cast her tie-breaking vote.

Republicans have been blocking the voting legislation by filibusters, procedural landmines that take 60 votes to overcome. So Biden and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., want Democrats to change the chamber's filibuster rules so it would take just a simple majority to pass voting rights legislation.

They could do that if all 50 Democratic senators were united behind the plan. But they're not.

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Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., have repeatedly said that while they back the voting rights push, they oppose weakening the filibuster rule without GOP support for fear of further fraying the brittle relationship between the two parties. They're the same two senators who've been the chief stumbling blocks to Biden's stalled 10-year, roughly \$2 trillion social and environment bill, another top Democratic goal.

Though Sinema's opposition was well known, she took to the Senate floor Thursday to underline it — even as Biden was heading to Capitol Hill to meet with her and other Democrats. She said she wouldn't support changes "that worsen the underlying disease of division infecting our country."

Sinema's timing may have been designed to preemptively ease pressure on her during the session with Biden. But it was still a very public, startling show of resistance, one that may have been unthinkable under a president who — unlike Biden, who has a penchant for accommodation — had a reputation for retribution for such overt rebellion.

Manchin released a written statement after the Biden meeting, saying he would not vote to weaken the filibuster. Doing that would "only pour fuel onto the fire of political whiplash and dysfunction that is tearing this nation apart," he said.

Schumer said Biden "made a powerful and strong and impassioned presentation for us to get this done and we are going to do everything we can to pass these two bills."

Other Democrats said they think the risks of easing filibusters — which for decades have helped minority parties protect their priorities but have grown in use dramatically this century — are outweighed by the dangers state GOP voting restrictions pose.

"They're doing what they think is right," Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., said of Sinema and Manchin. "I happen to disagree."

As grating as their stances were with Democrats, they were praised by Republicans, who as minority party would benefit by keeping filibusters intact.

"It was extraordinarily important and she has, as a conspicuous act of political courage, saved the Senate as an institution," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said of Sinema.

Also Thursday, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., talked to reporters for the first time since releasing a statement the previous evening saying he would not cooperate with a special House committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection.

McCarthy said there is "nothing that I can provide the Jan. 6 committee" that would help their investigation and accused Democrats of using the probe for "pure politics."

McCarthy spoke with Trump by phone during the attack, and later that day said on the House floor that Trump "bears responsibility" for the assault.

But he visited Trump at his Florida estate days later and has since refrained from criticizing the former president. The special committee, which Democrats dominate 7-2, wants to know about his dealings with Trump.

The refusal to cooperate by McCarthy, who hopes to become speaker next year should Republicans win House control, is no surprise.

To win that post, he'd have to be elected to it by House Republicans — a pathway he could complicate by helping a probe of Trump, who holds sway over many in the GOP. Two other GOP lawmakers and Trump allies have also rejected the panel's requests for information, and many Republicans have said they consider the committee and its work to be illegitimate and partisan.

The committee's investigation will continue no matter what.

Still, McCarthy's defiance was the latest sign of how torn apart the parties are, unable to do what many Congresses in the past have done after major crises: mount a fully bipartisan investigation into them.

## Supreme Court halts COVID-19 vaccine rule for US businesses

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court has stopped a major push by the Biden administration to boost the nation's COVID-19 vaccination rate, a requirement that employees at large businesses get a vaccine or

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test regularly and wear a mask on the job.

At the same time, the court is allowing the administration to proceed with a vaccine mandate for most health care workers in the U.S. The court's orders Thursday came during a spike in coronavirus cases caused by the omicron variant.

The court's conservative majority concluded the administration overstepped its authority by seeking to impose the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's vaccine-or-test rule on U.S. businesses with at least 100 employees. More than 80 million people would have been affected and OSHA had estimated that the rule would save 6,500 lives and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations over six months.

"OSHA has never before imposed such a mandate. Nor has Congress. Indeed, although Congress has enacted significant legislation addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, it has declined to enact any measure similar to what OSHA has promulgated here," the conservatives wrote in an unsigned opinion.

In dissent, the court's three liberals argued that it was the court that was overreaching by substituting its judgment for that of health experts. "Acting outside of its competence and without legal basis, the Court displaces the judgments of the Government officials given the responsibility to respond to workplace health emergencies," Justices Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor wrote in a joint dissent.

President Joe Biden said he was "disappointed that the Supreme Court has chosen to block common-sense life-saving requirements for employees at large businesses that were grounded squarely in both science and the law."

Biden called on businesses to institute their own vaccination requirements, noting that a third of Fortune 100 companies already have done so.

When crafting the OSHA rule, White House officials always anticipated legal challenges — and privately some harbored doubts that it could withstand them. The administration nonetheless still views the rule as a success at already driving millions of people to get vaccinated and encouraging private businesses to implement their own requirements that are unaffected by the legal challenge.

The OSHA regulation had initially been blocked by a federal appeals court in New Orleans, then allowed to take effect by a federal appellate panel in Cincinnati.

Both rules had been challenged by Republican-led states. In addition, business groups attacked the OSHA emergency regulation as too expensive and likely to cause workers to leave their jobs at a time when finding new employees already is difficult.

The National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, called the Supreme Court's decision "a significant victory for employers."

The vaccine mandate that the court will allow to be enforced nationwide scraped by on a 5-4 vote, with Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Brett Kavanaugh joining the liberals to form a majority. The mandate covers virtually all health care workers in the country, applying to providers that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid funding. It affects 10.4 million workers at 76,000 health care facilities as well as home health care providers. The rule has medical and religious exemptions.

Biden said that decision by the court "will save lives."

In an unsigned opinion, the court wrote: "The challenges posed by a global pandemic do not allow a federal agency to exercise power that Congress has not conferred upon it. At the same time, such unprecedented circumstances provide no grounds for limiting the exercise of authorities the agency has long been recognized to have." It said the "latter principle governs" in the healthcare arena.

Justice Clarence Thomas wrote in dissent that the case was about whether the administration has the authority "to force healthcare workers, by coercing their employers, to undergo a medical procedure they do not want and cannot undo." He said the administration hadn't shown convincingly that Congress gave it that authority.

Justices Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett signed onto Thomas' opinion. Alito wrote a separate dissent that the other three conservatives also joined.

Decisions by federal appeals courts in New Orleans and St. Louis had blocked the mandate in about half the states. The administration already was taking steps to enforce it elsewhere.

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More than 208 million Americans, 62.7% of the population, are fully vaccinated, and more than a third of those have received booster shots, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. All nine justices have gotten booster shots.

The courthouse remains closed to the public, and lawyers and reporters are asked for negative test results before being allowed inside the courtroom for arguments, though vaccinations are not required.

The justices heard arguments on the challenges last week. Their questions then hinted at the split verdict that they issued Thursday.

A separate vaccine mandate for federal contractors, on hold after lower courts blocked it, has not been considered by the Supreme Court.

## **SKorea slightly eases distancing but warns of omicron surge**

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea will slightly ease its coronavirus gathering restrictions starting next week but continue to maintain a 9 p.m. curfew on restaurants and entertainment venues, as it braces for a possible surge in infections driven by the contagious omicron variant.

Health Minister Kwon Deok-cheol said Friday the four-person limit on private social gatherings between fully vaccinated people will be raised to six for at least three weeks starting Monday.

While officials have acknowledged frustration and fatigue with prolonged virus restrictions and the damage on small businesses, they say they couldn't afford to loosen social distancing rules further when the country may face a huge wave of cases in coming weeks as omicron continues to spread.

About 12% of South Korea's infections reported last week were of the omicron variant and officials say it could become the country's dominant in one or two weeks. Kwon raised concern that the spread could be accelerated by the Lunar New Year holiday break at the end of this month, when millions of people travel across the country to meet relatives.

Kwon pleaded with people stay home during the Jan. 29-Feb. 2 holidays and especially not visit aging relatives who aren't fully vaccinated. Visits to nursing homes will be banned during the period and officials will also limit the capacity on trains and ferries to discourage travel.

"Thanks to active cooperation by our people, our medical response has significantly improved ... but the increasing spread of omicron has us facing a new danger," Kwon said during a briefing. The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said the country may see its daily infections jump to levels around 30,000 by the end of February if it substantially loosens social distancing.

Restaurants, coffee shops, gyms and karaoke venues will continue to be required to close at 9 p.m. Adults will be asked to verify their vaccination status through apps to use restaurants, movie theaters, museums, shopping malls and other indoor places. Most of these locations admit only fully vaccinated adults, but restaurants and coffee shops are allowed to accept one adult in each group who isn't fully vaccinated or vaccinated at all.

Experts say omicron, which has already become dominant in many countries, spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains. It also more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had previously been infected by prior versions of the virus. However, early studies show omicron is less likely to cause severe illness than the delta variant, and that vaccination and booster shots still offer strong protection from serious illness, hospitalization and death.

South Korea on Friday reported 4,542 new cases, including a record 409 linked to international arrivals. The daily count exceeded 7,000 several times last month during a delta-driven surge that caused a spike in hospitalizations and deaths, but transmissions have slowed in recent weeks as officials enforced tightened social distancing.

## **Biden chooses 3 for Fed board, including first Black woman**

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will nominate three people for the Federal Reserve's Board

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of Governors, including Sarah Bloom Raskin, a former Fed and Treasury official, for the top regulatory slot and Lisa Cook, who would be the first Black woman to serve on the Fed's board.

Biden will also nominate Phillip Jefferson, an economist, dean of faculty at Davidson College in North Carolina and a former Fed researcher, according to a person familiar with the decision Thursday who was not authorized to speak on the record. The three nominees, who will have to be confirmed by the Senate, would fill out the Fed's seven-member board.

The nominees would join the Fed at a particularly challenging time in which the central bank will undertake the delicate task of raising its benchmark interest rate to try to curb high inflation, without undercutting the recovery from the pandemic recession. On Wednesday, the government reported that inflation reached a four-decade high in December. Inflation has become the economy's most serious problem, a burden for millions of American households and a political threat to the Biden administration.

Raskin's nomination to the position of Fed vice chair for supervision — the nation's top bank regulator — will be welcomed by progressive senators and advocacy groups, who see her as likely to take a tougher approach to bank regulation than Randal Quarles, a Trump appointee who stepped down from that post last month. She is also viewed as someone committed to incorporating climate change considerations into the Fed's oversight of banks. For that reason, though, she has already drawn opposition from some Republican senators.

A Harvard-trained lawyer, Raskin, 60, previously served on the Fed's seven-member board from 2010 to 2014. President Barack Obama then chose her to serve as deputy Treasury secretary, the No. 2 job in the department.

As Fed governors, Raskin, Cook and Jefferson would vote on interest-rate policy decisions at the eight meetings each year of the Fed's policymaking committee, which also includes the 12 regional Fed bank presidents.

Raskin's first term as a Fed governor followed her work as Maryland's commissioner of financial regulation. Before her government jobs, Raskin had worked as a lawyer at Arnold & Porter, a high-profile Washington firm, and as a managing director at the Promontory Financial Group.

Kathleen Murphy, CEO of the Massachusetts Bankers Association, worked with Raskin when Raskin was Maryland's banking regulator from 2007 to 2010 and Murphy led the Maryland bankers' group. Murphy said the state's financial industry regarded her as a "strong regulator but a fair regulator."

"She has always had a very collaborative approach," Murphy said. "She wanted to make sure all the voices were at the table when decisions were made."

Still, Raskin is likely to draw fire from critics for her progressive views on climate change and the oil and gas industry. Two years ago, in an opinion column in *The New York Times*, she criticized the Fed's willingness to support lending to oil and gas companies as part of its efforts to bolster the financial sector in the depths of the pandemic recession.

"The decisions the Fed makes on our behalf should build toward a stronger economy with more jobs in innovative industries — not prop up and enrich dying ones," Raskin wrote, referring to oil and gas providers.

On Thursday, Sen. Pat Toomey, the top Republican on the Senate Banking Committee, criticized Raskin for having "explicitly advocated that the Fed allocate capital by denying it to this disfavored sector."

Raskin is married to Rep. Jamie Raskin, a liberal Maryland Democrat who gained widespread visibility as a member of the House Judiciary Committee when it brought impeachment charges against President Donald Trump.

If confirmed, Cook, together with Jefferson, would be the fourth and fifth Black members of the Fed's Board of Governors in its 108-year history. She has been a professor of economics and international relations at Michigan State since 2005. She was also a staff economist on the White House Council of Economic Advisers from 2011 to 2012 and was an adviser to the Biden-Harris transition team on the Fed and bank regulatory policy.

Cook is best-known for her research on the impact of racial violence on African-American invention and innovation. A 2013 paper she wrote concluded that racially motivated violence, by undermining the rule of law and threatening personal security, depressed patent awards to Black Americans by 15% annually between 1882 and 1940 — a loss that she found also held back the broader U.S. economy.

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In an interview in October, Cook said that despite encouragement from prominent economists such as Milton Friedman and George Akerlof, she struggled for years to get the paper published. The major economics journals, she said, typically didn't deal with "patents, or economic history, or anything that related to African-Americans."

Cook has also been an advocate for Black women in economics, a profession that is notably less diverse than other social sciences. In 2019, she co-wrote a column in The New York Times that asserted that "economics is neither a welcoming nor a supportive profession for women" and "is especially antagonistic to Black women."

To combat those problems, Cook has spent time mentoring younger Black women in economics, directing a summer program run by the American Economic Association, and won an award for mentoring in 2019.

Jefferson, who grew up in a working-class family in Washington, D.C., according to an interview with the American Economic Association, has focused his research on poverty and monetary policy. In a 2005 paper, he concluded that the benefits of a hot economy from the reduction in unemployment among lower-skilled workers outweighed the costs, including the risk that companies would adopt automation once labor grew scarce.

## Wisconsin Gov. Evers' reelection pitch: democracy is at risk

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

JANESVILLE, Wis. (AP) — Wisconsin's Democratic Gov. Tony Evers is known for his folksy demeanor, sprinkling his speeches with "by gollys" and the occasional PG-rated swear word. To win reelection, the 70-year-old grandfather and former teacher is trying to convince voters that he's also a valiant defender of democracy and the lone figure ensuring their votes will still matter in 2024 and beyond.

"We are that close to not having our vote count in the state of Wisconsin," Evers warned about 50 Democrats who braved single-digit temperatures on a recent Saturday morning to see him at a party headquarters in downtown Janesville.

In heavily gerrymandered Wisconsin, Evers is the only resistance to state Republicans eager to reshape elections to aid their party. He's already vetoed a half-dozen bills that would make it more difficult to vote, with the GOP promising more efforts to overhaul elections this spring.

They're destined for defeat as long as Evers is in place, but any Republican who beats him would have plenty of time to shift the playing field before 2024 — in one of the few battleground states that typically decides the presidential race.

"I don't think he's exaggerating when he talks about what's at stake and the fact that he's the last line of defense to a lot of these things happening," said Democratic state Rep. Gordon Hintz.

Many Republicans around the country are working to undermine Joe Biden's 2020 victory, roll back voting access in some areas and elect candidates to offices that might allow them to block unfavorable results in 2024. Evers isn't the only battleground Democrat making the argument, particularly in the so-called "blue wall" trio of states — Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania — that Biden flipped en route to winning.

In Michigan, Attorney General Dana Nessel has highlighted a Republican opponent who argued that state's lawmakers should have voted to decertify the 2020 results.

"We are heading into November strong, but we cannot take it for granted," Nessel tweeted this week. "Get ready to vote like democracy depends upon it. Because it does."

In Pennsylvania, Attorney General Josh Shapiro — the state's presumed Democratic nominee for governor -- is in court challenging what Republican lawmakers call a "forensic investigation" of the election amid GOP campaign trail vows to repeal the state's mail-in voting law. Shapiro has made "defending our democracy" a central plank of his campaign.

Biden sounded some similar notes this week in a fiery speech in Atlanta, describing the raft of voting changes around the country as "Jim Crow 2.0" and imploring senators to change chamber rules to pass voting rights legislation blocked by Republicans.

Democrats are undertaking the strategy even though polls have shown it's not front of mind with voters

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more concerned about rising inflation and the state of the economy.

