

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Saturday, Jan. 29

Groton Area Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m.
5 p.m.: Boys Basketball vs. Lennox at Madison

Sunday, Jan. 30

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at Groton Community Center, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Carnival of Silver Skates, 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

Monday, Jan. 31

Junior High Boys Basketball with Redfield at Groton. 7th at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game

Tuesday, Feb. 1

Boys Basketball hosts Langford Area with JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 3

Basketball Doubleheader at Faulkton

Friday, Feb. 4

Wrestling triangular at Preshop



Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Boys Basketball

Groton Area vs. Lennox

5 p.m. today

Carnival of Silver Skates

2 p.m. performance tomorrow

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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Groton Area COVID-19 Report

It's amazing what a difference a few days makes when counting the COVID-19 cases. The Groton Area School District had peaked at 37 and has since then dropped to 13 in the count from yesterday. Only the fifth grade seen an increase of one while the rest of the grades experienced a decrease or stayed the same.

Groton Area School District
Active COVID-19 Cases
Updated January 28, 2022; 2:29 PM

**Total change in
numbers remain
unchanged from
Thursday**

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	o
														a	a
														f	f
														f	l
1	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	9

Change **+1 -1 0 0 +1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 +1 -1 -1 0**

**GUN SHOW: Dakota Territory Gun Collectors Association
ABERDEEN Show, Saturday, Feb. 5, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday,
Feb. 6, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at THE DAKOTA EVENT CENTER.
Laura Ennen 701-214-3388.**

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Northern Men Hold On for Second OT Victory of 2022

St. Paul, Minn. – The Northern State University men’s basketball team tallied an overtime win on the road at Concordia-St. Paul Friday evening. The Wolves out-scored the Golden Bears, 16-12 in the five minute period, sealing their 14th victory of the season.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 76, CSP 72

Records: NSU 14-9 (8-7 NSIC), CSP 2-19 (1-13 NSIC)

Attendance: 491

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Northern led 38-27 at the half and by as much as 13 in the second, however the Golden Bears rallied to tie the game at 60-all and force the overtime period
- The Wolves shot 42.9% from the floor, 25.0% from beyond the arc, and 75.0% from the foul line in the game
- Concordia out-shot NSU, notching a 43.1% clip from field goal range and 44.0% clip from the 3-point line
- NSU put pressure on CSP, forcing 17 turnovers in the contest which resulted in 21 points
- They also added 42 points in the paint, 14 points off 11 offensive boards, and 11 points off the bench
- Northern recorded 40 rebounds, 18 assists, ten steals, and four blocks in the win
- Three Wolves scored in double figures led by Jordan Belka with 28 and four tallied five or more rebounds
- Belka also recorded his second double-double of the season, as well as a career high three steals
- Kailleb Walton-Blanden added a career high four steals of his own to lead the team

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

- Jordan Belka: 28 points, 61.9 FG%, 12 rebounds, 3 steals
- Sam Masten: 16 points, 9 rebounds, 6 assists
- Jacksen Moni: 16 points, 5 rebounds, 2 assists
- Cole Bergan: 7 rebounds, 5 points, 3 assists

UP NEXT

Northern State travels to Minnesota State this evening. Tip-off is set for 5:30 p.m. in Mankato.

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Wolves Drop NSIC Road Contest at Concordia-St. Paul

St. Paul, Minn. – The Northern State women’s basketball team was unable to close out a tightly contested match-up and fell to Concordia-St. Paul 78-70. Neither team led in the game by more than eight points and saw 16 lead changes in the game.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 70, CSP 78

Records: NSU 10-9 (7-7 NSIC), CSP 12-6 (8-6 NSIC)

Attendance: 379

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Concordia-St. Paul took an early 13-6 lead in the first quarter, however a 9-0 Northern State run sparked by three baskets by Kailee Oliverson gave the Wolves a 15-13 lead
- Northern maintained the momentum in the start of the second quarter, pushing the scoring run to 16-3 with two more baskets by Oliverson and a 3-pointer by Carly Mekash
- CSP responded with a 9-0 run of their own to regain the lead, however the two teams would trade baskets the remainder of the period and the Golden Bears entered halftime with a 36-35 lead
- A 3-pointer by Rianna Fillipi sparked another 9-2 scoring run midway through the third period for the Wolves, and they regained a 46-41 lead in the game
- With a tie game at 66 with 4:56 remaining in the game, Northern State was unable to stop one last push by Concordia and the Golden Bears ended the game on a 12-4 run
- The Wolves shot 42.2 percent from the field, 22.2 percent from 3-point range, and 80.0 percent from the free throw line
- Northern once again held the advantage on the glass, out-rebounding CSP 47-32
- Oliverson notched a career high 29 points on 11-18 shooting from the field, and added 12 rebounds for her third double-double of the season

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

- Kailee Oliverson: 29 points, 12 rebounds, 2 assists
- Rianna Fillipi: 11 points, 3 rebounds, 3 assists
- Haley Johnson: 10 points, 7 rebounds, 2 assists

UP NEXT

The Northern State women’s basketball team will conclude NSIC cross-division play when they travel to face Minnesota State. The Wolves and the Mavericks will tip-off at 3:30 p.m. this afternoon.

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed

Sponsored by Groton Lions Club

Sunday, January 30, 2022

10:00am-1:00pm

Groton Community Center



Pancakes, Sausage, Coffee, Milk and Juice will be served!

Free will donation!

Proceeds will go to Groton Robotics.

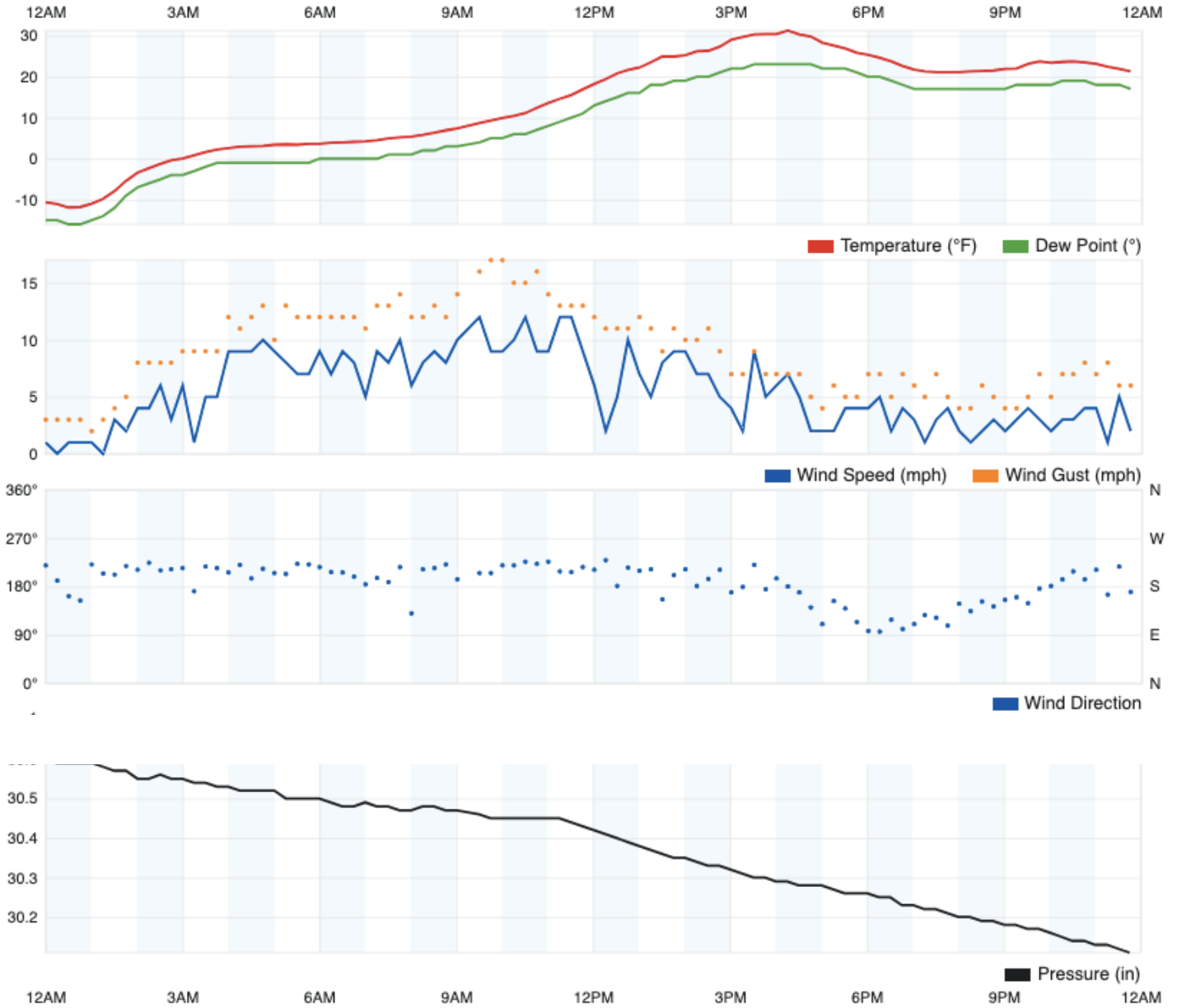


Carnival of Silver Skates performing at 2pm & 6:30pm!

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Increasing
Clouds

High: 40 °F

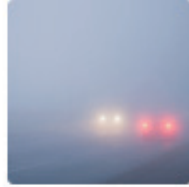
Tonight



Partly Cloudy
then Patchy
Fog

Low: 8 °F

Sunday



Patchy Fog

High: 32 °F

Sunday
Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 16 °F

Monday

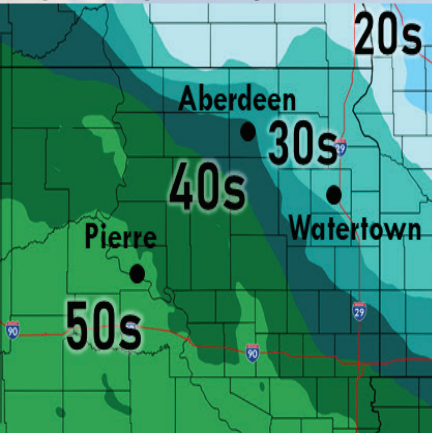


Mostly Cloudy

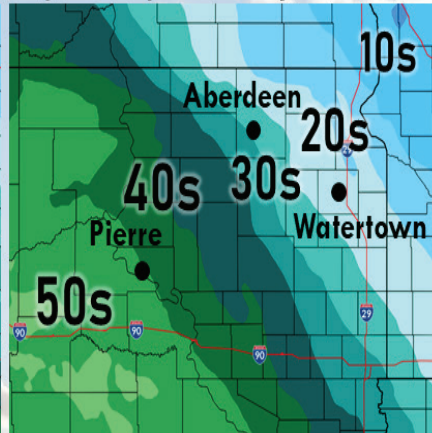
High: 41 °F

Mild End to January

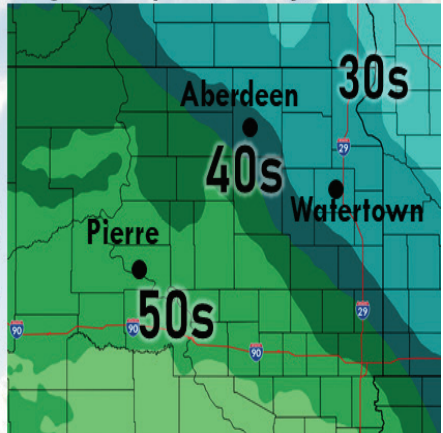
High Temps Today, Jan 29th



High Temps Sunday, Jan 30th



High Temps Monday, Jan 31st



Other Forecast Notes

- *High to very high grassland fire danger* across portions of Central SD each afternoon through Monday.
- *Arctic air* moves in Tuesday, and remains in place through the rest of the week.

Updated: 1/29/2022 5:37 AM Central



Above average temperatures, particularly across central South Dakota, will persist through and peak on Monday. Then, Arctic cold air is expected from Tuesday through the rest of the work-week. Mostly dry meanwhile, with currently just a few slight chances for snow next week.

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Today in Weather History

January 29, 2008: Arctic air combined with strong northwest winds of 20 to 40 mph to bring extreme wind chills to much of north-central and northeast South Dakota. The extreme wind chills began in the morning hours of January 29th across all of the area. The wind chills improved across north-central South Dakota by the evening and improved across northeast South Dakota during the morning hours of January 30th. The extreme wind chills ranged from 35 to 50 degrees below zero across the area. The extreme cold caused school delays and activity cancellations, along with much discomfort to people and livestock. On Monday, January 28th, the day before the extreme cold, a southerly flow brought very mild temperatures with some record highs set at several locations. Highs were in the 40s to the mid-50s across central and northeast South Dakota. When the Arctic front came through on January 28th, temperatures fell dramatically through the evening and early morning with below zero temperatures by Tuesday morning, January 29th. In fact, most locations across the area had a 40 to 55-degree temperature change from the 28th to the 29th.

1921: A small but intense windstorm resulted in the "Great Olympic Blowdown" in the Pacific Northwest. Hurricane-force winds funneled along the mountains downed vast expanses of Douglas fir trees, and the storm destroyed eight billion board feet of timber. Winds at North Head, WA, gusted to 113 mph. On January 31, 1921, the International News Services reported from Aberdeen, Washington, "It is reported that thousands of dollars in damage was done to buildings and storms in Aberdeen and Hoquiam. The wind velocity was estimated at from 125 to 150 miles an hour. Four steel smokestacks reaching almost 200 feet into the air were the first to collapse before the terrific onslaught of the gale. The giant chimneys crashed down on dwellings crushing them like houses of cardboard."

1947: On this date through the 30th, a fierce winter storm buried southern Wisconsin under two feet of snow. Strong northeasterly winds piled drifts up to 10 feet high in the Milwaukee area, shutting down the city for two days.

2002: A major three-day winter storm blasted parts of Kansas and Missouri. A catastrophic ice storm occurred south of the snow area, with two inches of ice and snow accumulating in the Kansas City, Missouri area. Thousands of trees were felled by the storm, blocking roads, felling utility lines, and causing fires. Two "Bicentennial Trees," estimated at being over 200 years old, were badly damaged from this storm. After the 31st, 325,000 people were reported without power in Kansas City alone.

2008: A sharp cold front moved across Illinois during the day, producing a drastic temperature drop. Temperatures fell 20 to 40 degrees in just a couple of hours, with areas from Springfield, Illinois to St. Louis, Missouri seeing temperatures fall as much as 50 degrees between noon and 6 pm. Temperatures in the mid-60s in central Illinois at midday on the 29th had fallen to near zero by the next morning.

1780 - On the coldest morning of a severe winter the mercury dipped to 16 degrees below zero at New York City, and reached 20 degrees below zero at Hartford CT. New York Harbor was frozen for five weeks, allowing a heavy cannon to be taken across the ice to fortify the British on Staten Island. (The Weather Channel)

1921 - A small but intense windstorm resulted in the "Great Olympic Blowdown" in the Pacific Northwest. Hurricane force winds, funneled along the mountains, downed vast expanses of Douglas fir trees, and the storm destroyed eight billion board feet of timber. Winds at North Head WA gusted to 113 mph. (David Ludlum)

1983 - A series of Pacific coast storms finally came to an end. The storms, attributed in part to the ocean current, "El Nino," produced ocean swells 15 to 20 feet high which ravaged the beaches of southern California. Much of the damage was to homes of movie stars in the exclusive Malibu Colony. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A strong storm moving out of the Central Rockies spread snow across the north central states, with up to eight inches of snow in Wisconsin, and produced wind gusts to 64 mph at Goodland KS. A thunderstorm produced three inches of snow in forty-five minutes at Owing Mills MD. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