In Wisconsin, Republicans have dismissed the “democracy at risk” argument.

“That’s not a kitchen table issue,” said Andrew Hitt, a GOP strategist and former state party director. “That’s not an issue that people wake up every day and are like, ‘How am I going to pay my bills? How am I going to send my kids to school? How am I going to get health care?’ That’s where I think our focus needs to be.”

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos — Evers’ chief nemesis — says Evers has latched onto it because his tenure has been a failure. He and the GOP-controlled Legislature have blocked Evers’ agenda at nearly every turn, including successfully suing to end a statewide mask mandate early last year.

“What Governor Evers is doing is trying to take an electorate, especially his base, who look at him as weak and feckless and try to show that he matters,” Vos said.

Evers, a cancer survivor with a shock of white hair, isn’t the most electrifying candidate. His favorite meal is an Egg McMuffin, he likes to play pickleball and he has been known to kill time awaiting election night results with a game of euchre. He was the state schools chief when he won his first term by riding the Democrats’ 2018 midterm wave to the narrowest of victories over Scott Walker.

His reelection pitch isn’t only about a supposed GOP threat to democracy. He’s playing up his record, including signing two Republican-written budgets that cut taxes for the middle class, put more money to roads and increase funding for broadband.

There are scant examples of other significant areas where Evers and Republicans have been on the same page.

Evers doesn’t miss chances to remind voters about the Republican push to undo Trump’s 2020 loss. In Wisconsin, Republicans have continued to cast doubt on Biden’s win and the integrity of elections, threatened to jail Democratic mayors and advocated for doing away with the bipartisan commission that runs elections.

“I think the people of Wisconsin understand how important it is to do the right thing, rather than to succumb to the radical extremism that that we’re hearing from the Republican Party,” Evers said at his Janesville appearance, against a backdrop of “Tony for Wisconsin” signs.

Polls and history show Evers faces an uphill battle. He beat Walker by fewer than 30,000 votes, and the candidate of the president’s party has lost the last eight races for Wisconsin governor.

Walker’s lieutenant governor, Rebecca Kleefisch, is the best-known Republican challenging Evers, and raised \$3.3 million in her first four months in the race. A handful of others are considering joining the race after Sen. Ron Johnson recently announced plans to seek a third term.

Evers raised \$10 million all of last year and had \$10.5 million in the bank heading into 2022.

A Marquette University Law School poll in November found about 45% approval for Evers, down from 51% in February 2020.

Democratic strategist Melissa Baldauff, who worked as Evers’ communications director early in his term, said he has provided steady leadership, particularly with the pandemic, that will resonate with voters.

“I think about who I call when I have an emergency,” Baldauff said. “You don’t call your wild and crazy friend who you can’t count on. You call your friend that you can trust and that’s going to show up.”

Evers recognizes that his dire message makes a bit of a contrast with his image.

“Mild-mannered Tony Evers,” he said. “When democracy is on the line, I’m going to speak up. You have to. I guess people should say it’s got to be important if Evers is making a big deal out of it.”

## Judge to decide if Wisconsin parade suspect will stand trial

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A judge is set to decide Friday whether a Milwaukee man accused of plowing his SUV through a Christmas parade, killing six people and injuring dozens more, will stand trial for murder.

Darrell Brooks Jr. is set to appear in Waukesha County court before Judge Michael Bohren for a preliminary hearing. Such hearings, when the judge decides whether there’s enough evidence to hold a defendant for trial, are usually a formality but can shed light on defense and prosecution strategies.

According to the criminal complaint, Brooks drove his mother’s maroon Ford Escape into the parade in downtown Waukesha on Nov. 21. He kept going despite police officers’ demands to stop, with some officers



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telling investigators it appeared the driver was trying to intentionally hit people and “citizen witnesses” telling detectives the SUV never slowed down.

Some of the people he hit flew up onto the hood of the Escape; at one point Brooks had to lean out the driver’s window to steer because a person had landed on the windshield, according to the complaint.

Six people were killed and dozens more injured. District Attorney Susan Opper charged Brooks with six counts of first-degree intentional homicide a few days later. He would face life in prison if he’s convicted on even one count. Opper this week added scores of additional charges, including reckless endangerment, hit-and-run involving death, bail jumping and battery.

Any possible motives remain unknown. Court documents filed Wednesday allege Brooks beat the mother of his child minutes before driving into the parade because she refused to bail him out of jail after he was arrested for allegedly running her over with the same vehicle earlier in November.

Brooks had been arrested in neighboring Milwaukee County in that alleged earlier incident. He walked out of jail on Nov. 19, two days before the parade, after posting \$1,000 bail.

Milwaukee County District Attorney John Chisholm, a Democrat, has taken intense criticism for his office recommending bail be set so low for Brooks.

Chisholm told county officials in December that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a backlog of cases in his office. An evaluation of the risk Brooks posed to the community never made into his office’s computer system and went unseen, Chisholm said, and a young, overworked assistant prosecutor recommended \$1,000 bail for him so she could move on to other cases.

A group of Milwaukee County taxpayers filed a complaint with Gov. Tony Evers in December demanding he remove Chisholm from office. An attorney the Evers administration hired to review the complaint concluded Tuesday that the complaint suffers from technical legal deficiencies and isn’t valid. Evers refused to take any action against Chisholm, a fellow Democrat.

Chisholm has pushed for ending cash bail, saying it’s not fair to poor defendants. He wants a new system in which only violent offenders are jailed until trial.

Brooks’ case has pushed Republican legislators to introduce bills that would require a \$10,000 minimum bond for people who have previously committed a felony or violent misdemeanor. They would also require the Wisconsin Department of Justice to create a “bond transparency report” detailing crime and bond conditions.

Evers and Democratic Attorney General Josh Kaul have said they would support stricter bail policies.

Bohren is no stranger to high-profile cases. He presided over proceedings against two Waukesha girls accused of stabbing their classmate in 2014 to please a fictional horror character, Slender Man.

## **Biden chooses 3 for Fed board, including first Black woman**

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will nominate three people for the Federal Reserve’s Board of Governors, including Sarah Bloom Raskin, a former Fed and Treasury official, for the top regulatory slot and Lisa Cook, who would be the first Black woman to serve on the Fed’s board.

Biden will also nominate Phillip Jefferson, an economist, dean of faculty at Davidson College in North Carolina and a former Fed researcher, according to a person familiar with the decision Thursday who was not authorized to speak on the record. The three nominees, who will have to be confirmed by the Senate, would fill out the Fed’s seven-member board.

The nominees would join the Fed at a particularly challenging time in which the central bank will undertake the delicate task of raising its benchmark interest rate to try to curb high inflation, without undercutting the recovery from the pandemic recession. On Wednesday, the government reported that inflation reached a four-decade high in December. Inflation has become the economy’s most serious problem, a burden for millions of American households and a political threat to the Biden administration.

Raskin’s nomination to the position of Fed vice chair for supervision — the nation’s top bank regulator — will be welcomed by progressive senators and advocacy groups, who see her as likely to take a tougher approach to bank regulation than Randal Quarles, a Trump appointee who stepped down from that post last

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month. She is also viewed as someone committed to incorporating climate change considerations into the Fed's oversight of banks. For that reason, though, she has already drawn opposition from some Republican senators.

A Harvard-trained lawyer, Raskin, 60, previously served on the Fed's seven-member board from 2010 to 2014. President Barack Obama then chose her to serve as deputy Treasury secretary, the No. 2 job in the department.

As Fed governors, Raskin, Cook and Jefferson would vote on interest-rate policy decisions at the eight meetings each year of the Fed's policymaking committee, which also includes the 12 regional Fed bank presidents.

Raskin's first term as a Fed governor followed her work as Maryland's commissioner of financial regulation. Before her government jobs, Raskin had worked as a lawyer at Arnold & Porter, a high-profile Washington firm, and as a managing director at the Promontory Financial Group.

Kathleen Murphy, CEO of the Massachusetts Bankers Association, worked with Raskin when Raskin was Maryland's banking regulator from 2007 to 2010 and Murphy led the Maryland bankers' group. Murphy said the state's financial industry regarded her as a "strong regulator but a fair regulator."

"She has always had a very collaborative approach," Murphy said. "She wanted to make sure all the voices were at the table when decisions were made."

Still, Raskin is likely to draw fire from critics for her progressive views on climate change and the oil and gas industry. Two years ago, in an opinion column in *The New York Times*, she criticized the Fed's willingness to support lending to oil and gas companies as part of its efforts to bolster the financial sector in the depths of the pandemic recession.

"The decisions the Fed makes on our behalf should build toward a stronger economy with more jobs in innovative industries — not prop up and enrich dying ones," Raskin wrote, referring to oil and gas providers.

On Thursday, Sen. Pat Toomey, the top Republican on the Senate Banking Committee, criticized Raskin for having "explicitly advocated that the Fed allocate capital by denying it to this disfavored sector."

Raskin is married to Rep. Jamie Raskin, a liberal Maryland Democrat who gained widespread visibility as a member of the House Judiciary Committee when it brought impeachment charges against President Donald Trump.

If confirmed, Cook, together with Jefferson, would be the fourth and fifth Black members of the Fed's Board of Governors in its 108-year history. She has been a professor of economics and international relations at Michigan State since 2005. She was also a staff economist on the White House Council of Economic Advisers from 2011 to 2012 and was an adviser to the Biden-Harris transition team on the Fed and bank regulatory policy.

Cook is best-known for her research on the impact of racial violence on African-American invention and innovation. A 2013 paper she wrote concluded that racially motivated violence, by undermining the rule of law and threatening personal security, depressed patent awards to Black Americans by 15% annually between 1882 and 1940 — a loss that she found also held back the broader U.S. economy.

In an interview in October, Cook said that despite encouragement from prominent economists such as Milton Friedman and George Akerlof, she struggled for years to get the paper published. The major economics journals, she said, typically didn't deal with "patents, or economic history, or anything that related to African-Americans."

Cook has also been an advocate for Black women in economics, a profession that is notably less diverse than other social sciences. In 2019, she co-wrote a column in *The New York Times* that asserted that "economics is neither a welcoming nor a supportive profession for women" and "is especially antagonistic to Black women."

To combat those problems, Cook has spent time mentoring younger Black women in economics, directing a summer program run by the American Economic Association, and won an award for mentoring in 2019.

Jefferson, who grew up in a working-class family in Washington, D.C., according to an interview with the American Economic Association, has focused his research on poverty and monetary policy. In a 2005 paper, he concluded that the benefits of a hot economy from the reduction in unemployment among lower-skilled

workers outweighed the costs, including the risk that companies would adopt automation once labor grew scarce.

## **RFK assassin Sirhan Sirhan will remain in prison**

By DON THOMPSON Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Sirhan Sirhan, who assassinated presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy in 1968, was denied parole Thursday by California's governor, who said the killer remains a threat to the public and hasn't taken responsibility for a crime that altered American history.

Kennedy, a U.S. senator from New York, was shot moments after he claimed victory in California's pivotal Democratic presidential primary. Five others were wounded during the shooting at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, who has cited RFK as his political hero, rejected a recommendation from a two-person panel of parole commissioners who said Sirhan, 77, should be freed. The panel's recommendation in August had divided the Kennedy family, with two of RFK's sons — Douglas Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — supporting his release, and their siblings and mother vehemently opposing it.

In his decision, Newsom said the assassination was "among the most notorious crimes in American history," Aside from causing Kennedy's then-pregnant wife and 10 children "immeasurable suffering," Newsom said the killing "also caused great harm to the American people."

It "upended the 1968 presidential election, leaving millions in the United States and beyond mourning the promise of his candidacy," Newsom wrote. "Mr. Sirhan killed Senator Kennedy during a dark season of political assassinations, just nine weeks after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s murder and four and a half years after the murder of Senator Kennedy's brother, President John F. Kennedy."

He said Sirhan still lacks insight, refuses to accept responsibility and has failed to disclaim violence committed in his name. That adds "to his current risk of inciting further political violence," Newsom wrote.

In 1973, terrorists took 10 hostages at an embassy in Sudan, demanding the release of Sirhan and other prisoners and killing three diplomats when their demands weren't met, he noted.

Sirhan, who will be scheduled for a new parole hearing no later than February 2023, will ask a judge to overturn Newsom's denial, defense attorney Angela Berry said.

"We fully expect that judicial review of the governor's decision will show that the governor got it wrong," she said.

State law holds that inmates are supposed to be paroled unless they pose a current unreasonable public safety risk, she said, adding that "not an iota of evidence exists to suggest Mr. Sirhan is still a danger to society."

She said the parole process has become politicized, and Newsom "chose to overrule his own experts (on the parole board), ignoring the law."

Parole commissioners found Sirhan suitable for release "because of his impressive extensive record of rehabilitation over the last half-century," Berry said. "Since the mid-1980's Mr. Sirhan has consistently been found by prison psychologists and psychiatrists to not pose an unreasonable risk of danger to the public."

During his parole hearing, the white-haired Sirhan called Kennedy the "hope of the world." But he stopped short of taking full responsibility for a shooting he said he doesn't recall because he was drunk.

"It pains me ... the knowledge for such a horrible deed, if I did, in fact, do that," Sirhan said.

Kennedy's widow, Ethel, and six of his children hailed Newsom's decision in a statement that called RFK a "visionary and champion of justice" whose life "was cut short by an enraged man with a small gun."

"The political passions that motivated this inmate's act still simmer today, and his refusal to admit the truth makes it impossible to conclude that he has overcome the evil that boiled over 53 years ago," they wrote.

The panel's decision was based in part on several new California laws since he was denied parole in 2016 — the 15th time he'd lost his bid for release.

Commissioners were required to consider that Sirhan committed his crime at a young age, when he was 24; that he now is elderly; and that the Christian Palestinian who immigrated from Jordan had suffered childhood trauma from the conflict in the Middle East.

In addition, Los Angeles County prosecutors didn't object to his parole, following District Attorney George Gascón's policy that prosecutors should not be involved in deciding whether prisoners are ready for release.

The decision had a personal element for Newsom, a fellow Democrat, who displays RFK photos in his official and home offices. One of them is of Kennedy with Newsom's late father.

Sirhan originally was sentenced to death, but that sentence was commuted to life when the California Supreme Court briefly outlawed capital punishment in 1972.

## Supreme Court halts COVID-19 vaccine rule for US businesses

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court has stopped a major push by the Biden administration to boost the nation's COVID-19 vaccination rate, a requirement that employees at large businesses get a vaccine or test regularly and wear a mask on the job.

At the same time, the court is allowing the administration to proceed with a vaccine mandate for most health care workers in the U.S. The court's orders Thursday came during a spike in coronavirus cases caused by the omicron variant.

The court's conservative majority concluded the administration overstepped its authority by seeking to impose the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's vaccine-or-test rule on U.S. businesses with at least 100 employees. More than 80 million people would have been affected and OSHA had estimated that the rule would save 6,500 lives and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations over six months.

"OSHA has never before imposed such a mandate. Nor has Congress. Indeed, although Congress has enacted significant legislation addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, it has declined to enact any measure similar to what OSHA has promulgated here," the conservatives wrote in an unsigned opinion.

In dissent, the court's three liberals argued that it was the court that was overreaching by substituting its judgment for that of health experts. "Acting outside of its competence and without legal basis, the Court displaces the judgments of the Government officials given the responsibility to respond to workplace health emergencies," Justices Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor wrote in a joint dissent.

President Joe Biden said he was "disappointed that the Supreme Court has chosen to block common-sense life-saving requirements for employees at large businesses that were grounded squarely in both science and the law."

Biden called on businesses to institute their own vaccination requirements, noting that a third of Fortune 100 companies already have done so.

When crafting the OSHA rule, White House officials always anticipated legal challenges — and privately some harbored doubts that it could withstand them. The administration nonetheless still views the rule as a success at already driving millions of people to get vaccinated and encouraging private businesses to implement their own requirements that are unaffected by the legal challenge.

The OSHA regulation had initially been blocked by a federal appeals court in New Orleans, then allowed to take effect by a federal appellate panel in Cincinnati.