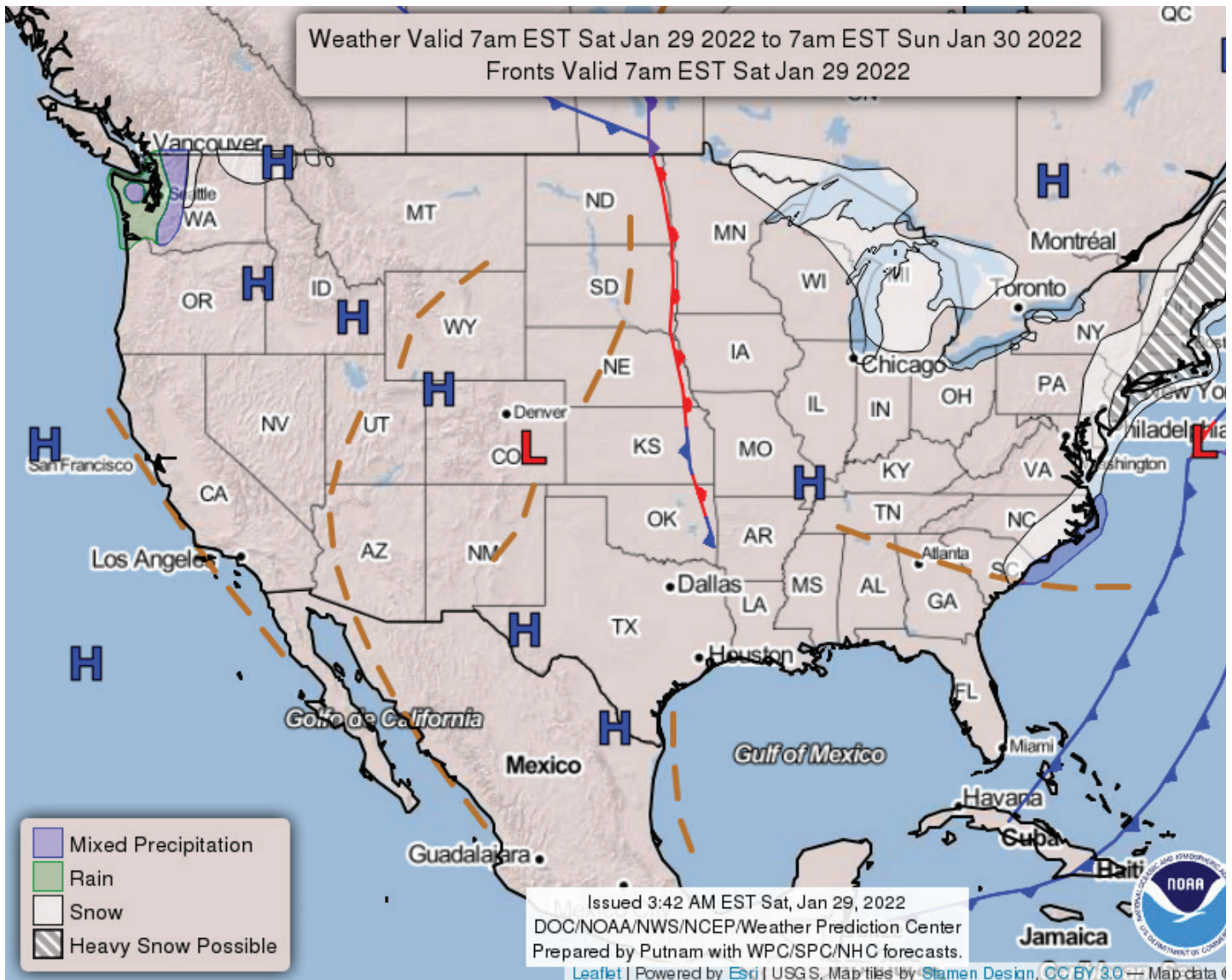
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 31 °F at 4:12 PM
Low Temp: -12 °F at 12:33 AM
Wind: 17 mph at 9:39 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 58 in 1931
Record Low: -32 in 1951
Average High: 25°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.52
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.59
Average Precip to date: 0.52
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 5:36:27 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:53:31 AM



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STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

There are "woods" and there are "woulds." And there is a significant difference between the two of them. We know that "forests" are made of "trees" that we call "woods." And there are many Christians who have "woulds" in their lives.

Every now and then we hear some say, "I know that what I am doing is wrong - but I'm going to do it anyway. I would do the right thing but there is some thing inside me that is stronger than me and it makes me do these evil things. I would do the Lord's will, but there is some thing deep within me that continues to make me a slave to sin, and I would give it up but have not been able to."

That's being lost "in the woulds." But the Psalmist decided that he would not be lost in the "woulds." Rather, he confidently cried out from the depths of his heart and said, "The Lord is my strength and my defense; He has become my salvation!"

We are never sufficient in ourselves to be or do all that God would have us to do. We have proven this time and time again: we often intend to do what was right only to realize that our best and most earnest efforts were not enough. We needed someone Who was above us and beyond us but willingly and lovingly lived within us.

Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing." However, Paul gave us the solution to our lack of strength and the resource that is available to enable us to do God's will: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"

If we would do right and live right, He must be Lord.

Prayer: Often, Lord, we would do what is right only to fail. Strengthen us with Your Spirit to honor You always. You are our strength and reason to sing. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: – The Lord is my strength and my defense; He has become my salvation. Psalm 118:14

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2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
06/17/2022 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
06/18/2022 Groton Triathlon
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Dacotah Bank Back To School Supply Drive
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
07/21/2022 Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
JVT School Supply Drive
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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- Colored \$42.60/6 months
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News from the Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 51, Wilmot 33

Aberdeen Roncalli 53, Sisseton 51

Bowman County, N.D. 67, Lemmon 48

Chamberlain 55, Mobridge-Pollock 52

Chester 69, Baltic 64

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 51, McLaughlin 33

Custer 48, Hill City 47

DeSmet 63, Colman-Egan 50

Edgemont 51, Hay Springs, Neb. 14

Faith 50, Newell 37

Flandreau 60, Beresford 16

Florence/Henry 66, Great Plains Lutheran 38

Freeman 46, Bon Homme 45

Garretson 52, Sioux Valley 44

Hamlin 53, Webster 14

Hanson 57, Bridgewater-Emery 42

Highmore-Harrold 62, Iroquois/Doland 35

Howard 43, Ethan 42

McCook Central/Montrose 55, Parker 40

Milbank 55, Redfield 38

Mitchell 55, Sioux Falls Lincoln 33

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 42, Winner 35

North Central Co-Op 36, Strasburg-Zeeland, N.D. 34

Northwestern 52, Langford 48

Platte-Geddes 61, Colome 23

Potter County 62, Sunshine Bible Academy 32

Rapid City Stevens 51, Rapid City Central 40

Red Cloud 88, Lead-Deadwood 27

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 75, Pierre 54

Tea Area 55, Madison 40

Tripp-Delmont/Armour 45, Burke 20

Warner 53, Waubay/Summit 25

Watertown 56, Douglas 37

Dakota Oyate Challenge=

Consolation Semifinal=

Marty Indian 75, Flandreau Indian 32

Tiospaye Topa 64, Takini 40

Semifinal=

Crow Creek 65, Omaha Nation, Neb. 42

Lower Brule 71, Tiospa Zina Tribal 38

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Kadoka Area vs. Bison, ppd.

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BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=
Aberdeen Christian 61, Wilmot 34
Bon Homme 60, Freeman 49
Burke 56, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 46
Chamberlain 49, Mobridge-Pollock 47
Corsica/Stickney 54, Menno 33
DeSmet 93, Colman-Egan 32
Elkton-Lake Benton 47, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 36
Hanson 52, Bridgewater-Emery 51
Harrisburg 73, Marshall, Minn. 59
Hay Springs, Neb. 57, Edgemont 30
Highmore-Harrold 64, Iroquois/Doland 36
Howard 49, Ethan 46
Huron 55, Brookings 53
Ipswich 41, Herreid/Selby Area 30
Lakota Tech 68, Hot Springs 53
Langford 61, Northwestern 54
Platte-Geddes 62, Colome 44
Red Cloud 66, Lead-Deadwood 32
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 55, Pierre 49
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 64, Sioux Falls Washington 43
St. Thomas More 48, Rapid City Christian 39
Watertown 66, Douglas 54
Waubay/Summit 69, Warner 41
Winner 60, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 51
Wolsey-Wessington 57, Kimball/White Lake 32
Dakota Oyate Challenge=
Consolation Semifinal=
Crow Creek 64, Tiospaye Topa 33
Omaha Nation, Neb. 89, Takini 25
Semifinal=
Lower Brule 86, Marty Indian 54
Tiospa Zina Tribal 98, Flandreau Indian 36
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Kadoka Area vs. Bison, ppd.