Both rules had been challenged by Republican-led states. In addition, business groups attacked the OSHA emergency regulation as too expensive and likely to cause workers to leave their jobs at a time when finding new employees already is difficult.

The National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, called the Supreme Court's decision "a significant victory for employers."

The vaccine mandate that the court will allow to be enforced nationwide scraped by on a 5-4 vote, with Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Brett Kavanaugh joining the liberals to form a majority. The mandate covers virtually all health care workers in the country, applying to providers that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid funding. It affects 10.4 million workers at 76,000 health care facilities as well as home health care providers. The rule has medical and religious exemptions.

Biden said that decision by the court "will save lives."

In an unsigned opinion, the court wrote: "The challenges posed by a global pandemic do not allow a federal

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agency to exercise power that Congress has not conferred upon it. At the same time, such unprecedented circumstances provide no grounds for limiting the exercise of authorities the agency has long been recognized to have." It said the "latter principle governs" in the healthcare arena.

Justice Clarence Thomas wrote in dissent that the case was about whether the administration has the authority "to force healthcare workers, by coercing their employers, to undergo a medical procedure they do not want and cannot undo." He said the administration hadn't shown convincingly that Congress gave it that authority.

Justices Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett signed onto Thomas' opinion. Alito wrote a separate dissent that the other three conservatives also joined.

Decisions by federal appeals courts in New Orleans and St. Louis had blocked the mandate in about half the states. The administration already was taking steps to enforce it elsewhere.

More than 208 million Americans, 62.7% of the population, are fully vaccinated, and more than a third of those have received booster shots, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. All nine justices have gotten booster shots.

The courthouse remains closed to the public, and lawyers and reporters are asked for negative test results before being allowed inside the courtroom for arguments, though vaccinations are not required.

The justices heard arguments on the challenges last week. Their questions then hinted at the split verdict that they issued Thursday.

A separate vaccine mandate for federal contractors, on hold after lower courts blocked it, has not been considered by the Supreme Court.

## **Seditious conspiracy: 11 Oath Keepers charged in Jan. 6 riot**

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, COLLEEN LONG and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Stewart Rhodes, the founder and leader of the far-right Oath Keepers militia group, and 10 other members or associates have been charged with seditious conspiracy in the violent attack on the U.S. Capitol, authorities said Thursday.

Despite hundreds of charges already brought in the year since pro-Trump rioters stormed the Capitol in an effort to stop the certification of President Joe Biden's 2020 election victory, these were the first seditious conspiracy charges levied in connection with the attack on Jan. 6, 2021.

It marked a serious escalation in the largest investigation in the Justice Department's history — more than 700 people have been arrested and charged with federal crimes — and highlighted the work that has gone into piecing together the most complicated cases. The charges rebut, in part, the growing chorus of Republican lawmakers who have publicly challenged the seriousness of the insurrection, arguing that since no one had been charged yet with sedition or treason, it could not have been so violent.

The indictment alleges Oath Keepers for weeks discussed trying to overturn the election results and preparing for a siege by purchasing weapons and setting up battle plans. They repeatedly wrote in chats about the prospect of violence and the need, as Rhodes allegedly wrote in one text, "to scare the s---out of" Congress. And on Jan. 6, the indictment alleges, they entered the Capitol building with the large crowds of rioters who stormed past police barriers and smashed windows, injuring dozens of officers and sending lawmakers running.

Authorities have said the Oath Keepers and their associates worked as if they were going to war, discussing weapons and training. Days before the attack, one defendant suggested in a text message getting a boat to ferry weapons across the Potomac River to their "waiting arms," prosecutors say.

On Jan. 6, several members, wearing camouflaged combat attire, were seen on camera shouldering their way through the crowd and into the Capitol in a military-style stack formation, authorities say.

The indictment against Rhodes alleges Oath Keepers formed two teams, or "stacks," that entered the Capitol. The first stack split up inside the building to separately go after the House and Senate. The second stack confronted officers inside the Capitol Rotunda, the indictment said. Outside Washington, the indictment alleges, the Oath Keepers had stationed two "quick reaction forces" that had guns "in support of their plot

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to stop the lawful transfer of power.”

Rhodes, 56, of Granbury, Texas, is the highest-ranking member of an extremist group to be arrested in the deadly siege. He and Edward Vallejo, 63, of Phoenix, Arizona, were arrested on Thursday. The nine others were already facing criminal charges related to the attack.

Sedition charges are difficult to win and rarely used, but defendants face steep prison time of 20 years if convicted, compared with five for the other conspiracy charges. The last time U.S. prosecutors brought such a seditious conspiracy case was in 2010 in an alleged Michigan plot by members of the Hutaree militia to incite an uprising against the government. But a judge ordered acquittals on the sedition conspiracy charges at a 2012 trial, saying prosecutors relied too much on hateful diatribes protected by the First Amendment and didn't, as required, prove the accused ever had detailed plans for a rebellion.

Among the last successful convictions for seditious conspiracy stemmed from another, now largely forgotten storming of the Capitol in 1954, when four Puerto Rican nationalists opened fire on the House floor, wounding five representatives.

Most of the hundreds of people charged in the violence are facing lower-level crimes. More than 150 people have been charged with assaulting police officers at the Capitol. Over 50 have been charged with conspiracy, mostly people linked to the far-right Proud Boys and anti-government Oath Keepers. There have been no sedition charges brought against the Proud Boys.

Rhodes did not enter the Capitol building on Jan. 6 but is accused of helping put into motion the violence. Jonathan Moseley, an attorney who said he represented Rhodes, said Rhodes was supposed to testify before the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection in a deposition but it got called off.

“He has been subject to a lot of suspicion to why he wasn't indicted,” so far in the Jan. 6 riot, Moseley said. “I don't know if this is in response to those discussions, but we do think it's unfortunate. It's an unusual situation.”

A second attorney representing the group, Kellye SoRelle, said she was issuing a statement later and said Mosley did not represent Rhodes.

Rhodes has said in interviews with right-wing hosts that there was no plan to storm the Capitol and that the members who did so went rogue. But he has continued to push the lie that the 2020 election was stolen, while posts on the Oath Keepers website have depicted the group as a victim of political persecution.

Other defendants in the conspiracy have argued in court that the only plan was to provide security at the rally before the riot or protect themselves against possible attacks from far-left antifa activists.

Rhodes, a former U.S. Army paratrooper and Yale Law School graduate, founded the Oath Keepers in 2009. The right-wing extremist group recruits current and former military, police and first responders. Several of those arrested are veterans.

Rhodes has appeared in court documents in the conspiracy case for months as “Person One.”

Authorities say he held a GoToMeeting call days after the election, telling his followers to go to Washington and let then President Donald Trump know “that the people are behind him.” Rhodes told members they should be prepared to fight antifa and that some Oath Keepers should “stay on the outside” and be “prepared to go in armed” if necessary.

“We're going to defend the president, the duly elected president, and we call on him to do what needs to be done to save our country. Because if you don't guys, you're going to be in a bloody, bloody civil war, and a bloody — you can call it an insurrection or you can call it a war or fight,” Rhodes said, according to court documents.

Authorities have said Rhodes was part of an encrypted Signal chat with Oath Keepers from multiple states leading up to Jan. 6 called “DC OP: Jan 6 21” and it showed the group was “activating a plan to use force” that day.

On the afternoon of the 6th, authorities say Rhodes told the group over Signal: “All I see Trump doing is complaining. I see no intent by him to do anything. So the patriots are taking it into their own hands. They've had enough.”

Around 2:30 p.m., Rhodes had a 97-second phone call with Kelly Meggs, the reputed leader of the group's

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Florida chapter, who was part of the military-style stack, authorities say. About 10 minutes later, Rhodes sent a photo to the group showing the southeast side of the Capitol with the caption, "South side of US Capitol. Patriots pounding on doors." Around that same time, those in the stack formation forcibly entered the Capitol, prosecutors say.

Rhodes was arrested in Little Elm, a suburb about 35 miles north of Dallas. He was booked into the Collin County Detention Center, where a sheriff's deputy said that local jail officials could not make Rhodes available to speak with a reporter because he was arrested by federal agents.

He was expected in court Friday in Texas.

More than 70 defendants remain detained on riot charges. At least 183 defendants have pleaded guilty to riot-related charges as of Jan. 11. At least 78 of them have been sentenced, including 35 people who received jail or prison sentences or time already served.

## **EXPLAINER: Why didn't China send troops to aid Kazakhstan?**

BEIJING (AP) — China gave strong verbal backing to Kazakhstan's leader for his deadly crackdown to quell violent unrest, but stood aside as Russia sent in special forces troops.

Resource-rich Kazakhstan, on China's western border, has economic and strategic importance for Beijing and is an important link in its "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative to expand its global trade and political influence in rivalry with the U.S. and its allies.

China's response to the crisis underscores how it prefers to influence outcomes with verbal assurances and offers of assistance, without committing troops.

"The growing closeness between Russia and China means we can expect more rhetorical support for Moscow's overseas ventures, particularly when they go up against Western geostrategic aims," said Rana Mitter, an Oxford University China expert.

"However, China remains extremely reluctant to deploy People's Liberation Army troops outside its own territory, except in areas such as U.N. peacekeeping operations, as it would contradict its constant statements that unlike the U.S., China does not intervene in other countries' conflicts," Mitter said.

### **WHAT ARE CHINA'S GOALS IN CENTRAL ASIA?**

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, China has steadily expanded its economic and political influence in a region that Russia considers its own backyard. As the largest and by far the wealthiest Central Asian state, Kazakhstan is key, acting as the buckle in China's "Belt and Road" initiative, and its authoritarian politics act as a bulwark against democratic movements in Ukraine and elsewhere that China derides as Western-engineered "color revolutions."

China's ruling Communist Party, which violently repressed its own pro-democracy challenge in 1989, views such movements, whether in Georgia or Hong Kong, as a threat to its own stability. In a message to Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev amid the unrest, Chinese leader Xi Jinping said his country would "resolutely oppose external forces deliberately creating turmoil and instigating a 'color revolution' in Kazakhstan."

China's position dovetails with its strident opposition to outside criticism of its policies, whether its human rights record or its expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea, as meddling in its internal affairs.

China's influence in Central Asia still has limits, however, and Kazakhstan may feel uneasy about inviting in Chinese troops, given China's harsh treatment of ethnic Kazakhs and other Muslim minorities within its borders, said Steve Tsang, director of the China Institute at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

"An important element of China's foreign policy under Xi is to make the world safe for authoritarian states and stop color revolutions from spreading," Tsang said.

### **WHEN DOES CHINA INTERVENE?**

China frequently vows retaliation for any criticism of its policies, especially when the offenders are the U.S. and its allies. It is far friendlier with autocrats, pledging non-interference and cooperation with whomever

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is in power, regardless of their records on human rights and corruption.

That's evidenced in its dealings with regimes that others criticize, from Myanmar's military leaders to Hungary's Viktor Orban. While not recognizing the Taliban, it is hedging its bets in Afghanistan by working with the country's current rulers, despite their espousal of the form of radical Islam that Beijing has sought to keep from infiltrating its restive, largely Muslim region of Xinjiang, which shares a narrow border with Afghanistan and a much larger one with Kazakhstan.

China generally reserves action, military and otherwise, for cases in which its own security is perceived as threatened, as in the 1950-53 Korean War, or more recently, in violent incidents along its disputed border with India, and especially with Taiwan, which China threatens to invade if it doesn't agree to unite. Beijing responded with ruthless trade and diplomatic retaliation against Lithuania when the tiny Baltic nation broke with diplomatic convention by allowing Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius under the name "Taiwan" instead of "Chinese Taipei."

## HOW DOES CHINA VIEW MILITARY ALLIANCES?

Troops, mostly from Russia, were deployed to Kazakhstan last week by the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a grouping of six former Soviet states, at the president's request amid unprecedented violence. China officially eschews such security alliances, although The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which Beijing dominates along with Moscow, has a security component, currently limited to joint training and other non-combat missions.

Unlike the CSTO, there is "no agreement about sending troops from member countries of the SCO," Chinese international security expert Li Wei said. "In addition, China sticks to the fundamental principle of not using force in other countries."

U.N. Peacekeeping Operations remain the rare exception, and China is quick to point out that it is the largest contributor of forces to such missions among the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council.

Given the growing might of China's military, some experts expect Beijing to become more amenable to military interventions in the future. Oxford's Mitter also points to a growing "grey zone" of Chinese private security enterprises that can be used to protect Chinese interests "without any formal government intervention."

## Businesses react to ruling against Biden vaccine mandate

By DAVID KOENIG AP Business Writer

For companies that were waiting to hear from the U.S. Supreme Court before deciding whether to require vaccinations or regular coronavirus testing for workers, the next move is up to them.

Many large corporations were silent on Thursday's ruling by the high court to block a requirement that workers at businesses with at least 100 employees be fully vaccinated or else test regularly for COVID-19 and wear a mask on the job.

Target's response was typical: The big retailer said it wanted to review the decision and "how it will impact our team and business."

The Biden administration argues that nothing in federal law prevents private businesses from imposing their own vaccine requirements. However, companies could run into state bans on vaccine mandates in Republican-controlled states. And relatively few businesses enacted their own rules ahead of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirement, raising doubt that there will be rush for them now.

In legal terms, the Supreme Court's conservative majority said the OSHA lacked authority to impose such a mandate on big companies. The court, however, let stand a vaccination requirement for most health care workers.

The National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade organization and one of the groups that challenged the OSHA action, called the court's decision "a significant victory for employers." It complained that OSHA acted without first allowing public comments, although administration officials met with many business and labor groups before issuing the rule.

Chris Spear, the president of the American Trucking Associations, another of the groups that fought the



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OSHA rule, said it "would interfere with individuals' private health care decisions."

Karen Harned, an official with the National Federation of Independent Business, said that as small businesses try to recover from nearly two years of pandemic, "the last thing they need is a mandate that would cause more business challenges."

But mandate supporters called it a matter of safety for employees and customers.

Dan Simons, co-owner of the Founding Farmers chain of restaurants in the Washington area, said vaccine mandates are "common sense." He requires his 1,000 employees to be fully vaccinated; those who request an exemption must wear a mask and submit weekly COVID test results.

"If your priority is the economy, or your own health, or the health of others, you would agree with my approach," Simons said.

Administration officials believe that even though the OSHA rule has been blocked, it drove millions of people to get vaccinated. But companies that used mandates to achieve relatively high vaccination rates may decide that they have accomplished enough.

Ford Motor Co. said it was "encouraged by the 88% of U.S. salaried employees who are already vaccinated." The car maker said it would review the court decision to see if it needs to change a requirement that most U.S. salaried workers get the shots.

Labor advocates were dismayed by the ruling.

"This decision will have no impact on most professional and white collar workers, but it will endanger millions of frontline workers who risk their lives daily and who are least able to protect themselves," said David Michaels, who led OSHA during the Obama administration and now teaches at the George Washington University's School of Public Health.

For their part, labor unions had been divided all along about Biden's attempt to create a vaccine mandate, with many nurses and teachers groups in favor, but many police and fire unions opposed. Some unions wanted the right to bargain over the issue with companies.

The United Auto Workers, which encourages workers to get vaccinated, said the decision won't change safety protocols such as face masks, temperature checks and distancing when possible for more than 150,000 union members at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis factories.

The Service Employees International Union, which represents more than 2 million service industry workers, said the Supreme Court's decision is a relief for health care workers but leaves others without critical protections.

"In blocking the vaccine-or-test rule for large employers, the court has placed millions of other essential workers further at risk, caving to corporations that are trying to rig the rules against workers permanently," the union said.

The union called on Congress and states to pass laws requiring vaccinations, masks and paid sick leave. Workers also need better access to testing and protective equipment, the union said.

The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, the largest union for grocery workers and meatpacking plants, said that the Supreme Court decision fails to recognize the "extreme health risks" America's front-line food and retail workers face on the job.

"Frontline workers need to be protected and this decision needlessly ignores that there was a better way to address this issue without negating this mandate," said Marc Perrone, president of the UFCW International in a statement.