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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

03-16-25-44-55, Mega Ball: 13, Megaplier: 3

(three, sixteen, twenty-five, forty-four, fifty-five; Mega Ball: thirteen; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$421 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$104 million

South Dakota-based group studies effects of regenerative ag

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By DAN GUNDERSON Minnesota Public Radio News

MOORHEAD, Minn. (AP) — As he embarks on a massive data collection project, Ecdysis Foundation Director Jonathan Lundgren is confident farmers are very interested in learning more about regenerative agriculture and are willing to help collect the necessary data.

“We did one Facebook post on it, and so far, we’ve gotten 350 farmers,” he said. “The interest is there. This movement is very real right now, and the farmers are demonstrating that by their interest in gathering primary data on their farming operations.”

The South Dakota-based nonprofit research organization has been studying regenerative agriculture for several years and finding that regenerative principles increase biodiversity and profits, Minnesota Public Radio News reported.

Scaling up that research to 1,000 farms across the country is a big challenge, but Lundgren said a large database is needed to answer questions about whether the systemic, sustainable changes in farming work and can be profitable if implemented broadly.

“The status quo in science and in farming isn’t getting us where we need to go,” he said. “We need bold action, and the farmers are doing their part. They’re changing. Now it’s time for the science to catch up.”

Researchers will look at farms with varying levels of adoption of regenerative principles.

Regenerative practices include planting cover crops, growing a more diverse mix of crops, grazing livestock on harvested fields and reducing pesticide use.

Researchers have divided the country into 10 eco-regions and will gather large amounts of data from farms in each region.

“We’ll be looking at soils and carbon down to a meter deep. We’ll be looking at micronutrient status of the soil. We’ll be looking at soil microbiology, water quality and dynamics within the water profile,” said Lundgren. “We’ll be looking at insects and plants and birds and the nutrition of the food, and we’ll also be looking at the economics of the operation.”

To manage the data, Lundgren said the research team has devised new tools, including the use of artificial intelligence to identify thousands of insects collected in fields.

Farmers will collect some of the raw data, and researchers will use automated data collection sensors in addition to on-farm visits.

Lundgren estimates it will cost about \$7,500 for each field studied, and the full cost of the ten-year project is expected to reach \$80 million.

A variety of partners have signed on including General Mills, Ducks Unlimited, the U.S. Geological Survey and several philanthropic organizations. Lundgren said farmers and farm organizations are also donating to the project.

Lundgren expects to start the research next month, with the goal of having 1,000 farms enrolled by next year. There are two overarching goals for the research.

“Number one will be testing whether regenerative agriculture works no matter what you grow and where you grow it,” said Lundgren. “And then we also will be providing road maps that farmers develop for successful transitioning to regenerative systems.”

Noem campaign says it raised \$8.5 million last year

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem reelection campaign said Friday that she has raised \$8.5 million in 2021, touting a historical fundraising haul for a South Dakota gubernatorial candidate.

The Republican governor has \$7.3 million on hand across multiple committees, according to her campaign. Noem has created both a federal political action committee and an in-state political committees.

The Republican governor has risen to national prominence among conservatives for her hands-off approach to the pandemic. She has held fundraising events across the country and attended Republican gatherings in several states that will figure largely in the 2024 GOP presidential primaries.

Noem faces a primary challenge from state Rep. Steve Haugaard, a former House Speaker who is running to the right of Noem. His recent financial filings were not yet available from the Secretary of State.

Supreme Court sides with trailer court in pit bull attack

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Supreme Court has ruled a Yankton trailer court owner isn't liable for injuries to a child who was attacked by a tenant's dog.

Teresa Burgi appealed a case she brought on behalf of herself and as a guardian for the boy who was injured at the trailer court in September 2017.

A lower court earlier ruled in favor of East Winds Court and its owner John Blackburn.

The boy, identified only as K.B., was retrieving a basketball within the radius of the pit bull's leash while playing at the trailer court. The dog attacked and bit the child's face. A number of surgeries were needed to correct the damage, according to the court filing.

In her general negligence claim, Burgi alleged East Winds and Blackburn had a duty as a landlord to protect K.B. from the attack or to warn him of the dog's potential for violence, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

She further alleged East Winds knew of the dog's dangerous tendencies. In turn, East Winds failed to exercise reasonable care by not removing the dog from the premises or otherwise terminating the dog owner's lease.

East Winds moved for summary judgment on all of Burgi's claims, which the circuit court granted.

The Supreme Court concluded East Winds owed no legal duty to K.B. while he was present on the dog owner's property outside of a common area, and, in any event, East Winds had no knowledge of the dog's temperament.

Divided no more? Court opening may draw Democrats together

KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats in Congress have fractured repeatedly over President Joe Biden's agenda, stalling legislation and creating an atmosphere of mistrust that has made it increasingly difficult for progressives and centrists to work together.

But one area where the party has not cracked, not even an inch, is on Biden's nominations to the courts.

That ironclad unity has helped Biden appoint the most judges during the first year of a presidency since John F. Kennedy. The achievement is giving Democrats hope that the coming fight over the Supreme Court seat will allow them to go on the political offensive and move past an ugly stretch of legislating that depressed their base.

But unity is far from assured as Republicans prepare to oppose what they predict will be a "radical" Biden pick to replace the retiring Justice Stephen Breyer.

As always, two Democratic senators will be the center of attention: Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona.

While their opposition to changing Senate rules stalled the party's signature voting legislation this month, they have been reliable votes on Biden's nominees to the courts. Indeed, in the 44 roll call votes held so far on Biden's judicial picks, there has yet to be a single Democratic defection.

That streak bodes well for the future nominee in the 50-50 Senate, where Vice President Kamala Harris would break any ties. If Democrats are able to stay together, Republicans would lack the power to stop Biden's pick from being confirmed. Supreme Court nominees can no longer filibustered, thanks to a rules change put in place by GOP leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, making party unity the path to certain victory.

On this particular vote, analysts suspect that Democrats will have a better chance of staying united than Republicans.

"I'd say the progressive wing probably has less to worry about than McConnell & Company," said Russell Wheeler, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution who closely tracks the judicial nomination process. "But you just never know."

Yet the news of Breyer's pending retirement — he plans to leave at the end of the court's term — drew

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cautious, noncommittal responses from both Sinema and Manchin.

Sinema tweeted that she would examine Biden's pick on three criteria: "whether the nominee is professionally qualified, believes in the role of an independent judiciary, and can be trusted to faithfully interpret and uphold the rule of law."

Manchin told a local radio show, "Talkline," that he would evaluate whether the nominee has the disposition to work with other justices and that "a lot of it will be the character of the person." Asked if he could support someone who was more liberal than himself, Manchin responded that "as far as philosophical beliefs, no, that will not prohibit me from supporting somebody."

Outwardly, progressive groups don't sound worried about the prospects of Manchin or Sinema tanking Biden's pick. The president has promised to nominate a Black woman — that would be a first for the court — and a short list of top contenders has quickly emerged.

"Frankly, I am very confident that President Biden's nominee will be confirmed because, as he has with the lower court nominees, he's going to put forward somebody with unimpeachable credentials who's eminently qualified," said Daniel Goldberg, the legal director at the Alliance for Justice, a liberal advocacy group that closely tracks and weighs in on judicial nominees.

During the presidency of Donald Trump, Republicans worked with assembly line-like precision to install more than 230 judges on the court, including three Supreme Court justices. Most gallingly to Democrats, Republicans refused to consider President Barack Obama's early 2016 choice of Merrick Garland, then a federal court judge and now Biden's attorney general, to serve on the Supreme Court after the death of Justice Antonin Scalia. McConnell said voters, with a White House election coming that fall, should weigh in to determine which president they trust to fill the vacancy. Yet four years later, Republicans voted to confirm Amy Coney Barrett to the high court just days before 2020 presidential election.

The GOP's actions gave the court a solid 6-3 conservative majority, an ideological tilt that will remain in place even after Breyer is replaced.

Democrats have responded with an added sense of urgency on judges now that they have the Senate majority. Obama, who inherited a fiscal crisis, had just 12 judges confirmed his first year. Trump had 22. Biden had 42.

The spotlight as Biden considers replacing Breyer will not just be on swing Democratic votes. Biden has also had success in attracting GOP support for many of his nominees.

Among Republicans, Sens. Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina have voted for a significant majority of Biden's judicial nominees and will be closely watched throughout the process.

But Collins said she wants ample time for questions, review and consideration. Democrats have talked of moving as quickly as possible, using the rapid confirmation of Barrett as a model.

If the confirmation vote tracks recent history, the margin of victory will be a slim one. Among Trump's three appointments, Neil Gorsuch was confirmed by a vote of 54-45, Kavanaugh was confirmed by a vote of 50-48 and Barrett was confirmed, 52-48.

Democrats are eager for Biden to make his selection so they can get started. Biden said he will put forward a nominee by the end of February.

"Our process is going to be rigorous," Biden said Thursday. "I will select a nominee worthy of Justice Breyer's legacy of excellence and decency."

After stumbles on the president's domestic agenda, including the now-delayed \$2 trillion social and environment bill, some Democratic strategists believe the Supreme Court battle could help galvanize the party's voters before an election season when Republicans are growing ever more confident about their prospects.

"I think it will be a big plus with African American voters, and women and younger voters, there's no question about it," said Bill Carrick, a Democratic political consultant based in California. "Historically, Democrats have not focused as much on the court as Republicans, but in this circumstance, it's very different."

Carrick said it is different this time because people have seen how Republicans under Trump went to

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such lengths to secure a conservative majority. Plus they now see a threat of the landmark Roe v. Wade decision providing abortions rights being overturned. He said California has several competitive House races this year where he believes abortion rights will play a role.

"Sometimes it's not been a relevant issue," Carrick said of abortion. "But I think in this case it's going to be."

The Supreme Court signaled last month in a case from Mississippi that it could roll back abortion rights and possibly overturn the Roe v. Wade decision. A ruling is expected later this year.

Winter storm churns up East Coast with deep snow, high winds

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — People from New York City to Maine awakened Saturday to half a foot (15 centimeters) of snow, and forecasters warned that could more than quadruple as a powerful nor'easter kicked up blinding blizzard conditions with high winds and the potential for widespread power outages and coastal flooding.

Parts of 10 states and some major population centers — Philadelphia, New York and Boston — were in the path of the storm, which was expected to rage throughout the day.

Airlines canceled more than 4,500 flights at some of the nation's busiest airports, according to FlightAware. Amtrak suspended or limited service on the Boston-to-Washington corridor.

In West Hartford, Connecticut, a tractor-trailer jackknifed on snow-slicked Interstate 84, closing several westbound lanes.

Officials from Virginia to Maine warned people to stay off the roads amid potential whiteout conditions. The storm's saving grace: It was hitting on a weekend, with schools closed and few commuters.

Rhode Island, all of which was under a blizzard warning, banned all nonemergency road travel starting at 8 a.m.

"This is serious. We're ready for this storm, and we also need Rhode Islanders to be ready," Gov. Dan McKee said. "The best way to handle this storm is to stay home tomorrow."

Delaware allowed only essential personnel to drive in two of its three counties. Massachusetts, where forecasters said some isolated pockets could get as much as 30 inches (76 centimeters) of snow, banned heavy trucks from interstate highways for most of Saturday.

Shoppers crammed stores Friday to stock up on food, generators and snowblowers ahead of the nor'easter, a type of storm so named because its winds typically blow from the northeast as it churns up the East Coast.

Many hardy New Englanders took the storm in stride.

Dave McGillivray, race director for the Boston Marathon, jokingly invited the public to his suburban Boston home on Saturday for a free snow shoveling clinic.

"I will provide the driveway and multiple walkways to ensure your training is conducted in the most life-like situation," he said.

Marc Rudkowski, 28, bought French bread and wine Friday at the Star Market in Cambridge, Massachusetts, along with balloons and toys for his dog, who turned 1 on Friday.

"He's going to love it," Rudkowski said. "He's a snow dog."

But there were some concerns about hoarding amid ongoing supply chain issues caused by the pandemic. New England supermarket giant Stop & Shop pleaded with customers to practice restraint.

"We ask shoppers to buy what they need and save some for their neighbors," the chain said in a statement.

Parts of 10 states were under blizzard warnings: Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. Areas closest to the coast were expected to bear the brunt of the storm, which could bring wind gusts as high as 70 mph (113 kph) in New England.

Coastal New Jersey was forecast to get as much as 18 inches (46 centimeters) of snow and eastern Long Island up to 17 inches (43 centimeters). Philadelphia, New York City, and parts of the Delmarva Peninsula

in Delaware, Maryland and Virginia could get 10 inches (25 centimeters) or more.

Virginia, where a blizzard this month stranded hundreds of motorists for hours on Interstate 95, did not hesitate to get resources at the ready. In Maryland, the governor mobilized the National Guard.

Washington and Baltimore were spared the worst of the storm.

Snow could fall as fast as 5 inches (nearly 13 centimeters) per hour in spots, including Connecticut, where officials worried about having enough snowplow drivers amid shortages caused by the coronavirus pandemic and other issues.

The worst of the storm was expected to blow by Sunday morning into Canada, where several provinces were under warnings.

One saving grace, at least in parts of Massachusetts: The snow should fall light and flaky because it is coming with cold weather that dries it out, said Judah Cohen, a winter storm expert for the commercial firm Atmospheric Environmental Research.

That means lousy snowballs — and snow that's less capable of snapping tree branches and tearing down power lines.

No peace in Myanmar 1 year after military takeover

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — The army takeover in Myanmar a year ago that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi not only unexpectedly aborted the country's fledgling return to democracy: It also brought a surprising level of popular resistance, which has blossomed into a low-level, but persistent, insurgency.

Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the commander of Myanmar's military — known as the Tatmadaw — seized power on the morning of Feb. 1, 2021, arresting Suu Kyi and top members of her government and ruling National League for Democracy party, which had won a landslide election victory in November 2020.

The military's use of deadly force to hold on to power has escalated conflict with its civilian opponents to the point that some experts describe the country as being in a state of civil war.

The costs have been high, with some 1,500 people killed by the security forces, almost 8,800 detained, an unknown number tortured and disappeared, and more than 300,000 displaced as the military razes villages to root out resistance.

Other consequences are also significant. Civil disobedience hampered transport, banking services and government agencies, slowing an economy already reeling from the coronavirus pandemic. The public health system collapsed, leaving the fight against COVID-19 abandoned for months. Higher education stalled as faculty and students sympathetic to the revolt boycotted school, or were arrested.

The military-installed government was not at all anticipating the level of resistance that arose, Thomas Kean, an analyst of Myanmar affairs consulting for the International Crisis Group think tank, told The Associated Press.

"We saw in the first days after the coup, they tried to adopt a sort of business-as-usual approach," with the generals denying they were implementing any significant change, but only removing Suu Kyi from power, he said.

"And of course, you know, that unleashed these huge protests that were brutally crushed, which resulted in people turning to armed struggle."

The army has dealt with the revolt by employing the same brutal tactics in the country's rural heartland that it has long unleashed against ethnic minorities in border areas, which critics have charged amount to crimes against humanity and genocide.

Its violence has generated newfound empathy for ethnic minorities such as the Karen, the Kachin and the Rohingya, longtime targets of army abuses with whom members of the Burman majority now are making common anti-military cause.

People opposed the army takeover because they had come to enjoy representative government and liberalization after years of military rule, said David Steinberg, a senior scholar of Asian Studies at Georgetown University.

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Youth turned out in droves to protest despite the risks, he said, because they had neither families nor careers to lose, but saw their futures at risk.

They also enjoyed tactical advantages that previous generations of protesters lacked, he noted. Myanmar had caught up with the rest of the world in technology, and people were able to organize strikes and demonstrations using cellphones and the internet, despite efforts to limit communications.

A driving force was the Civil Disobedience Movement, founded by health care workers, which encouraged actions such as boycotts of military products and people not paying electricity bills or buying lottery tickets.

Kept in detention by the military, Suu Kyi has played no active part in these developments.

The ruling generals, who have said they will probably hold a new election by 2023, have tied her up with a variety of criminal charges widely seen as trumped-up to keep her from returning to political life. The 76-year-old Suu Kyi has already been sentenced to six years' imprisonment, with the prospect of many more being added.