Meanwhile, employers have been split on what to do with their unvaccinated workers. Among 543 U.S. companies surveyed in November by insurance broker and consulting firm Willis Towers Watson, fewer than one in five required vaccination. Two-thirds had no plans to require the shots unless the courts upheld the OSHA requirement.

Jeff Levin-Scherz, an executive in the firm's health practice, said most companies with mandates will keep them because they are working. He said nothing short of a mandate can get vaccination rates to 90%, and "you really need a very high level of vaccination to prevent community outbreaks."

United Airlines was one of the first major employers to announce a mandate, back in August. CEO Scott

Kirby has said that 99% of United employees either got vaccinated or submitted a request for exemption on medical or religious grounds.

United declined to comment Thursday, but in earlier comments Kirby has sounded committed to the mandate for his employees because "it was the right thing to do for safety."

Airlines fall under a separate Biden order that required federal contractors to get their workers vaccinated. That requirement was not part of Thursday's Supreme Court ruling, but it has been tied up separately since early December, when a federal district judge in Georgia issued a preliminary injunction barring enforcement of the mandate.

## Study nixes Mars life in meteorite found in Antarctica

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A 4 billion-year-old meteorite from Mars that caused a splash here on Earth decades ago contains no evidence of ancient, primitive Martian life after all, scientists reported Thursday.

In 1996, a NASA-led team announced that organic compounds in the rock appeared to have been left by living creatures. Other scientists were skeptical and researchers chipped away at that premise over the decades, most recently by a team led by the Carnegie Institution for Science's Andrew Steele.

Tiny samples from the meteorite show the carbon-rich compounds are actually the result of water — most likely salty, or briny, water — flowing over the rock for a prolonged period, Steele said. The findings appear in the journal *Science*.

During Mars' wet and early past, at least two impacts occurred near the rock, heating the planet's surrounding surface, before a third impact bounced it off the red planet and into space millions of years ago. The 4-pound (2-kilogram) rock was found in Antarctica in 1984.

Groundwater moving through the cracks in the rock, while it was still on Mars, formed the tiny globs of carbon that are present, according to the researchers. The same thing can happen on Earth and could help explain the presence of methane in Mars' atmosphere, they said.

But two scientists who took part in the original study took issue with these latest findings, calling them "disappointing." In a shared email, they said they stand by their 1996 observations.

"While the data presented incrementally adds to our knowledge of (the meteorite), the interpretation is hardly novel, nor is it supported by the research," wrote Kathie Thomas-Keprta and Simon Clemett, astromaterial researchers at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston.

"Unsupported speculation does nothing to resolve the conundrum surrounding the origin of organic matter" in the meteorite, they added.

According to Steele, advances in technology made his team's new findings possible.

He commended the measurements by the original researchers and noted that their life-claiming hypothesis "was a reasonable interpretation" at the time. He said he and his team — which includes NASA, German and British scientists — took care to present their results "for what they are, which is a very exciting discovery about Mars and not a study to disprove" the original premise.

This finding "is huge for our understanding of how life started on this planet and helps refine the techniques we need to find life elsewhere on Mars, or Enceladus and Europa," Steele said in an email, referring to Saturn and Jupiter's moons with subsurface oceans.

The only way to prove whether Mars ever had or still has microbial life, according to Steele, is to bring samples to Earth for analysis. NASA's Perseverance Mars rover already has collected six samples for return to Earth in a decade or so; three dozen samples are desired.

Millions of years after drifting through space, the meteorite landed on an icefield in Antarctica thousands of years ago. The small gray-green fragment got its name — Allan Hills 84001 — from the hills where it was found.

Just this week, a piece of this meteorite was used in a first-of-its-kind experiment aboard the International Space Station. A mini scanning electron microscope examined the sample; Thomas-Keprta served as operator it remotely from Houston. Researchers hope to use the microscope to analyze geologic samples in space — on the moon one day, for example — and debris that could ruin station equipment or endanger

astronauts.

## **Biden to double free COVID tests, add masks to fight omicron**

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced Thursday that the government will double to 1 billion the rapid, at-home COVID-19 tests to be distributed free to Americans, along with “high-quality masks,” as he highlighted his efforts to “surge” resources to help the country weather the spike in coronavirus cases.

Biden also announced that starting next week 1,000 military medical personnel will begin deploying across the country to help overwhelmed medical facilities ease staff shortages due to the highly transmissible omicron variant. Speaking at the White House, he said six additional military medical teams will be deployed to Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio and Rhode Island.

Many facilities are struggling because their workers are in at-home quarantines due to the virus at the same time as a nationwide spike in COVID-19 cases. The new deployments will be on top of other federal medical personnel who have already been sent to states to help with acute shortages.

Biden acknowledged that, “I know we’re all frustrated as we enter this new year” as virus cases reach new heights. But he insisted that it remains “a pandemic of the unvaccinated.”

Both vaccinated and unvaccinated people test positive for the virus, but Biden noted medical figures showing that people are far less likely to suffer serious illness and death if they’ve received a shot: “What happens after that could not be more different.”

Biden’s comments come as his administration’s focus is shifting to easing disruptions from the spike in cases that is also contributing to grocery shortages and flight cancellations, rather than preventing the transmission of the virus.

On Tuesday, Janet Woodcock, the acting head of the Food and Drug Administration, told Congress that the highly transmissible strain will infect “most people” and that the focus should turn to ensuring critical services can continue uninterrupted.

“I think it’s hard to process what’s actually happening right now, which is: Most people are going to get COVID, all right?” she said. “What we need to do is make sure the hospitals can still function — transportation, other essential services are not disrupted while this happens.”

Biden said that he is directing his team to double its procurement of rapid COVID-19 tests to be delivered for free to Americans through a forthcoming federal website, as he seeks to respond to criticism over shortages and long lines for tests. The initial order was for 500 million tests, and now the federal government will purchase 1 billion at-home testing kits.

The initial batch of test kits will be available starting next week, Biden said, when the administration launches a new website where Americans can request the free tests. The rest of the tests will be delivered over the coming months.

Biden also announced that for the first time his administration was planning to make “high-quality masks,” including N95s, which are most effective at preventing transmission of the virus, available for free. He said his administration would announce details next week.

The federal government has a stockpile of more than 750 million N95 masks, the White House said this week. And though research has shown those masks to be better protection, they are often more uncomfortable, and health officials are not altering their guidance to recommend against less-protective cloth masks.

The best mask “is the one that you will wear and the one you can keep on all day long, that you can tolerate in public indoor settings,” Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said Wednesday.

Biden encouraged Americans to wear masks when indoors to slow the spread of the virus, even as he acknowledged they’re a “pain in the neck”

“Next week we’ll announce how we’re making high-quality masks available to the American people for free,” he added.

During Thursday’s remarks Biden was joined by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who recently recovered

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from his own case of COVID-19, and FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell. They were hearing about the work of the more than 800 military personnel who have been helping civilian hospitals since Thanksgiving and the more than 15,000 National Guard members whose work supporting vaccinations, testing and caring for patients is being covered by the federal government.

The White House said they spoke with federal personnel who are already on the ground in Arizona, Michigan and New York to hear about their experiences.

Gen. Dan Hokanson, chief of the National Guard Bureau, said that as of Thursday, there are now 15,200 Guard members around the country supporting COVID-19 missions.

State Guard leaders from Ohio, New York and Colorado told reporters on Thursday that they are using only vaccinated troops for missions that directly interact with the public, including at testing sites and in patient care at hospitals.

The White House said the teams will support Henry Ford Hospital just outside Detroit, University Hospital in Newark, the University of New Mexico hospital in Albuquerque, Coney Island Hospital in Brooklyn, Cleveland Clinic and Rhode Island Hospital in Providence.

The deployment by the Department of Defense will join another team sent by the Department of Health and Human Services, according to Bob Riney, president of Healthcare Operations and chief operating officer for Detroit-based Henry Ford Health System. He said the phases of the operations would come together "in a highly coordinated way."

"They're not overlapping. They're complementary," he told reporters Thursday.

The first team of medical personnel arrived Sunday and went through an orientation before helping patients on Monday. They are providing care for up to 24 beds and supporting staff at Henry Ford Wyandotte with in-patient care and surgeries, Riney said.

The first phase is through Jan. 21 and the second team will come for an additional 30 days. "We are looking at 45 days of total support and that has a much more meaningful impact," he said.

"We welcome and are grateful for any support that we have," said Riney, who told reporters that the federal government chose to address needs at the Wyandotte hospital after the health system submitted its current situation and data to Health and Human Services.

A spokesperson for the Cleveland Clinic said the hospital system is "receiving federal support from a team of approximately 20 military medical professionals."

Spokesperson Andrea Pacetti said they likely will begin working next week at the Clinic's main campus in Cleveland. CEO and President Dr. Tom Mihaljevic in a statement on Thursday said: "We are grateful for the federal support as we continue to face a challenging COVID-19 surge in our Ohio hospitals. The addition of military medical personnel allows us to care for more patients in our community."

## UK ministers rally around embattled Boris Johnson, for now

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — With varying degrees of enthusiasm, senior British government ministers on Thursday expressed support for Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson and rejected demands he resign for attending a garden party during the country's first coronavirus lockdown.

Many other Conservatives held their tongues, waiting to see whether the crisis threatening Johnson's premiership will fade or intensify.

Pressure on the beleaguered leader looked set to build after a newspaper published allegations of two more parties by staff in the prime minister's office, complete with drinking, music and dancing. The Daily Telegraph said the leaving parties for two staffers took place in April 2021, the night before the funeral of 99-year-old Prince Philip, the husband of Queen Elizabeth II. The queen sat alone in the church during the service in order to adhere to social distancing rules that barred indoor mixing.

The new revelation came a day after Johnson apologized in the House of Commons for attending a "bring your own booze" party in the garden of the prime minister's Downing Street office and residence in May 2020. About 100 staff were invited by a senior prime ministerial aide to what was billed as a "socially distanced

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drinks" event.

At the time Britons were banned by law from meeting more than one person outside their households as part of measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Millions were cut off from family and friends, and even barred from visiting dying relatives in hospitals.

Johnson said he understood public "rage," but stopped short of admitting wrongdoing, saying he had considered the gathering a work event to thank staff for their efforts during the pandemic.

Johnson urged people to await the conclusions of an investigation by senior civil servant Sue Gray into multiple alleged rule-breaking parties by government staff during the pandemic. Gray, a public service veteran with a reputation as a straight-shooter, is expected to report by the end of the month.

Johnson spent Thursday holed up in Downing Street as waves of support, anger and disbelief about his version of events swept through Britain's political system, and the country. A planned visit to a coronavirus vaccination center was called off after a family member tested positive for the coronavirus, the prime minister's office said.

Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis said Johnson's apology had been "very, very sincere" — but added that the prime minister did not believe he had done anything wrong.

"The prime minister has outlined that he doesn't believe that he has done anything outside the rules," Lewis told Sky News. "If you look at what the investigation finds, people will be able to take their own view of that at the time."

Gray does not have the power to punish politicians, and Johnson did not say what he would do if she found he was at fault.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss — often cited as a possible successor to Johnson — tweeted: "I stand behind the Prime Minister 100% as he takes our country forward."

Treasury chief Rishi Sunak, another potential rival for the top job, was more muted. He tweeted that "The PM was right to apologise and I support his request for patience while Sue Gray carries out her enquiry." Sunak was notably absent from the House of Commons during Johnson's statement on Wednesday; he was 200 miles (320 kilometers) away on a visit to southwest England.

Opposition politicians say Johnson should resign for attending the party and for his previous denials that any rule-breaking took place.

Many Conservatives fear the "partygate" scandal could become a tipping point for a leader who has weathered a series of other storms over his expenses, and his moral judgment.

Some have joined opposition calls for Johnson to quit. Douglas Ross, the leader of Conservatives in Scotland, said Johnson's position "is no longer tenable." Lawmaker Roger Gale called the prime minister a "dead man walking," and colleague Caroline Nokes said Johnson "looks like a liability."

Johnson has shown no sign that he plans to resign. His spokesman, Max Blain, said the prime minister was not sitting around musing on his strengths and weaknesses.

"I don't think self-reflection is his priority," Blain said. "His priority is on delivering for the public."

If he does not resign, Johnson could be ousted by a no-confidence vote among party legislators, which would be triggered if 15% of Conservative lawmakers write letters demanding it. It's unclear how many letters have already been submitted.

Senior Labour Party legislator Lisa Nandy said the police, and not just a civil servant, should be investigating the alleged multiple rule-breaches. The Metropolitan Police Force said it was waiting to see whether Gray's inquiry uncovered "evidence of behavior that is potentially a criminal offense."

Nandy said there was "immense" public anger over the party revelations.

"Based on what I'm seeing pouring into my inbox this morning, I think the prime minister should not be confident that he'll survive this," she said.

Many Conservatives were waiting to see how reaction to the crisis develops in the coming days.

Conservative lawmaker Philip Dunne said the allegations were "very serious."

"I think the prime minister was quite right to apologise yesterday, and I think it is right that we wait to see what the investigation from Sue Gray establishes," he told Times Radio. "People will then have to suffer the consequences of whatever happens."

## NYC mayor considering virtual learning plan for schools

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City Mayor Eric Adams is considering allowing the nation's largest school district to return to some form of virtual instruction as the city weathers a wave of coronavirus cases, a reversal from his pledge a week ago to keep children in schools.

Adams said at a news conference Thursday that he still believes the safest place for children to be is in school, "but we do have to be honest that there's a substantial number of children, for whatever reason, parents are not bringing them to school."

Attendance levels since students returned from winter break have been lower than usual, with anywhere from one-quarter to one-third of students not showing up to class most days. As of Wednesday, attendance district-wide was 76%, according to city Department of Education numbers. In a district of nearly a million students, that means about 220,000 were either out sick or otherwise missing school.

More than 100 schools reported attendance of less than 60%, and more than 50 reported less than half of all students attending class Wednesday.

After peaking the first week in January, the average number of new cases in New York City has declined slightly in recent days, raising some hopes among officials that the omicron tide is ebbing.

Adams, a Democrat who took office on the first of the year, has taken a bullish stance on the pandemic, urging New Yorkers to take precautions and get vaccinated but not to let COVID-19 control their lives. He also repeatedly said the city cannot afford more shutdowns of businesses or schools.

Michael Mulgrew, the president of the United Federation of Teachers union representing the city's public school teachers, had asked the mayor to postpone in-person learning as Adams took office.

Adams said Thursday that he's been working closely with Mulgrew and has been willing to entertain temporary remote learning so long as it was a "quality option."

"But my goal: I want children in school," Adams said.

The mayor stressed that the city would not see a dispute like that in Chicago, where the nation's third-largest school district canceled five days of classes because of a disagreement with the teachers' union over COVID-19 safety protocols.

"This is not Chicago," Adams said. "We can resolve this. We can get through these crises and we will find the right way to educate our children in a very safe environment."

He did not offer details about what a remote option might look like. Messages left with the teachers union and the city's Department of Education were not immediately returned.

The city's school system was one of the first to return to in-person instruction after the pandemic hit in 2020 and schools closed in March for the rest of the year. They started a hybrid plan in the fall of 2020, with most students inside school a few days a week and at home learning online the rest of the time.

New York City students returned to full-time in-person instruction this past fall.

## RNC threatens to boycott commission's presidential debates

By JILL COLVIN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican National Committee said Thursday it is planning a rules change that would force presidential candidates seeking the party's nomination to sign a pledge saying they will not participate in any debates sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates.

If ultimately enacted and enforced, the move would fundamentally change the way presidential elections have been conducted in the country for more than 30 years. The threat is a culmination of years of tension between the RNC and the nonprofit that was exacerbated by former President Donald Trump, who repeatedly accused the commission of unfair treatment. Trump ultimately refused to participate in the second 2020 debate because he objected to it being held virtually because of the pandemic.

In a letter to the commission first reported by The New York Times and obtained by The Associated Press, RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel voiced frustration with the CPD's response to a long list of complaints, including

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concerns about its selection of moderators, a desire for a debate before early voting starts and a push for changes to the commission's board.