But in the days after the army's takeover, her party's elected members of parliament laid the groundwork for sustained resistance. Prevented by the army from taking their seats, they convened on their own, and in April established the National Unity Government, or NUG, which stakes a claim to being the country's legitimate administrative body and has won the loyalty of many citizens.

The NUG has also sought to coordinate armed resistance, helping organize "People's Defense Forces," or PDFs, homegrown militias formed at the local and neighborhood levels. The military deems the NUG and the PDFs "terrorist" organizations.

With urban demonstrations mostly reduced to flash mobs to avoid crackdowns, the battle against military rule has largely passed to the countryside, where the badly outgunned local militias carry out guerrilla warfare.

The army's "Four Cuts" strategy aims to eradicate the militias' threat by cutting off their access to food, funds, information and recruitment. Civilians suffer collateral damage as soldiers block essential supplies, take away suspected militia supporters and raze whole villages.

When the military enters a village, "they'll burn down some houses, maybe shoot some people, take prisoners and torture them — the sort of horrific abuses that we're seeing on a regular basis," said analyst Kean.

"But when the soldiers leave, they lose control of that area. They don't have enough manpower to maintain control when 80% to 90% of the population is against them."

Some ethnic minority groups with decades of experience fighting the Myanmar military offer critical support to the PDF militia movement, including supplying training and some weapons, while also providing safe havens for opposition activists and others fleeing the army.

"We never accept a coup at all for whatever reason. The position of our organization is clear," Padoh Saw Taw Nee, the chief of the Karen National Union's foreign affairs department, told the AP. "We oppose any military dictatorship. Therefore, the automatic response is that we must work with those who oppose the military."

He said his group began preparing immediately after the takeover to receive people fleeing from military persecution and noted that it played a similar role in 1988 after a failed popular uprising.

There is a quid pro quo — the NUG says it will honor the minority ethnic groups' demands for greater autonomy when it takes power.

The military, meanwhile, keeps the pressure on the Karen with periodic attacks, including by air, that send villagers fleeing for safety across a river that forms the border with Thailand.

The support of the ethnic groups is seen as key to sustaining the resistance, the thought being that as long as they can engage the army, its forces will be too stretched to finish off the PDFs.

No other factors are seen as capable of tilting the balance in favor of the military or the resistance.

Sanctions on the ruling generals can make them uncomfortable — U.S. actions, especially, have caused financial distress — but Russia and China have been reliable allies, especially willing to sell arms. The U.N. and organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are seen as toothless at best.

"I see the stage sort of set for a prolonged conflict. Neither side seems willing to back down or sees

it as in their interest or a necessity to back down or to make concessions in any way to the other," said analyst Kean.

"And so it's just very difficult to see how the conflict will diminish, will reduce in the near term, even over a period of several years. It's just very difficult to see peace returning to many areas of Myanmar."

Barty wins drought-breaking Australian Open women's title

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Ash Barty will no longer need to overthink the 1970s when she prepares for the Australian Open.

The top-ranked Barty recovered from 5-1 down in the second set to beat Danielle Collins 6-3, 7-6 (2) in the final on Saturday night, ending a 44-year drought for Australian women at their home Grand Slam tournament.

Barty is the first Australian women's singles champion since Chris O'Neil in 1978. She was the first home-grown player to reach the final since Wendy Turnbull in 1980.

The pressure is off the 25-year-old Aussie, who has made a remarkable career comeback after taking time off — missing every Grand Slam tournament in 2015 and '16 — and briefly flirting with taking up a professional cricket career after three first-round exits at the majors in 2014.

Barty now has Grand Slam singles titles on three surfaces, adding the hard court at Melbourne Park to her win on grass at Wimbledon last year and on clay at the 2019 French Open. She joins Serena Williams as the only active players on the women's tour with majors on all three surfaces.

"This is just a dream come true for me," the 25-year-old Barty said. "I'm just so proud to be an Aussie."

Evonne Goolagong Cawley, a tennis icon with seven Grand Slam singles titles and a trailblazer for Indigenous athletes from Australia, was a surprise guest to present the champion's trophy to Barty, who is part of a new generation of Indigenous stars.

O'Neil was involved in the night, too, after carrying the trophy into the stadium for the pre-match ceremony.

"I'm an incredibly fortunate and lucky girl to have so much love in my corner," Barty said, thanking her coach and support team, her family, the tournament organizers and the crowd.

Barty hadn't dropped a set and had only conceded one service game through six matches, against American Amanda Anisimova in the fourth round.

The 28-year-old Collins was the fourth American to take on Barty in four consecutive rounds. Barty had beaten Anisimova, Jessica Pegula and 2017 U.S. Open runner-up Madison Keys in straight sets.

Collins had spent more than four hours longer on court than Barty in her previous six matches, having to come back from a set and break down to beat Danish teenager Clara Tauson in the third round and rally from a set down to beat Elise Mertens in the fourth.

Barty took the first set after saving a break point in the fifth game and then breaking in the next.

Not to be outdone, Collins hit back quickly, unloading with her powerful ground strokes and relying on her high-intensity game, breaking Barty's serve in the second and sixth games to take a 5-1 lead.

Collins twice served for the set and twice was within two points of leveling the match and taking her first Grand Slam final to a deciding set.

She led 30-0 in the seventh game of the set, but started to lose momentum when Barty jumped on a second serve and sent a return winner down the line. Another forehand winner just caught the baseline and then Barty got a breakpoint chance with another powerful forehand.

Collins went to the chair umpire to complain about people making noise during the point and got booed heavily by the crowd. The umpire asked fans to refrain from shouting during play, as a courtesy to both players.

When Collins hit a backhand wide to drop the game, she got another loud boo from the crowd.

Barty picked up the energy from an almost full house in Rod Laver Arena, despite government restric-

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tions on ticket sales in the COVID-19 pandemic.

She won five of the next six games to force a tiebreaker and then took control by racing to a 4-0 lead. "As an Aussie, the most important part of this tournament is being able to share it with so many people," Barty said. "This crowd is one of the most fun I've ever played in front of. You relaxed me, forced me to play my best tennis."

Barty had reached the quarterfinals at her home major in the three previous years and was the top seed for the third straight year, but her best run until Saturday at Melbourne Park was a semifinal loss to eventual champion Sofia Kenin in 2020. The pressure of home expectations had taken a toll in the past. This time, she said, she was just rolling with it.

There were pockets of fans in gold shirts with Barty printed on the front in red, mimicking the logo of Vegemite, the famous Australian condiment. Other fans wore the canary yellow shirt of the national World Cup-winning limited-overs cricket team — a nod to one of Barty's other sporting passions.

Australian flags and the red, black and yellow Aboriginal flag were waved around the crowd. Cathy Freeman, who draped both flags around her to celebrate her gold medal in the 400 meters at the Sydney 2000 Olympics — one of the defining images of those Games — was sitting adjacent to the baseline in Rod Laver Arena in full support.

Barty congratulated Collins and told her she "absolutely" belonged in the Top 10, adding: "I know you'll be fighting for many of these in future."

The run to the final was the best at a Grand Slam so far for Collins, who reached the semifinals in Australia in 2019 and the quarterfinals at Roland Garros.

She paid tribute to her longtime mentor Marty Schneider and her boyfriend Joe Vollen, who were in the stands for support.

"Thank you for believing in me," she said, crying. "I haven't had a ton of people believing me in my career. To support me every step of the way means everything to me."

Funeral held in Vietnam for influential monk Thich Nhat Hanh

By HAU DINH Associated Press

HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — A funeral was held Saturday for the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, a week after the renowned Zen master and peace activist died at the age of 95 in Hue in central Vietnam.

Thousands of monks and disciples trailed a procession of pallbearers carrying Nhat Hanh's coffin from Tu Hieu Pagoda, where he spent his last days, to the cremation site. Others knelt and clasped their hands in prayer on the roadside and bowed to the ground as the casket went past.

Nhat Hanh was globally recognized for spreading the practice of mindfulness and socially engaged Buddhism, particularly in the West. For most of his life, he lived in exile at Plum Village, a retreat center he founded in southern France.

Born Nguyen Dinh Lang in 1926 in Hue and ordained at the age of 16, Nhat Hanh distilled Buddhist teachings on compassion and suffering into easily grasped guidance over a lifetime dedicated to working for peace.