"The RNC has shared our concerns with the CPD in good faith, carefully documenting why the party and its voters have lost faith in your organization, and we have proposed commonsense reforms that would restore trust in the debates process," she wrote. "Unfortunately, neither the tone nor substance of your latest response inspires confidence that the CPD will meaningfully address the serious issues which the RNC has raised."

"Accordingly," she wrote, "the RNC will initiate the process of amending the Rules of the Republican Party at our upcoming Winter Meeting to prohibit future Republican nominees from participating in CPD-sponsored debates." The meeting will take place next month.

The commission said in a statement that it deals directly with candidates who qualify for participation in its debates.

"The CPD's plans for 2024 will be based on fairness, neutrality and a firm commitment to help the American public learn about the candidates and the issues," it said.

In a Dec. 14 letter to McDaniel, the commission said it always reviews its operations between election cycles and said that process was underway. As part of the review, the group's co-chairs said they planned to study the impact of early voting and evaluate the moderator selection process. But they rejected an RNC proposal to allow representatives from both parties to attend CPD board meetings, saying that would violate the group's status as a nonpartisan organization.

"We take the RNC's observations and suggestions seriously and, as we have said previously, we will give them careful consideration," they wrote, adding, "In furtherance of our position as a nonpartisan, neutral body, which neither favors nor disfavors any party or candidate, we do not negotiate the terms or conditions of our operations with anyone."

It remains unclear what would take the debates' place if the Republican candidate were to boycott. The televised events provide voters with their only opportunity to see the candidates appear side-by-side, and force those running to weigh in on a wide variety of domestic and foreign policy topics.

RNC spokesperson Danielle Alvarez said the party is seeking a potential alternative debate partner. Primary debates are not sponsored by the committee.

While the RNC has the ability to change many party rules between its quadrennial conventions, final say on whether to participate in the commission-sponsored debates will fall on the GOP's eventual 2024 nominee. The nominee usually effectively controls the convention, which could easily strip the rule drafted by party insiders if the nominee believes it is in their interest to attend the debates.

The commission was established in 1987 "to ensure, for the benefit of the American electorate, that general election debates between or among the leading candidates for the offices of President and Vice President of the United States are a permanent part of the electoral process," the nonprofit writes on its website.

After the 2012 presidential cycle, the RNC took on a more formal role in the primary debate process, including sponsoring debates in partnership with selected media outlets. As a condition of participation, candidates for the nomination had to agree not to attend any unsanctioned debates.

After CNBC's hosting of an October 2015 debate drew criticism from the candidates for poor management and "gotcha" questions designed to instigate clashes between the candidates, the RNC announced that it would ban NBC and its affiliates from hosting primary debates going forward.

Before the 2020 presidential debates, the RNC and the Trump campaign worked in public and behind the scenes to influence the selection of the debate hosts. Still, Trump voiced complaints that selected moderators were biased against him, repeatedly threatened boycotts and ultimately refused to participate in the second general election debate because it was going to be held virtually because of the pandemic.

Trump is considering another run for the White House in 2024.

Jaime Harrison, chair of the Democratic National Committee, accused the RNC in a statement of trying to "hide their ideas and candidates from voters."

"Regardless of the RNC's tantrum, voters can count on hearing from President Biden and Vice President

Harris who are proud of their records," he said.

## **Study: Stronger evidence linking virus to multiple sclerosis**

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

There's more evidence that one of the world's most common viruses may set some people on the path to developing multiple sclerosis.

Multiple sclerosis is a potentially disabling disease that occurs when immune system cells mistakenly attack the protective coating on nerve fibers, gradually eroding them.

The Epstein-Barr virus has long been suspected of playing a role in development of MS. It's a connection that's hard to prove because just about everybody gets infected with Epstein-Barr, usually as kids or young adults -- but only a tiny fraction develop MS.

Thursday, Harvard researchers reported one of the largest studies yet to back the Epstein-Barr theory.

They tracked blood samples stored from more than 10 million people in the U.S. military and found the risk of MS increased 32-fold following Epstein-Barr infection.

The military regularly administers blood tests to its members and the researchers checked samples stored from 1993 to 2013, hunting antibodies signaling viral infection.

Just 5.3% of recruits showed no sign of Epstein-Barr when they joined the military. The researchers compared 801 MS cases subsequently diagnosed over the 20-year period with 1,566 service members who never got MS.

Only one of the MS patients had no evidence of the Epstein-Barr virus prior to diagnosis. And despite intensive searching, the researchers found no evidence that other viral infections played a role.

The findings "strongly suggest" that Epstein-Barr infection is "a cause and not a consequence of MS," study author Dr. Alberto Ascherio of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and colleagues reported in the journal *Science*.

It's clearly not the only factor, considering that about 90% of adults have antibodies showing they've had Epstein-Barr -- while nearly 1 million people in the U.S. are living with MS, according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

The virus appears to be "the initial trigger," Drs. William H. Robinson and Lawrence Steinman of Stanford University wrote in an editorial accompanying Thursday's study. But they cautioned, "additional fuses must be ignited," such as genes that may make people more vulnerable.

Epstein-Barr is best known for causing "mono," or infectious mononucleosis, in teens and young adults but often occurs with no symptoms. A virus that remains inactive in the body after initial infection, it also has been linked to later development of some autoimmune diseases and rare cancers.

It's not clear why. Among the possibilities is what's called "molecular mimicry," meaning viral proteins may look so similar to some nervous system proteins that it induces the mistaken immune attack.

Regardless, the new study is "the strongest evidence to date that Epstein-Barr contributes to cause MS," said Mark Allegretta, vice president for research at the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

And that, he added, "opens the door to potentially prevent MS by preventing Epstein-Barr infection."

Attempts are underway to develop Epstein-Barr vaccines including a small study just started by Moderna Inc., best known for its COVID-19 vaccine.

## **UKs embattled Prince Andrew loses honorary military titles**

By DANICA KIRKA and SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Andrew has been stripped of his honorary military roles as the growing furor over allegations that he sexually abused a teenage girl trafficked by the late financier Jeffrey Epstein threatened to taint the House of Windsor.

Buckingham Palace said late Thursday that Queen Elizabeth II had also agreed that Andrew, 61, will give up his honorary leadership of various charities, known as royal patronages.

He will also no longer use the title "his royal highness" in official settings, British media said.



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The decision is an effort to insulate the monarchy from the fallout from potentially years of sordid headlines as Andrew vows to fight a lawsuit filed by an American woman, Virginia Giuffre, who alleges she was forced to have sex with the prince when she was 17. A New York judge on Wednesday rejected Andrew's effort to have the suit dismissed, increasing the chances that he will have to testify in the case if it goes to trial.

"With The Queen's approval and agreement, The Duke of York's military affiliations and Royal patronages have been returned to The Queen," the palace said, using the prince's formal title. "The Duke of York will continue not to undertake any public duties and is defending this case as a private citizen."

The move came after more than 150 veterans and serving members of the armed forces asked the queen to strip her second son of his military titles, saying he had failed to live up to the "very highest standards of probity, honesty and honourable conduct" that are expected of British officers.

"We understand that he is your son, but we write to you in your capacity as head of state and as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Navy and Air Force," they wrote in a letter released by Republic, a pressure group that campaigns for an end to the monarchy.

"These steps could have been taken at any time in the past eleven years. Please do not leave it any longer."

Andrew served in the Royal Navy for two decades, including as a helicopter pilot during the 1982 Falklands War. The honorary military roles he lost included several overseas ones, such as his title as colonel-in-chief of the Royal New Zealand Army Logistic Regiment.

Andrew denies Giuffre's allegations and has said he can't recall ever meeting her.

He has spent years combatting concerns about his links with Epstein, the U.S. financier who died in 2019 while awaiting trial on child sex trafficking charges, and Epstein's longtime companion Ghislaine Maxwell, who was convicted of related charges last month.

The prince stepped away from royal duties in November 2019 after a disastrous BBC interview in which he tried to justify his association with the pair and failed to show empathy for Epstein's victims. But he managed to cling to his military titles and patronages until Wednesday's ruling made Andrew's position untenable.

Giuffre sued Andrew in August, alleging that Epstein and Maxwell coerced her into sexual encounters with the prince in 2001. Giuffre said she was sexually abused by Andrew at Maxwell's London home, at Epstein's New York mansion and his estate in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

On Wednesday, U.S. District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan rejected Andrew's request to dismiss the lawsuit before trial. Lawyers for the prince had argued the terms of a 2009 settlement between Giuffre and Epstein barred her from suing anyone else associated with the case. Kaplan stressed that he wasn't ruling on the truth of the allegations against Andrew.

Britain's Press Association quoted a person close to Andrew as saying his team was "unsurprised by the ruling."

"However, it was not a judgement on the merits of Ms. Giuffre's allegations," the person said. "This is a marathon not a sprint and the duke will continue to defend himself against these claims."

But that is likely to have repercussions for other members of the royal family and the institution of the monarchy at a time when Elizabeth is preparing for a nationwide celebration to mark 70 years on the throne.

If the case goes to trial, Andrew will likely be required to give a sworn statement, and may have to testify in court about his relationships with Epstein, Maxwell and Giuffre. That could expose him to embarrassing questions that would undermine the authority of the royal family, said Mark Stephens, an expert on international law at Howard Kennedy in London.

"Up until now, it's been Prince Andrew alone that has carried the water on this," Stephens said.

"But now the issue is that he can make it much worse for the royal family when he has to get into the detail of what he was alleged to have done with a 17-year-old girl, which the public, whether it was lawful or not, are going to think was morally reprehensible."

The decision Thursday increases the chances Andrew will do whatever he can to settle, Stephens said.

"If he's not successful in his appeal, he's going to have to settle because of realpolitik," Stephens said.

## Manatee feeding experiment starts slowly as cold looms

By CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — An unprecedented, experimental attempt to feed manatees facing starvation in Florida has started slowly but wildlife officials expressed optimism Thursday that it will work as cold weather drives the marine mammals toward warmer waters.

A feeding station established along the state's east coast has yet to entice wild manatees with romaine lettuce even though the animals will eat it in captivity, officials said on a news conference held remotely.

Water pollution from agricultural, urban and other sources has triggered algae blooms that have decimated seagrass beds on which manatees depend, leading to a record 1,101 manatee deaths largely from starvation in 2021. The typical five-year average is about 625 deaths.

That brought about the lettuce feeding program, part of a joint manatee death response group led by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It remains a violation of state and federal law for people to feed manatees on their own.

"We have not documented animals foraging on the lettuce," said Ron Mezich, chief of the joint effort's provisioning branch. "We know manatees will eat lettuce."

During winter months, hundreds of manatees tend to congregate in warmer waters from natural springs and power plant discharges. Because this winter has been unusually mild in Florida so far, the animals have been more dispersed.

"They're moving, but they are not being pressed by cold temperatures yet," said Tom Reinert, south regional director for the FWC. "We expect that to happen."

In addition to the feeding experiment, officials are working with a number of facilities to rehabilitate distressed manatees that are found alive. These include Florida zoos, the SeaWorld theme park and marine aquariums. There were 159 rescued manatees in 2021, some of which require lengthy care and some that have been returned to the wild, officials said.

"Our facilities are at or near capacity," said Andy Garrett, chief of rescue and recovery. "These animals need long-term care. It's been a huge amount of work to date."

There are a minimum of 7,520 manatees in Florida waters currently, according to state statistics. The slow-moving, round-tailed mammals have rebounded enough to list them as a threatened species rather than endangered, although a push is on to restore the endangered tag given the starvation deaths.

Officials are also using \$8 million in state money on several projects aimed at restoring manatee habitat and planting new seagrass beds, but that is a slow process and won't ultimately solve the problem until the polluted waters are improved.

People can report any manatee they see that might be distressed by calling a wildlife hotline at 888-404-FWCC (3922). Other ways to help are donating money through a state-sponsored fund or purchasing a Save the Manatee vehicle license plate.

That's better than feeding manatees personally, which does more harm than good because the animals will associate humans with food, according to officials. People and manatees have struggled to coexist for decades.

"This is a very serious situation," Reinert said. "Use your dollars and not heads of lettuce."

## ABC News draws fire for editing of CDC director's interview

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — ABC News is under fire for its editing of a "Good Morning America" interview with CDC Director Rochelle Walensky that created uncertainty that's being exploited by vaccine critics.

In the interview, Walensky discussed a study that showed how most vaccinated people who died of coronavirus were also sick for other reasons. But the way the interview was edited, it wasn't clear she was talking about vaccinated people — and references spread widely online implying she was talking about all COVID-19 victims.

The interview was seized upon by figures like Donald Trump Jr., Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham to imply the Biden administration has been lying to the public about the importance of vaccines.

The network remained mum on Thursday about the controversy. However, experts say ABC News has a responsibility to talk to viewers about what happened and why, to prevent misinformation from spreading

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further.

In the interview on Friday, Cecilia Vega asked Walensky about the "encouraging headlines" surrounding a study that showed how well vaccines worked to prevent severe illness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director began by summarizing some of the findings.

But ABC edited out the summary, about 20 seconds of her answer. That made it appear that Walensky began by saying: "The overwhelming numbers of deaths, over 75%, occurred in people who had at least four comorbidities, so really these were people who were unwell to begin with."

Besides making what she was saying unclear, the edit made it easy for people to distribute the exchange to make it appear that Walensky was talking about all COVID-19 patients who had died, not just the vaccinated.

ABC's editing was a mistake, said Carol Marin, a veteran broadcast journalist and director of the Center for Journalism Integrity and Excellence at DePaul University.

In a situation like that, the network should make a quick fix and explain clearly to viewers why it was being done, Marin said Wednesday.

"It happens," she said. "There are times when we edit so fast that we're not sufficiently mindful of context."

Without taking control of the situation, "people are just going to write the narrative for you," said Kelly McBride, chairwoman of the Craig Newmark Center for Ethics and Leadership at the Poynter Institute, a journalism think tank.

"I get that you can't spend every single minute in a defensive crouch, but people are asking more and more for transparency," McBride said.

Through a spokeswoman, Walensky had no comment on the edit.

Both Carlson and Ingraham aired Walensky's quote on Fox News Channel without making clear she was talking about vaccinated people, as part of segments suggesting government authorities were lying about the importance of vaccines.

Political commentator and Outkick founder Clay Travis wrote on Twitter: "The CDC director just said over 75% of 'covid deaths' occurred in people with at least four comorbidities. Since Biden can't shut down covid, suddenly all this data is getting shared publicly."

Twitter labeled the message as out of context and blocked it from being shared.

Donald Trump Jr. tweeted Walensky's quote, adding "how many people had 2/3 things that would likely kill them or were in late stage terminal cancer?" His tweet was shared more than 1,600 times before being deleted.

It's possible ABC News believes there was nothing wrong with its edit. When asked, the network would not comment on Thursday.

On Monday, ABC posted a version of Vega's interview on the "GMA" website that restored the portion that was cut. The only indication there was any difference came in a note at the end of the nearly four-minute clip that said the video had been updated.

"A shorter version edited for time was broadcast on Friday, Jan. 7," the note said.

The network has said nothing on the air about the issue.

Many television news producers hate corrections, said Tom Bettag, a longtime ABC "Nightline" producer who now teaches journalism at the University of Maryland. While newspapers generally put a correction inside the paper, when a newscaster has to discuss it, for television that's effectively on the front page.

In this case, it wasn't that ABC News spread misinformation, but that a false picture was allowed to take hold because of their own editing mistake or decision, said Yotam Ophir, a Buffalo University professor who studies misinformation in health and science.

Given the way Walensky's statement was used on social media, ABC News has a responsibility to discuss its editing decision, he said.

Without doing so, "they provide fuel to those adhering to conspiracy theories, who found an opportunity in the unfortunate mistake to spread additional misinformation," Ophir said.

"Remaining silent here doesn't do good to both ABC and science."

## The heat stays on: Earth hits 6th warmest year on record

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Earth simmered to the sixth hottest year on record in 2021, according to several newly released temperature measurements.

And scientists say the exceptionally hot year is part of a long-term warming trend that shows hints of accelerating.

Two U.S. science agencies — NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration — and a private measuring group released their calculations for last year's global temperature on Thursday, and all said it wasn't far behind ultra-hot 2016 and 2020.