His campaign against the Vietnam War in the 1960s led to him being barred from returning to both North and South Vietnam. He was only allowed back into the country in 2005, when the communist-ruled government welcomed him back in the first of several visits.

Surviving a stroke in 2014 that left him unable to speak, Nhat Hanh returned home in October 2018, spending his final years at the Tu Hieu Pagoda.

During the seven-day wake, Nhat Hanh was laid in state in Tu Hieu Pagoda's full moon reception hall, where his disciples came to pay respect in silence and practice meditation as a tribute to his teachings.

"I am happy and feel at peace that I could come to Hue to say farewell and meditate with 'Su Ong' for the last time," said Do Minh Hieu, a follower of Nhat Hanh's who traveled from southern Ho Chi Minh City with his family for the funeral. "Su Ong" is an affectionate Vietnamese term meaning "Grandpa Monk."

According to his wishes, Nhat Hanh will be cremated and his ashes will be scattered at Plum Village

centers and monasteries around the world.

In France, anti-vax fury, politics make public service risky

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

LE PECQ, France (AP) — In Sainte-Anastasie-sur-Issole, a village that curls catlike in verdant Provence hills, voters are making an early start on France's presidential election.

From their ballot box this weekend and next will come the name of the candidate — picked from among dozens — that they want their mayor to endorse.

Normally, the choice would be Mayor Olivier Hoffmann's alone, under a right that, at election time, turns small-potato public office-holders into hot properties — wooed by would-be candidates who need 500 endorsements from elected officials to get onto the April ballot.

But in an inflamed climate of election-time politics, and with fury among opponents of COVID-19 vaccinations increasingly bubbling over into violence directed at elected representatives, Sainte-Anastasie's staunchly apolitical mayor doesn't want to be seen taking sides.

Safer, he figures, to let the 2,000 villagers choose for him.

"I know lots and lots of people in the village, many are my friends, I don't want to create tensions," Hoffmann said in a phone interview. "So no politics."

"Politics," the mayor added, "often do more harm than good."

Even in a country with ingrained traditions of violent contestation, where the revolutionaries of 1789 guillotined King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette, an upsurge of physical and verbal attacks and online torrents of hatred directed at public officials — often, now, over COVID-19 policies — are ringing alarm bells.

Violence hasn't approached the level of the storming of the U.S. Capitol by Donald Trump supporters in 2021. Nor have French lawmakers been killed like their counterparts in Britain. There, the fatal stabbing of a Member of Parliament in October prompted renewed national soul-searching about the safety of elected officials with a proud tradition of readily meeting voters.

Still, there's mounting disquiet in France in the wake of apparent arson attacks in December that targeted a lawmaker and a mayor, both aligned with President Emmanuel Macron, and other violence targeting elected officials as the government steadily increased pressure on the non-vaccinated to get COVID-19 jabs to curb the surge of infections fueled by the omicron variant.

The Interior Ministry recorded a year-on-year increase of 47% in acts of violence directed at elected officials through the first 11 months of 2021, with 162 lawmakers and 605 mayors or their deputies reporting attacks. Lawmakers say death threats have become everyday occurrences. Titled "decapitation," an email received by lawmaker Ludovic Mendes in November read: "That's how we dealt with tyrants during the French Revolution."

This month, during protests against France's vaccine pass that bars the unvaccinated from cafés and other venues, about 30 angry people besieged the office of lawmaker Romain Grau, shoving him and yelling furiously.

"Death! We'll get you all!" shouted one man who launched a slap at the lawmaker's head. Grau later told broadcaster TF1 that he feared the confrontation would finish "in a blood bath and a lynching."

When lawmaker Pascal Bois' garage went up in flames in December, the words, "Vote no" and "It's going to blow!" were spray-painted on an outside wall, which he took as an intimidation attempt before parliamentary passage of the vaccine pass this month.

The National Assembly president, Richard Ferrand, says more than 540 of the 577 lawmakers have reported threats or verbal and physical attacks.

"France isn't bathed in fire and blood. These are acts of brutal minorities," Ferrand told the parliamentary TV channel this week. "Still, it seems to me that we have ratcheted up a notch, expressing a rage that is new."

Anti-vaccination sentiment is also dovetailing with residual anger among "yellow vest" protesters. Their frequently violent demonstrations against Macron rocked his government before the pandemic. Recent

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protests against COVID-19 measures have again seen some demonstrators wearing yellow vests.

When Bernard Denis was jolted awake by a loud boom in the middle of the night in December, the mayor of the Normandy village of Saint-Côme-du-Mont discovered his cars on fire and the words, "The mayor supports Macron," daubed in black on a wall.

Also written was "Zemour president" — a misspelt apparent reference to presidential candidate Eric Zemmour, a far-right rabble-rouser with repeated hate-speech convictions.

Around 42,000 elected officials are empowered to sponsor a candidate for the presidential race. The bar of 500 endorsements is intended to whittle down the field. Endorsing a candidate doesn't require agreeing with their politics. Some sponsors simply want a politically broad election choice. But because endorsements are public, they're also not without potential consequences.

In Sainte-Anastasie, Hoffmann is keen to participate. But the mayor wants to avoid any risk of villagers turning on him if he decides alone, of them saying: "You endorsed him so you support him, you're this and that, you're red, yellow, green, blue, blue-white-and-red' or whatever."

Hoffmann is instead pledging to endorse their choice, even if the winner of the ad hoc vote he's organizing isn't aligned with his own politics, which he keeps to himself. In the 2017 presidential run-off that Macron won, the village voted by a large majority for the loser, far-right leader Marine Le Pen, who is running again.

Villagers will choose from around 45 would-be candidates, including Macron, who Hoffmann assumes will seek re-election even though the president hasn't yet said so.

And thus, Hoffmann hopes, harmony will reign in what he calls "the village of my heart."

"I want to give it, my village, everything I have," he said, "and I don't want politics to encroach on that."

EXPLAINER: Can Portugal election clear political roadblock?

By BARRY HATTON Associated Press

LISBON, Portugal (AP) — Portuguese voters go to the polls Sunday, two years earlier than scheduled, after a political crisis over a blocked spending bill brought down the minority Socialist government and triggered a snap election.

The Socialist Party has been in power since 2015, with Portugal one of only a half-dozen European countries having a left-of-center government. It faces a strong challenge from the center-right Social Democratic Party, its traditional rival.

Some 10.8 million voters are eligible to choose 230 lawmakers in the Republican Assembly, Portugal's parliament, where political parties then decide who forms a government.

Here's a look at what's happening:

WHY HAVE AN EARLY ELECTION?

Parliament last November rejected the Socialist government's spending plan for 2022.

In previous years, the Socialists had relied on the support of their left-of-center sympathizers in parliament — the Left Bloc and the Portuguese Communist Party — to ensure the state budget had enough votes to pass.

But this time their differences, especially over health spending and workers' rights, were too hard to bridge, and Socialist Prime Minister António Costa was left short of votes to pass his party's plan.

Portugal's president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, said the 2022 budget is "crucial," because it needs to relaunch the economy after the pandemic. He called a snap election so the Portuguese can decide what path the country should take.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Portugal is poised to begin deploying some 45 billion euros (\$50 billion) of aid from the European Union to help fire up the economy post-pandemic.

Two-thirds of that sum is meant for public projects, such as major infrastructure, giving the next govern-

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ment a huge windfall to spend. The rest is to help selected private sector projects.

The 2022 state budget forecast GDP growth of 5.5% this year, one of the highest among countries that use the euro currency, with a jobless rate of around 6.5% — roughly the same as now.

The new government will be sworn in for a four-year term.

WHAT ARE THE CHOICES?

The Socialist Party is promising to increase the minimum monthly salary, earned by more than 800,000 people, to 900 euros (\$1,021) by 2026. It is currently 705 euros (\$800). Low wages are a common grievance among voters.

The Socialists also want to “start a national conversation” about cutting the working week to four days, from five.

The Social Democratic Party is promising income tax cuts and more help for private companies. Party leader Rui Rio wants to cut corporate tax from the current 21% to 17% by 2024.

Those two parties traditionally collect around 70% of the vote.

The Portuguese Communist Party and the Left Bloc are potential allies for the Socialists. The conservative Popular Party has in the past allied with the Social Democratic Party.