Six different calculations found 2021 was between the fifth and seventh hottest year since the late 1800s. NASA said 2021 tied with 2018 for sixth warmest, while NOAA puts last year in sixth place by itself.

Scientists say a La Nina — natural cooling of parts of the central Pacific that changes weather patterns globally and brings chilly deep ocean water to the surface — dampened global temperatures just as its flip side, El Nino, boosted them in 2016.

Still, they said 2021 was the hottest La Nina year on record and that the year did not represent a cooling off of human-caused climate change but provided more of the same heat.

"So it's not quite as headline-dominating as being the warmest on record, but give it another few years and we'll see another one of those" records, said climate scientist Zeke Hausfather of the Berkeley Earth monitoring group that also ranked 2021 the sixth hottest. "It's the long-term trend, and it's an indomitable march upward."

Gavin Schmidt, the climate scientist who heads NASA's temperature team, said "the long-term trend is very, very clear. And it's because of us. And it's not going to go away until we stop increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere."

The last eight years have been the eight hottest on record, NASA and NOAA data agree. Global temperatures, averaged over a 10-year period to take out natural variability, are nearly 2 degrees (1.1 degrees Celsius) warmer than 140 years ago, their data shows.

The other 2021 measurements came from the Japanese Meteorological Agency and satellite measurements by Copernicus Climate Change Service in Europe and the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

There was such a distinctive jump in temperatures about eight to 10 years ago that scientists have started looking at whether the rise in temperatures is speeding up. Both Schmidt and Hausfather said early signs point to that but it's hard to know for sure.

"If you just look at the last the last 10 years, how many of them are way above the trend line from the previous 10 years? Almost all of them," Schmidt said in an interview.

There's a 99% chance that 2022 will be among the 10 warmest years on record and a 10% chance it will be the hottest on record, said NOAA climate analysis chief Russell Vose in a Thursday press conference.

Vose said chances are 50-50 that at least one year in the 2020s will hit 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) warming since pre-industrial times — the level of warming nations agreed to try to avoid in the 2015 Paris climate accord.

While that threshold is important, extreme weather from climate change is hurting people now in their daily lives with about 1.2 degrees Celsius (2.2 degrees Fahrenheit) warming, Vose and Schmidt said.

The global average temperature last year was 58.5 degrees (14.7 Celsius), according to NOAA. In 1988, NASA's then-chief climate scientist James Hansen grabbed headlines when he testified to Congress about global warming in a year that was the hottest on record at the time. Now, the 57.7 degrees (14.3 Celsius) of 1988 ranks as the 28th hottest year on record.

Last year, 1.8 billion people in 25 Asian, African and Middle Eastern nations had their hottest years on record, including China, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Iran, Myanmar and South Korea, according to Berkeley Earth.

The deep ocean, where most heat is stored in the seas, also set a record for warmth in 2021, according to a separate new study.

"Ocean warming, aside from causing coral bleaching and threatening sea life and fish populations, ... is de-

stabilizing Antarctic ice shelves and threatens massive ... sea level rise if we don't act," said study co-author Michael Mann, a Pennsylvania State University climate scientist.

The last time Earth had a cooler than normal year by NOAA or NASA calculations was 1976. That means 69% of the people on the planet — more than 5 billion people under age 45 — have never experienced such a year, based on United Nations data.

North Carolina state climatologist Kathie Dello, 39, who wasn't part of the new reports but said they make sense, said, "I've only lived in a warming world and I wish that the younger generations did not have to say the same. It didn't have to be this way."

## Probe finds 'unintentional mistakes' in Petito police stop

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — An investigation has found that Utah police made "several unintentional mistakes" when they stopped Gabby Petito and her boyfriend before she was killed in what became a high-profile missing person case.

The independent report released Wednesday examines a traffic stop by police in the tourist town of Moab on Aug. 12. Officers investigated a fight between Petito and her boyfriend Brian Laundrie but ultimately allowed the couple to leave after requiring them to spend a night apart.

Police body camera video of a visibly upset Petito, 22, was widely viewed as the investigation unfolded and raised questions about whether a different police response could have prevented her death weeks later. Laundrie, 23, later killed himself after being named the only person of interest in her death.

The report faults officers for not issuing a domestic violence citation to Petito after she told police she had hit her boyfriend first, though it also points to indications she was likely a victim in the broader scope of the relationship. The report also faults investigators for failing to take a statement from a 911 caller who had reported seeing the couple outside their van and a man slapping a girl.

"Would Gabby be alive today if this case was handled differently? That is an impossible question to answer despite it being the answer many people want to know. Nobody knows and nobody will ever know the answer to that question," wrote Capt. Brandon Ratcliffe, from the police department in Price, Utah, who prepared the report.

The ultimately tragic search for Petito drew worldwide attention, sparking social media sleuthing, discussions about dating violence and shining a light on the disproportionate coverage of missing white women in the U.S. compared to other missing persons.

Long before their names appeared in headlines, the couple was stopped by police officers during a cross-country trip. Their van was seen speeding and hit a curb near the entrance to Arches National Park. Laundrie told police the couple got into a minor scuffle that began when he climbed into the van with dirty feet.

Petito told a similar story, and faulted her own desire to keep the converted camper van clean. She told police she had hit him first, and since Laundrie was injured but declined to press charges officers separated the couple and then allowed them to leave.

Petito was reported missing a month after that traffic stop, and her strangled body was discovered Sept. 19 on the edge of Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. Laundrie was the only person ever identified by law enforcement officials as a person of interest in the case. He was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in a swamp after returning alone to his parents' home in Florida. Both were originally from Long Island, New York.

Utah law says police should cite an aggressor in domestic violence assaults. In this case, police didn't cite anyone, finding the incident was more of a mental or emotional health break.

One officer who argued against citing Petito said Laundrie might bail her out of jail and then have "more control over her."

That officer told investigators that if he had known she was in life-threatening danger he would taken his own time to follow them. "I would have done anything to stop it if I would have known that was coming ... I am devastated about it."

The city of Moab said they would follow the report's recommendations, though they also said the officers

"showed kindness, respect and empathy in their handling of this incident."

The report found that the officers did what they thought was right at the time, and responsibility for Petito's death lays with her killer alone.

Nevertheless the report recommends improved training, especially in domestic violence investigation, and that the officers involved be put on probation or have existing probation extended.

Ratcliffe wrote that while it appears Petito was the aggressor in the specific fight Moab police investigated, that wasn't necessarily the tenor of their relationship.

"There have been many times in my career where someone who we know from past experience to be a long-term victim of domestic violence, gets arrested for committing an act of domestic violence against their long-term abuser," Ratcliffe wrote. "It's very likely Gabby was a long-term victim of domestic violence, whether that be physically, mentally, and/or emotionally."

## **COVID-19 pill rollout stymied by shortages as omicron rages**

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two brand-new COVID-19 pills that were supposed to be an important weapon against the pandemic in the U.S. are in short supply and have played little role in the fight against the omicron wave of infections.

The problem, in part, is that production is still being ramped up and the medicines can take anywhere from five to eight months to manufacture.

While the supply is expected to improve dramatically in the coming months, doctors are clamoring for the pills now, not just because omicron is causing an explosion of cases but because two antibody drugs that were once the go-to treatments don't work as well against the variant.

"This should be a really joyous time because we now have highly effective antiviral pills," said Erin McCreary, a pharmacist and administrator at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. "Instead, this feels like the hardest and most chaotic stretch of the pandemic."

The pills — and other COVID-19 drugs, for that matter — are being carefully rationed, reserved for the highest-risk patients.

"January is going to be a terrible month with a million cases a day," said University of North Carolina virologist Dr. Myron Cohen. "Most people will do perfectly well, but we have to select out the people who won't and give them the drugs we have available."

The Food and Drug Administration authorized the two pills from Pfizer and Merck late last month based on studies showing they cut the risk of severe disease and death when given shortly after symptoms appear. They are the first COVID-19 treatments patients can take at home, and thus could reduce the burden on hospitals.

The U.S. didn't make the kind of mass purchases in advance that it did with vaccines.

Pfizer's pill, Paxlovid, is considered far superior to Merck's, but because of the six to eight months it takes to manufacture, the company says it can supply only about 250,000 courses of the treatment by the end of this month.

The U.S. has ordered enough Paxlovid to treat 20 million people, but the first 10 million orders won't be delivered until June.

White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said this week that the government collaborated with Pfizer to help speed up development of the pill by several months, and that officials continue to work with the company to look for ways to boost production.

Pfizer said it is adding capacity: "We expect to use our strong manufacturing capabilities and our extensive supplier network to continue to improve output rapidly."

Merck's pill, molnupiravir, was produced in greater advance quantities. It takes six months to manufacture, though the company says that can be compressed to five months if necessary.

But final testing showed the drug was far less effective than Pfizer's pill and carried significant risks, including the potential for birth defects when taken by pregnant women. As a result, it is considered the last-choice

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option under federal guidelines.

Merck said it has delivered 900,000 courses of the drug and is on track to ship all 3 million ordered by the U.S. by the end of the month.

Since last month, the government has sent states enough Pfizer pills to treat 164,000 people, allocating them by population. That approach is coming under fire from some states with heavier caseloads.

The amount allocated to New York — enough to treat about 20,000 people — is insufficient, said Health Commissioner Dr. Mary Bassett.

“We need more of these drugs in order to make them alter the course of the pandemic and reduce hospitalization,” she said.

State guidelines generally recommend doctors give priority for the drugs to those at the highest risk, including cancer patients, transplant recipients and people who have lung disease or are pregnant. New York’s guidelines also recommend prioritizing certain racial and ethnic minorities, given their higher rates of severe illness and death.

States are distributing the pills differently.

In Michigan, all initial shipments went to 10 pharmacies in the hardest-hit areas. Pennsylvania, Maryland, Texas and many other states have distributed the pills more widely, so that at least one pharmacy in each county carries the drug.

Despite the strict prescribing guidelines, some patients have been able to get the pills through luck and persistence.

Craige Campbell, a website manager from Desert Hot Springs, California, began leaving messages with his doctor immediately after testing positive for COVID-19 and developing a 101-degree fever. Despite having no underlying health conditions, he was soon able to get a prescription.

The only pharmacy dispensing the drug was more than an hour’s drive away, so Campbell had a friend pick it up for him.

“I felt a bit privileged in a way,” he said. “The odds that it would land in my plate in the right amount of time were pretty extraordinary.”

At the same time, there is a shortage of antibody medications, the infused or injected drugs that can head off death and hospitalization. Only one of them, from GlaxoSmithKline, appears effective against omicron, and it, too, is being rationed.

Federal officials are limiting shipments of it to about 50,000 doses per week. This week, the government announced it is buying 600,000 more doses, on top of 400,000 purchased in November.

At the UPMC hospital system in Pennsylvania, the staff can treat fewer than 1,000 patients per week with antibodies, down from as many as 4,000 earlier in the pandemic.

Doctors and nurses around the U.S. have developed complex means of deciding who should get the scarce medications, based on patients’ symptoms, their underlying medical risks, where they live and whether they are healthy enough to travel for an infusion.

“What do we have on hand?” is the first question, said University of Maryland Medical Center’s Dr. Greg Schrank. “Among those therapies, what’s the most effective and how can we direct it to the people that we know are of greatest risk?”

The increasingly complicated treatment picture comes as exhausted, frustrated hospital workers try to manage rising admissions.

As of Sunday, nearly 128,000 Americans were in the hospital with COVID-19, surpassing the all-time high of around 125,000 last January. While fewer COVID-19 patients now require intensive care, the surge is pushing hospitals to the breaking point.

Considering that threat, Pfizer’s pill arrived just in time, Schrank said.

“It’s not going to turn the tide on the total number of cases, but it could really help dampen the impact on hospitals,” he said.

## **Tarnished Gold: Illegal Amazon gold seeps into supply chains**

By DAVID BILLER and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

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SAO PAULO (AP) — The medals were billed as the most sustainable ever produced.

To match the festive spirit of South America's first Olympics, officials from Brazil, the host country for the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro, boasted that the medals hung around the necks of athletes on the winners' podium were also a victory for the environment: The gold was produced free of mercury and the silver recycled from thrown away X-ray plates and mirrors.

Five years on, the refiner that provided the gold for the medals, Marsam, is processing gold ultimately purchased by hundreds of well-known publicly traded U.S. companies — among them Microsoft, Tesla and Amazon — that are legally required to responsibly source metals in an industry long plagued by environmental and labor concerns.

But a comprehensive review of public records by The Associated Press found that the Sao Paulo-based company processes gold for, and shared ownership links to, an intermediary accused by Brazilian prosecutors of buying gold mined illegally on Indigenous lands and other areas deep in the Amazon rainforest.

The AP previously reported in this series that the scale of prospecting for gold on Indigenous lands has exploded in recent years and involves carving illegal landing strips in the forest for unauthorized airplanes to ferry in heavy equipment, fuel and backhoes to tear at the earth in search of the precious metal. Weak government oversight enabled by President Jair Bolsonaro, the son of a prospector himself, has only exacerbated the problem of illegal gold mining in protected areas. Critics also fault an international certification program used by manufacturers to show they aren't using minerals that come from conflict zones, saying it is an exercise in greenwashing.

"There is no real traceability as long as the industry relies on self-regulation," said Mark Pieth, a professor of criminal law at the University of Basel in Switzerland and author of the 2018 book "Gold Laundering."

"People know where the gold comes from, but they don't bother to go very far back into the supply chain because they know they will come into contact with all kinds of criminal activity."

Much like brown and black tributaries that feed the Amazon River, gold illegally mined in the rainforest mixes into the supply chain and melds with clean gold to become almost indistinguishable.

Nuggets are spirited out of the jungle in prospectors' dusty pockets to the nearest city where they are sold to financial brokers. All that's required to transform the raw ore into a tradable asset regulated by the central bank is a handwritten document attesting to the specific point in the rainforest where the gold was extracted. The fewer questions asked, the better.

At many of those brokers' Amazon outposts — the financial system's front door — the gold becomes the property of Dirceu Frederico Sobrinho, known universally by just his first name.

For four decades, Dirceu has embodied the up-by-your-bootstraps myth of the Brazilian garimpeiro, or prospector. The son of a vegetable grocer who sold his produce near an infamous open-pit mine so packed with prospectors — among them Bolsonaro's father — they looked like swarming ants, he caught the gold bug in the mid-1980s and began dispatching planeloads of raw ore from a remote Amazon town. He secured his first concession in 1990, one year after the nation rolled out a permitting regime to regulate prospecting.

Today, from a high rise on Sao Paulo's busiest avenue, he is a major player in Brazil's gold rush, with 173 prospecting areas either registered to his name or with pending requests, according to Brazil's mining regulator's registry. In the same building is the headquarters of the nation's gold association, Anoro, which he leads. Dirceu, until last year, was also a partner in Marsam.

But even with gold jewelry dangling from his fingers and wrist, Dirceu still proudly boasts his everyman garimpeiro roots.

"You don't motivate someone to go into the forest if they're not chasing after a dream," he said in a rare interview from his corner office studded with a giant jade eagle. "Whoever deals in gold has that: They dream, they believe, they like it."

"We have a saying among the garimpeiros: 'I'm a pawn, but I'm a pawn for gold,'" he adds.

At the center of Dirceu's empire is F.D'Gold, Brazil's largest buyer of gold from prospecting sites, with purchases last year totaling more than 2 billion reais (\$361 million) from 252 wildcat sites, according to data from the mining regulator. Only two international firms that run industrial-sized gold mines paid more in royalties



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in 2021, a sign of how once artisanal prospecting has become big business in Brazil — at least for some.

In August, federal prosecutors filed a civil suit against F.D'Gold and two other brokers seeking the immediate suspension of all activities and payment of 10 billion reais (\$1.8 billion) in social and environmental damages.

The complaint alleges the companies failed to take actions that would have prevented the illegal extraction of a combined 4.3 metric tons from protected areas and Indigenous territories, where mining is not allowed. Dirceu said his company complies with all laws and has implemented extra controls, but he acknowledged that determining the exact origin of the gold it obtains is "impossible" at present. He has proposed an industry-wide digital registry to improve transparency.

The ongoing suit is the result of a study published in July by the Federal University of Minas Gerais which found that as much as 28% of Brazil's gold produced in 2019 and 2020 was potentially mined illegally. To reach that conclusion, researchers combed through 17,400 government-registered transactions by F.D'Gold and other buyers to pinpoint the location where the gold was purportedly mined. In many cases, the given location wasn't an authorized site or, when cross-checked with satellite images, showed none of the hallmarks of mining activity — deforestation, stagnant ponds of waste — meaning the gold originated elsewhere.

Dirceu's name and those of F.D'Gold and his mining company Ouro Roxo have popped up repeatedly over the years in numerous criminal investigations. He has been charged but never convicted.

A decade ago, federal prosecutors in Amazon's Amapa state accused his company of knowingly purchasing illegal gold from a national park that was later transformed into gold bars. The charges were dismissed in 2017 after a federal judge in Brasilia ruled that F.D'Gold made the purchases legally, as evidenced by the invoices. Separate money laundering charges against Dirceu were also dismissed, due to lack of evidence. Dirceu has denied wrongdoing.

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Whatever its origin, all the raw ore purchased by F.D'Gold ends up at Marsam.

F.D'Gold accounts for more than one-third of the gold Marsam processes, according to André Nunes, an external consultant for Marsam.

After almost two years as a partner in the Sao Paulo-based refiner, Dirceu stepped down last year and his daughter, Sarah Almeida Westphal, assumed management responsibilities. It was part of an effort to put different family members in charge of their own businesses, which function as separate legal entities, said Nunes, who previously worked for F.D'Gold.

"As much as it's the same family, it's important that each monkey has its own branch," he said.

But the federal tax authority's corporate registry shows Dirceu and Westphal remain partners in a machine rental and air cargo venture based in the Amazonian city of Itaituba, the national epicenter of prospecting. And Westphal could be seen working on a computer at F.D'Gold's office on the day the AP interviewed Dirceu.

From Marsam, the gold travels far and wide. More than 300 publicly traded companies list Marsam as a refiner in responsible mining disclosures they are required to file with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. The refiner has been virtually the only supplier to Brazil's mint over the past decade, according to data provided to the AP through a freedom of information request.

"Why do they want our bars? Because they're accepted all over the world," said Nunes, who is also a member of Marsam's six-person compliance committee.

Enabling such robust sales around the world is a seal of approval from the Responsible Minerals Initiative, or RMI.

The certification program run by a Virginia-based coalition of manufacturers emerged with the passage a decade ago of legislation in the U.S. requiring companies to disclose their use of conflict minerals fueling civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Later, its standards were supplemented by tougher guidelines developed by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development or OECD

Marsam is one of just two refiners in Brazil certified as compliant with RMI's standards for responsible sourcing of gold, having successfully completed two independent audits. The last one was performed in 2018 by UL Responsible Sourcing, an Illinois-based consultancy.

But its ties to Dirceu's family and its strategic positioning at the pinch point between the Amazon rainforest and global commerce raises questions about its previously unexamined role in the processing and sale of gold

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allegedly sourced from off-limit areas.

Marsam hasn't been accused by prosecutors of any wrongdoing and insists that it only refines gold, not sell it, on behalf of third-party exporters and domestic vendors.

The company in 2016 introduced a supply chain policy, which it has updated over the years, requiring it to seek out information from suppliers whenever they are publicly linked to illicit activities. They are also expected to analyze a mandatory declaration of origin form submitted by each client. No such risks were identified in the most recent RMI report and Marsam was moved to a lower risk category requiring an audit once every three years.

Critics say one problem is that the OECD's guidelines that RMI measures companies against pay scant attention to environmental crimes or the rights of Indigenous communities. Instead, they are geared toward risks stemming from civil wars and criminal networks. In Latin America, only Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela — where drug cartels or guerrilla insurgencies are active — are classified as conflict-affected and high-risk areas deserving greater scrutiny for sourcing practices.

But the influx of illegal miners into Indigenous territories has been on the rise in recent years in Brazil — sometimes ending in bloodshed.

In May, hundreds of prospectors raided a Munduruku village, setting houses on fire, including one that belonged to a prominent anti-mining activist. The attack followed clashes farther north in Roraima state, where miners in motorboats and carrying automatic weapons repeatedly threatened a riverside Yanomami settlement. In one incident, two children, ages 1 and 5, drowned when a shooting sent people scattering into the woods.

In their suits against F.D'Gold and the two other brokers, prosecutors blame expanding mining activity for the illegal clearing in 2019 and 2020 of some 5,000 hectares of once pristine rainforest located on Indigenous territories as well as exacerbating "internal rifts that may be irreconcilable."

Experts say these kinds of activities barely register in corporate boardrooms where sourcing decisions are made and given the seal of approval by international certification programs.

"Certification connotes a degree of certitude that isn't at all possible in the gold industry, especially in Brazil," said David Soud, an analyst at I.R. Consilium, which recently prepared a report for the OECD on illegal gold flows from neighboring Venezuela. "The result is a lot of blind spots that can easily be exploited by bad actors."

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Some of those blind spots are created by Brazil's own weak oversight.

Under Brazilian law, securities brokers like F.D'Gold can't be held responsible if the prospector whose ore they buy lies about its provenance. Nor is there any effective way to track the information provided at the point of sale.

It's a system that inhibits tracking and accountability at best, and at worst enables willful ignorance as a means to launder illegal gold, according to wildcat mining experts including Larissa Rodrigues of the environmental think tank Choices Institute. For starters, experts say there need to be electronic invoices feeding a database that allows information to be verified.

"The supply chain is absorbing gold that doesn't come from that chain. We know this happens," said Rodrigues. "It's a fact that fraud exists, but you can't prosecute because you can't prove it."

Dirceu didn't deny the possibility that F.D'Gold has unwittingly bought dirty gold. But he insists F.D'Gold, as an entity regulated by Brazil's powerful central bank, follows the law and goes beyond what is required — such as hiring in 2020 two companies to monitor through satellite imagery the sources of its gold.

"The moment we had knowledge this could be happening, we hired them," he said.

As president of the nation's gold association, he claims to have been pushing since at least 2017 a plan to create a digital profile of every participant in the supply chain, complete with the garimpeiro's photo, fingerprints and ID number.

"Digitalization and automation is the start of traceability," he said. "The more legality, the more security there will be for our activities."

Yet for all the apparent industry goodwill, and the support of Brazil's tax authority, the proposal remains just that — an idea that hasn't even been taken up by Congress. In the past two decades, the central bank

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hasn't revoked authorization for any company that purchases gold.

For its part, Marsam says it uses its "best efforts" to identify the origin of the metals it refines. That includes requiring clients to sign affidavits attesting to the metal's legality, demanding original invoices and conducting client visits to verify they have systems in place to prevent fraud.

But it doesn't visit the mines themselves — something that RMI requires of refiners operating only in high-risk jurisdictions.

"We have to be diligent, but not do work that isn't ours," Nunes said. Asked when was the last time Marsam suspended a client it suspects of trading in dirty gold he shook his head, struggling to recall.

"I don't remember it ever happening," Nunes said before finally harkening back to one instance more than a decade ago.

RMI wouldn't discuss prosecutors' allegations against F.D'Gold, despite its close affiliation with Marsam, citing confidentiality agreements to encourage refiners to participate in its grievance process.

In a statement, it said that it takes all allegations "very seriously" and works with companies to address concerns. As part of that process, refiners are expected to trace activities all the way back to the mine whenever red flags are detected. If they don't then address the concerns, they will be removed from the conformant list.

A 2018 report by the OECD found that while RMI's standards are aligned with its guidelines there are significant gaps in the way RMI and other industry initiatives carry out audits, relying more on a refiner's policies and procedures than its due diligence efforts. RMI-approved auditors also demonstrated a lack of basic technical skills and familiarity with the OECD guidelines, the study found.

"There was also an observed absence of curiosity, professional skepticism and critical analysis," according to the report. RMI said it has since strengthened implementation efforts and is awaiting the outcome of a new assessment being conducted for the European Union.

Additional analysis in 2017 by Kumi, a London-based consulting firm that advises the OECD, found that only 5% of 314 end-user companies then registered with RMI, most of them U.S. based, had policies on sourcing conflict materials that were in line with the OECD guidelines.

"End-user companies set the tone for what happens in their supply chains," said Andrew Britton, managing director of Kumi, which is conducting a new assessment of certifiers now for the European Commission. "It's really important that companies' due diligence on their supply chains really probes into potential risks and is not simply a box-ticking exercise."

While land grabbing by ranchers, loggers and prospectors is hardly new in the Amazon, never before has Brazil had a president as outspokenly favorable to such interests.

Bolsonaro campaigned for the nation's top job with promises of unearthing the Amazon's vast mineral wealth, and his support for prospectors has encouraged a modern-day gold rush.

Bolsonaro's father prospected for gold at Serra Pelada, where Dirceu first saw gold mining, and the president sometimes draws on his upbringing to rally support from prospectors. While campaigning, he aired videos in the Amazon region in which he boasted of sometimes pulling over at jungle stream and pulling a pan from a car to try his luck.

"Interest in the Amazon isn't about the Indians or the damn trees; it's the ore," he told a group of prospectors at the presidential palace in 2019, vowing to deploy the armed forces to allow their operations to continue unfettered.

Then in May 2021, he attacked environmentalists for trying to criminalize prospecting.

"It's really cool how people in suits and ties guess about everything that happens in the countryside," he said sarcastically.

Beyond the rhetoric, Bolsonaro's administration recently introduced legislation that would open up Indigenous territories to mining — something federal prosecutors have called unconstitutional and activists warn would wreak vast social and environmental damages.

Dirceu said he opposes allowing mining of Indigenous lands unless local people support the activity and are

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given first priority to pursue it themselves. But even as he fashions himself a reformer from the inside, he's also benefitted from the current free-for-all. For one, he doesn't even consider prospectors working without a permit to be illegal — just irregular.

Given persistent efforts to deregulate gold extraction, calls by Dirceu and the gold association to increase accountability over the gold supply chain "ring hollow," said Robert Muggah, who oversees an initiative on environmental crime in the Amazon at think tank Igarape Institute.

Soon, Dirceu may stand to profit even more. Recently, F.D'Gold received approval to begin exporting directly. Dirceu said the company is currently seeking clients abroad and hopes to begin shipments soon.

If he succeeds, it means that, for the first time, someone will have a hand in the entirety of Brazil's gold supply chain: from the Amazon where the gold is mined, to the outposts where it is first sold, to the planes that bring the ore to his daughter's refinery in Sao Paulo and, finally, into the hands of foreign buyers.

"It's really important to understand that the nature of gold extraction in countries like Brazil is linked, ineluctably, to the global markets," said Muggah.

## Djokovic in Australian Open draw as visa saga continues

By JOHN PYE and ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic remained in limbo even after he was included in the draw for the Australian Open on Thursday, with the tennis star still awaiting a government decision on whether to deport him for not being vaccinated for COVID-19.

Despite the cloud hanging over Djokovic's ability to compete, Australian Open organizers included the top seed in the draw. He is slated to play fellow Serb Miomir Kecmanovic, who is ranked world No. 78., in the opening round next week.

No. 1-ranked Djokovic had his visa canceled on arrival in Melbourne last week when his vaccination exemption was rejected, but he won a legal battle on procedural grounds that allowed him to stay in the country.

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke has been considering the question since a judge reinstated Djokovic's visa on Monday.

Expectations of a pending decision were raised when Prime Minister Scott Morrison called an afternoon news conference after a national Cabinet meeting. Speculation heightened when the tournament draw was postponed by 75 minutes to a time after Morrison's news conference.

The wait continued after both events concluded, with Morrison referring questions on Djokovic to his immigration minister.

"These are personal ministerial powers able to be exercised by Minister Hawke and I don't propose to make any further comment at this time," Morrison said.

Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley also declined comment after the draw ceremony for the tournament that starts Monday.

The 34-year-old Djokovic has been trying to focus his attention on the playing court in the four days since he was released from immigration detention. He held a practice session at Rod Laver Arena, his fourth this week, in mid-afternoon.

He was on the practice court Wednesday when a statement posted on his social media accounts acknowledged that his Australian travel declaration form contained incorrect information.

In the statement, Djokovic blamed "human error" by his support team for failing to declare that he had traveled in the two-week period before entering Australia.

Giving false information on the form could be grounds for deportation. That could result in sanctions ranging up to a three-year ban from entering Australia, a daunting prospect for a player who has won almost half of his 20 Grand Slam singles titles here.

Djokovic acknowledged the lapses when he sought to clarify what he called "continuing misinformation" about his movements after he became infected last month. It also raised questions about his public appearances in Serbia last month, particularly a media interview he attended despite knowing he was positive.

It was another twist in a saga over whether the athlete should be allowed stay in Australia despite not

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being vaccinated.

The initial news that Djokovic was granted an exemption to strict vaccination rules to enter the country provoked an outcry and the ensuing dispute has since overshadowed the lead-up to the Australian Open.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce said most Australians disapproved of the nine-time and defending Australian Open champion coming to Melbourne to compete in breach of the nation's tough pandemic quarantine rules.

"Most of us thought because Mr. Djokovic hadn't been vaxxed twice that he would be asked to leave," Joyce said. "Well, that was our view, but it wasn't the court's view."

"The vast majority of Australians ... didn't like the idea that another individual, whether they're a tennis player or ... the king of Spain or the Queen of England, can come up here and have a different set of rules to what everybody else has to deal with," Joyce added.

No. 4-seeded player Stefanos Tsitsipas told India's WION TV channel that Djokovic seemed to be "playing by his own rules."

"No one would have really thought, you know, 'I can just come to Australia unvaccinated and not having to follow the protocols that they gave me,'" Tsitsipas said. "It takes a lot of daring to do, I think, and putting a Grand Slam kind of at risk."

The debate over Djokovic's presence in Australia rages against a backdrop of surging COVID-19 infections across the nation.

Victoria state, which hosts the Australian Open, on Thursday eased seven-day isolation rules for close contacts of those infected in sectors including education and transport to curb the number of employees staying away from work.

The state recorded 37,169 new cases in the latest 24-hour period on Thursday, as well as 25 deaths and 953 hospitalizations. With cases surging, the Victoria state government moved to limit ticket sales to the tennis tournament in a bid to reduce the risk of transmission.

Djokovic's visa status has been debated since he arrived more than a week ago, after posting on social media that he had received exemption permission.

At issue is whether he has a valid exemption to strict rules requiring vaccination to enter Australia since he recently recovered from COVID-19.

His exemption to compete was approved by the Victoria state government and Tennis Australia, the tournament organizer. That apparently allowed him to receive a visa to travel.

But the Australian Border Force rejected the exemption and canceled his visa upon arrival before a federal judge overturned that decision. Lawyers for the government have said an infection was only grounds for an exemption in cases in which the coronavirus caused severe illness — though it's not clear why he was issued a visa if that's the case.

If Djokovic's visa is canceled, his lawyers could go back to court to apply for an injunction that would prevent him from being forced to leave the country.

## French teachers go on strike over handling of pandemic

By SYLVIE CORBET The Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French teachers voiced anger at the way the French government is handling the pandemic in schools, denounced confusing rules and called for more protection during a nationwide strike on Thursday.

Exhausted by the pressures of surging COVID-19 cases, many teachers answered the call by 11 unions to protest virus-linked class disruptions and ever-changing isolation rules.

France is at the epicenter of Europe's current fight against COVID-19, with new infections topping 360,000 a day this week, driven by the highly contagious omicron variant.

Health Minister Olivier Veran announced on Twitter Thursday that he tested positive for the virus and was self-isolating in order to continue working.

The teachers' strike puts the government of President Emmanuel Macron under additional pressure a week after opposition lawmakers delayed implementation of a key measure that mandates proof of vaccination

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for entry into restaurants, cultural and sport facilities.

Teachers want clarifications on rules and more protections, such as extra masks and tests to help relieve the strain.

Among those at a demonstration in Paris' city center was English teacher and SE-UNA union member Lilia Larbi who said that people are "fed up" with the situation at school.

"The strike is not against the virus, it's against bad communication, changing rules... and the bad handling of the sanitary crisis," she said, adding that the government "is denying reality."

Larbi said she taught to only three children in her class on Wednesday because colleagues either tested positive for COVID-19 or were waiting for test results. "We feel like we're babysitting" rather than teaching, she said.

Paris teacher Frédéric Le Bihan expressed "exasperation" at the confusing "orders and counterorders." Within a span of a week, authorities changed the rules on testing schoolchildren twice.

Le Bihan said teachers are under additional pressure from parents who expected them to implement government directives "which is not possible."

Fatna Seghrouchni, a teacher in the Paris region and member of the Federation Sud Education union, said teachers are being asked "to do things without having the means to do them."

Like many other protesters, Seghrouchni's anger was directed at Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer who she said has shown teachers "contempt" by announcing last minute, virus-related rules in a newspaper interview to a newspaper instead of sending instructions directly to educators.

Blanquer has acknowledged that January has been "tough" for schools as 50,000 new COVID-19 cases have been detected among students in "recent days" and more than 10,000 classes cancelled. The figures are expected to worsen in the coming weeks.

Unions estimated that 62% to 75% of teachers were supporting the protest movement, depending on which school they're posted. The government said 27% of teachers were on strike.

The SNUIPP teacher's union is calling for a return to a previous rule that shuts classes down for a week if a child tests positive.

Teachers are also demanding higher quality masks, more testing at schools and devices in classes warning when ventilation is required.

The strike comes on the same day French senators voted a bill requiring adults to provide proof of vaccination to enter restaurants and bars, cinemas, theaters, museums, sports arenas and inter-regional trains. Unvaccinated kids between 12 and 17 can show a negative test.

The measure will come into force later than initially expected, after parliament approves the legislation by next week.

## Dutch king won't use carriage criticized for colonial image

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The Dutch king ruled out Thursday using, for now at least, the royal family's "Golden Carriage," one side of which bears a painting that critics say glorifies the Netherlands' colonial past, including its role in the global slave trade.

The announcement was an acknowledgement of the heated debate about the carriage as the Netherlands reckons with the grim sides of its history as a 17th-century colonial superpower, including Dutch merchants making vast fortunes from slaves.

"The Golden Carriage will only be able to drive again when the Netherlands is ready and that is not the case now," King Willem-Alexander said in a video message.

One side of the vehicle is decorated with a painting called "Tribute from the Colonies" that shows Black and Asian people, one of them kneeling, offering goods to a seated young white woman who symbolizes the Netherlands.

The carriage is currently on display in an Amsterdam museum following a lengthy restoration. In the past it has been used to carry Dutch monarchs through the streets of The Hague to the state opening of Parlia-

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ment each September.

"There is no point in condemning and disqualifying what has happened through the lens of our time," the king said. "Simply banning historical objects and symbols is certainly not a solution either. Instead, a concerted effort is needed that goes deeper and takes longer. An effort that unites us instead of divides us."

Anti-racism activist and co-founder of The Black Archives in Amsterdam, Mitchell Esajas, called the king's statement "a good sign," but also the "bare minimum" the monarch could have said.

"He says the past should not be looked at from the perspective and values of the present ... and I think that's a fallacy because also in the historical context slavery can be seen as a crime against humanity and a violent system," he said. "I think that argument is often used as an excuse to kind of polish away the violent history of it."

The Netherlands, along with many other nations, has been revisiting its colonial history in a process spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement that swept the world after the death of Black man George Floyd in the United States.

Last year, the country's national museum, the Rijksmuseum, staged a major exhibition that took an unflinching look at the country's role in the slave trade, and Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema apologized for the extensive involvement of the Dutch capital's former governors in the trade.

Halsema said she wanted to "engrave the great injustice of colonial slavery into our city's identity."

## U.S. jobless claims rise by 23,000 to 230,000

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose last week to the highest level since mid-November, but still low by historic standards.

U.S. jobless claims climbed by 23,000 last week to 230,000, the Department of Labor said Thursday. The four-week moving average, which smooths out week-to-week blips, rose nearly 6,300 to almost 211,000.

The weekly applications, a proxy for layoffs, have risen in four of the last five weeks, a period that runs in tandem with the spread of the omicron variant. Yet the jobs market has bounced back strongly from last year's coronavirus recession. Jobless claims had fallen mostly steadily for about a year and they dipped below the pre-pandemic average of around 220,000 a week.

"The rise in claims likely reflects an increase in layoffs due to the surge in COVID cases," said economists Nancy Vanden Houten and Kathy Bostjancic of Oxford Economics. "Claims may remain elevated in the near term, but we expect initial claims will gravitate back to the 200k level once the omicron wave passes. Encouragingly, there are indications that cases from the omicron variant are peaking."

Altogether, 1.6 million people were collecting jobless aid the week that ended Jan. 1.

Companies are holding onto workers at a time when it's difficult to find replacements. Employers posted 10.6 million job openings in November, the fifth-highest monthly total in records going back to 2000. A record 4.5 million workers quit their jobs in November — a sign that they are confident enough to look something better.

The job market has bounced back from last year's brief but intense coronavirus recession. When COVID-19 hit, governments ordered lockdowns, consumers hunkered down at home and many businesses closed or cut back hours. Employers slashed millions of jobs in March and April 2020, and the unemployment rate rocketed to 14.7%.

But massive government spending — and eventually the rollout of vaccines — brought the economy back. Last year, employers added a record 6.4 million jobs — but that still was not enough to make up for the unprecedented 9.4 million jobs lost in 2020. And hiring slowed in November and December last year as employers struggled to fill job openings.

Still, the unemployment rate fell last month to a pandemic low 3.9%.

## China faces omicron test weeks ahead of Beijing Olympics

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

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TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Most access to a major city adjacent to Beijing was suspended Thursday as China tried to contain an outbreak of the highly contagious omicron variant, which poses a test to its “zero-tolerance” COVID-19 policy and its ability to successfully host the Winter Olympics.

Tianjin, a port and manufacturing center with 14 million people, is one of a half-dozen cities where the government is imposing lockdowns and other restrictions as part of a policy that aims to track down every virus case. But the outbreak in a city so close to the Olympic host is particularly worrying.

Throughout the pandemic, authorities have been especially protective of Beijing since it is the seat of government and home to senior politicians. With the Games opening there in just over three weeks and China’s national pride on the line, the stakes are even higher now.

On Thursday, Tianjin suspended train, taxi, bus and ride-hailing services to other cities. Flights and high-speed train services were canceled earlier and highways closed. People leaving the city were required to present negative virus tests and receive special permission.

Elsewhere, more than 20 million people under lockdown in China, including in the western city of Xi’an. Some are barred from leaving their homes.

That’s all part of the sweeping restrictions on movement China has repeatedly imposed since early 2020. It started with the then-unprecedented step of sealing off 11 million people in the central city Wuhan, where the virus was first detected, and other parts of surrounding Hubei province.

Along with mass testing and digital surveillance of people’s movements, those measures have kept the virus from spreading into a full-fledged national outbreak so far. The country’s vaccination rate now also tops 85%.

Other countries that tried a similar zero-tolerance approach have abandoned it, deciding instead to try to live with the virus, while mitigating its worst effects.

China persists, but may find the strategy increasingly difficult since the omicron variant is more contagious than previous versions of the virus and is better at evading vaccines. That challenge comes just as China is welcoming thousands of people from abroad for the Olympics, which start Feb. 4.

“I think it truly is a critical juncture for China. Can it stave off omicron?” said Dali Yang, a Chinese politics expert at the University of Chicago.

China reported 124 domestically transmitted cases on Thursday, including 76 in Henan province and 41 in Tianjin.

Authorities have reported a total of 104,379 cases since the pandemic began and 4,636 deaths, a figure that hasn’t changed in months.

During the Tokyo Olympics in July, Japan saw a widespread outbreak driven by the delta variant, but the measures at the Olympics themselves were mostly effective in stopping transmission, said Kenji Shibuya, research director at the Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research and a public health expert.

The rules in Beijing will be even stricter than Tokyo’s.

The Games are being conducted under a “closed loop” system that is meant to prevent all contact between the outside world and athletes, journalists, staff and officials at the Olympics.

Those inside the Games bubble will travel between hotels and competition venues in special vehicles. Anyone who leaves the sealed environment will be required to quarantine for three weeks.

Police even went so far as to warn anyone involved in a collision with an Olympics vehicle to avoid contact with people on board and wait for a special team to handle the situation.

Such measures should be able to prevent the spread of the virus within the bubble, said Kei Saito, a virologist at the University of Tokyo.

But outside, it could be a different story.

“Omicron is three to four times more transmissible than delta,” said Saito. “I think it’s almost impossible to control the spread of omicron.”

Furthermore, the lack of widespread outbreaks means the Chinese population is protected only by vaccines and not by antibodies produced by previous infections, said Dr. Vineeta Bal, an Indian immunologist.

The domestically made vaccines China is using are also generally considered less effective than those widely used in other countries, such as the Pfizer or Moderna shots.



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Despite these challenges, China has shown no signs of giving up on its efforts to stop the spread of the virus in its tracks.

Tianjin conducted mass testing for a second time Wednesday. The government asked people to wait at home until they receive a negative result, and communities in Beijing asked their residents to report if they've visited the nearby port city in recent weeks.

Trucks carrying food and medical will be allowed into Tianjin, but drivers were told to wear masks and take other steps to avoid transmitting the virus, according to a city government notice.

Automaker Volkswagen AG said it shut down two factories in the city on Monday and employees have been tested twice. "We hope to resume production very soon," it said in a statement.

Despite that, the disruptions for people in Tianjin remain lighter than in other cities that are completely locked down.

"Everything is fine, the supermarkets and restaurants, you can go to all normally," said Yu Xuan, who works at a university in Tianjin.

Wang Dacheng, another resident, said his father who has trouble walking was able to get tested in their apartment.

"Everyone's been very calm and collected," Wang said.

Restrictions in Xi'an, a city of 14 million people, and the central province of Henan have prompted complaints people sequestered in their apartments were running out of food.

Organizers are determined the Games will go on despite the pandemic and controversies including a U.S.-led diplomatic boycott over accusations of human rights abuses against mostly Muslim minorities in China's northwest.

"The world is turning its eyes to China," President Xi Jinping said during an inspection tour last week. "And China is ready."

## Lionel Richie to receive Gershwin Prize for pop music

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Lionel Richie will be honored all night long for his musical achievements.

The Library of Congress said Thursday that Richie will receive the national library's Gershwin Prize for Popular Song. He will be bestowed the prize at an all-star tribute in Washington, D.C., on March 9.

PBS stations will broadcast the concert on May 17.

"This is truly an honor of a lifetime, and I am so grateful to be receiving the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song," Richie said in a statement. "I am proud to be joining all the other previous artists, who I also admire and am a fan of their music."

Past recipients include Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney, Billy Joel, Willie Nelson, Smokey Robinson, Tony Bennett, Emilio and Gloria Estefan and Garth Brooks.

Richie is known for his catalog of hits including "All Night Long," "Endless Love," "Lady," "Penny Lover," "Truly" and "Stuck on You." He co-wrote the historically popular song "We Are the World" with Michael Jackson.

Before his superstar solo career, Richie was a founding member of the Commodores, a funk and soul band that made waves in the 1970s. The group had tremendous success backed by chart-climbing hits such as "Three Times a Lady," "Still" and "Easy."

The singer has won four Grammys, an Oscar and the distinction of MusicCares Person of the Year in 2016. He was a Kennedy Center honoree in 2017.

Richie mentored aspiring music artists as a judge on ABC's "American Idol" for the past four seasons. He expects to return for the show's 20th season.

Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, said Richie has been an inspiring entertainer who helped "strengthen our global connections."

"Lionel Richie's unforgettable work has shown us that music can bring us together," Hayden said. "Even when we face problems and disagree on issues, songs can show us what we have in common."

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## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Jan. 14, the 14th day of 2022. There are 351 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 14, 2013, Lance Armstrong ended a decade of denial by confessing to Oprah Winfrey during a video-taped interview that he'd used performance-enhancing drugs to win the Tour de France.

On this date:

In 1784, the United States ratified the Treaty of Paris ending the Revolutionary War; Britain followed suit in April 1784.

In 1914, Ford Motor Co. greatly improved its assembly-line operation by employing an endless chain to pull each chassis along at its Highland Park, Michigan, plant.

In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and French General Charles de Gaulle opened a wartime conference in Casablanca.

In 1952, NBC's "Today" show premiered, with Dave Garroway as the host, or "communicator."

In 1954, Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio were married at San Francisco City Hall. (The marriage lasted about nine months.)

In 1963, George C. Wallace was sworn in as governor of Alabama with the pledge, "Segregation forever!" — a view Wallace later repudiated.

In 1964, former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy, in a brief televised address, thanked Americans for their condolences and messages of support following the assassination of her husband, President John F. Kennedy, nearly two months earlier.

In 1967, the Sixties' "Summer of Love" unofficially began with a "Human Be-In" involving tens of thousands of young people at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

In 1970, Diana Ross and the Supremes performed their last concert together, at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas.

In 1975, the House Internal Security Committee (formerly the House Un-American Activities Committee) was disbanded.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed an accord to stop aiming missiles at any nation; the leaders joined Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk in signing an accord to dismantle the nuclear arsenal of Ukraine.

In 2010, President Barack Obama and the U.S. moved to take charge in earthquake-ravaged Haiti, dispatching thousands of troops along with tons of aid.

Ten years ago: Rescue workers scrambled aboard the stricken Costa Concordia cruise liner, seeking to help some 4,200 passengers a day after the ship ran aground and tipped over off Italy's Tuscan coast; the death toll from the tragedy eventually reached 32.

Five years ago: Donald Trump tore into civil rights legend and Georgia congressman John Lewis on Twitter for questioning the legitimacy of Trump's White House victory. Protesters gathered in Washington and other cities to denounce the president-elect's anti-immigrant stance and his pledge to build a wall on the Mexican border. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket carrying a payload of satellites blasted off from California, marking the company's first launch since a fireball engulfed a similar rocket on a Florida launch pad more than four months earlier.

One year ago: Airlines and airports said they were stepping up security before the Jan. 20 presidential inauguration, with airlines saying they would prohibit passengers flying to the Washington area from putting guns in checked bags. An Arkansas man, Peter Stager, was in custody, accused of beating a police officer with a pole flying a U.S. flag during the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol. A global team of researchers sent by the World Health Organization arrived in the Chinese city where the coronavirus pandemic was first detected to investigate its origins. Authorities said a new investigation of the Flint water disaster had led to charges against nine people, including former Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder and key members of his administration.

Today's Birthdays: Blues singer Clarence Carter is 86. Singer Jack Jones is 84. Actor Faye Dunaway is 81. Actor

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Holland Taylor is 79. Actor Carl Weathers is 74. Singer-producer T-Bone Burnett is 74. Movie writer-director Lawrence Kasdan is 73. Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Maureen Dowd is 70. Rock singer Geoff Tate (Queensryche) is 63. Movie writer-director Steven Soderbergh is 59. Actor Mark Addy is 58. Former Fox News Channel anchorman Shepard Smith is 58. Actor/producer Dan Schneider is 58. Rapper Slick Rick is 57. Actor Emily Watson is 55. Actor-comedian Tom Rhodes is 55. Rock musician Zakk Wylde is 55. Rapper-actor LL Cool J is 54. Actor Jason Bateman is 53. Rock singer-musician Dave Grohl (Foo Fighters) is 53. Actor Kevin Durand is 48. Actor Jordan Ladd is 47. Actor Ward Horton is 46. Actor Emayatzy Corinealdi is 42. Retro-soul singer-songwriter Marc Broussard is 40. Rock singer-musician Caleb Followill (Kings of Leon) is 40. Actor Zach Gilford is 40. Actor Jake Choi is 37. Actor Jonathan Osser is 33. Actor-singer Grant Gustin is 32. Singer/guitarist Molly Tuttle is 29.