Several other smaller parties are presenting candidates nationwide and could become kingmakers by supporting a minority government.

They range from the populist Chega! (Enough!), which opposes large-scale immigration and demands more support for the police, to the People-Animals-Nature party which wants tougher animal welfare protection and tighter environmental controls.

WHO'S FAVORED TO WIN?

Opinion polls suggest a close race between the Socialists and Social Democrats. That likely means the ballot will produce another vulnerable minority government and a rocky period of horse-trading for parliamentary votes before a budget can be passed.

The Socialists, smarting from the collapse of their outgoing government, say they no longer trust their allies on the left.

The Social Democrats, meanwhile, may have to address a surge in support for the Chega! populists, whose policies they find distasteful.

HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED THE BALLOT?

More than a million eligible voters could be in home confinement on election day, authorities say, and officials have struggled to reconcile the constitutional right to vote with their duty to protect public health.

The highly contagious omicron variant has brought record daily infections of over 50,000 recently, compared with fewer than 1,000 in November. Portugal's high vaccination rate of 89% of the population has largely safeguarded the health system, officials say.

The main parties shunned their traditional flag-waving campaign rallies to avoid large gatherings. Party leaders attended 36 live television debates in the first half of January — many more than usual.

Thousands of poll workers got a booster shot ahead of the ballot.

Early voting possibilities were extended, and infected people are exceptionally allowed to leave isolation to vote, with the government recommending they cast their ballot in the slower evening period.

Joni Mitchell joining Neil Young in protest over Spotify

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Joni Mitchell said Friday she is seeking to remove all of her music from Spotify in solidarity with Neil Young, who ignited a protest against the streaming service for airing a podcast that featured a figure who has spread misinformation about the coronavirus.

Mitchell, who like Young is a California-based songwriter who had much of her success in the 1970s, is

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the first prominent musician to join Young's effort.

"Irresponsible people are spreading lies that are costing people their lives," Mitchell said Friday in a message posted on her website. "I stand in solidarity with Neil Young and the global scientific and medical communities on this issue."

Following Young's action this week, Spotify said it had policies in place to remove misleading content from its platform and has removed more than 20,000 podcast episodes related to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

But the service has said nothing about comedian Joe Rogan, whose podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience" is the centerpiece of the controversy. Last month Rogan interviewed on his podcast Dr. Robert Malone, an infectious disease specialist who has been banned from Twitter for spreading COVID misinformation.

Rogan is one of the streaming service's biggest stars, with a contract that could earn him more than \$100 million.

Young had called on other artists to support him following his action. While Mitchell, 78, is not a current hitmaker, the Canadian native's Spotify page said she had 3.7 million monthly listeners to her music. Her songs "Big Yellow Taxi" and "A Case of You" have both been streamed more than 100 million times on the service.

In a message on his website Friday, Young said that "when I left Spotify, I felt better."

"Private companies have the right to choose what they profit from, just as I can choose not to have my music support a platform that disseminates harmful information," he wrote. "I am happy and proud to stand in solidarity with the front line health care workers who risk their lives every day to help others."

There was no immediate response to a request for comment from Spotify.

First Arabic Netflix film tackles taboos, sparks controversy

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — A Lebanese father tells his teenage daughter she is free to choose whether to have sex with her boyfriend despite his reservations.

An Egyptian wife discreetly slips off her black, lacy underwear from under her clothes before heading out for dinner, and it's not her husband she's trying to tantalize.

And in a dramatic moment, a man reveals that he is gay, a secret he has kept from his longtime friends who are shocked — but seem mostly accepting.

The scenes in the first Arabic Netflix movie have sparked a public drama as intense as the one that plays out onscreen. On social media and TV talk shows and among friends in Egypt and other Middle East countries, a torrent of critics have denounced the film as a threat to family and religious values, encouraging homosexuality and unfit for Arab societies.

Others have rallied to the film's defense, saying detractors are in denial about what happens behind closed doors in real life. Those who don't like the movie, they argue, are free to not subscribe to Netflix or simply skip the film.

Titled "Ashab Wala A'azz," which means "No Dearer Friends," the movie is an Arabic version of the Italian hit "Perfect Strangers," which has inspired many other international remakes. It tells the story of seven friends at a dinner party gone wrong after the hostess suggests that, as a game, they agree to share any calls, text and voice messages. As smart phones buzz, secrets are revealed, infidelities are exposed and relationships are tested.

The controversy has re-ignited debates in the region over artistic freedom versus social and religious sensitivities; censorship; what constitutes a taboo in different societies and portrayal of gay characters.

One irony is that Netflix in the Middle East shows many non-Arabic movies and series that feature gay characters in a positive light, premarital and extramarital sex and even nudity — which is typically banned in cinemas in the region — with little outcry.

But to see those themes broached in an Arabic-language movie with Arab actors went too far for some. (The movie has no nudity; it's largely an hour and half of people talking around a dinner table.)

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"I think if it's a normal foreign movie, I will be ok. But because it's an Arabic movie, I didn't accept it," said 37-year-old Elham, an Egyptian who asked for her last name to be withheld due to the sensitivity of the topic. "We don't accept the idea of homosexuality or intimate relations before marriage in our society, so what happened was a cultural shock."

Homosexuality is a particularly strong taboo in Egypt: A 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 95% in the country say it should be rejected by society; in Lebanon, that number stood at 80% at the time.

The movie's cast are mostly prominent Lebanese stars and its events are set in Lebanon. There, it has garnered many positive reviews. Fans said it discussed relatable topics away from stereotypes that are usually attached to gay characters or cheating spouses on screen.

"There's nothing like the Arab world's hatred of the truth," Rabih Farran, a Lebanese journalist, said in a tweet, referring to the backlash.

It's not the first time that an Arabic-language movie has featured gay characters.

Most famously, the 2006 movie "The Yacoubian Building" with a cast of A-list Egyptian actors caused a stir for, among other things, including a gay main character. But the character was ultimately killed by his lover in what many saw as punishment.

In contrast, the gay character in "Ashab Wala A'azz" is not depicted negatively. Another character encourages him to expose his former employers who let him go for his sexual identity.

Fatima Kamal, a 43-year-old Egyptian, said she didn't find it to be promoting same-sex relationships. She argued that some Egyptian movies in the past were more daring.

"The movie touched on issues that the society refuses to confront but they do happen," she said. "We all have a dark side and hidden stories."

Kamal, who has a 12-year-old son, also dismissed the idea the film would corrupt Arab youth.

"Technology has changed society. Restricting movies is not the answer," she said. "The solution is to watch based on age ratings and to talk to the young and make them understand that not everything we see on the screen is OK."

Talking on a popular TV show, Egyptian lawmaker Mostafa Bakry contended Egyptian and Arab family values are being targeted.

"This is neither art nor creativity," he said. "We must ban Netflix from being in Egypt" even if temporarily.

Magda Maurice, an art critic debating Bakry on the show, disagreed. "This movie exposes what mobile phones do to people and to their normal lives," she said.

"You cannot ban anything now but you can confront it with good art," she added. "Banning has become a thing of the past."

In Egypt, much of the furor focused on the sole Egyptian woman in the cast, Mona Zaki, one of the country's biggest stars. Her character is the one seen slipping off her underwear, a gesture that many critics decried as scandalous.

In social media, some attacked her for participating in the film. The online abuse extended to actors and actresses who supported her or praised her performance. Some criticized her real-life husband, an Egyptian movie star in his own right, for "allowing" her to play the role.

The Egyptian actors syndicate came out in support of Zaki, saying it will not abide verbal abuse or intimidation against actors over their work. It said that freedom of creativity "is protected and defended by the syndicate," while adding that it is committed to the values of Egyptian society.

The Associated Press reached out to Netflix for a comment on the controversy but didn't receive one.

Egypt has long celebrated its cinema industry, which earned it the nickname "Hollywood of the East," lured actors from other Arabic-speaking countries and brought Egyptian movies and dialect into Arab homes the world over.

Film critic Khaled Mahmoud said Egypt "used to produce powerful and daring movies in the 1960s and 1970s." But much of that adventurousness has been lost with the trend of so-called "clean cinema," emphasizing themes deemed family appropriate with no physical intimacy or immodest attire, he added.

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"Society has changed, and the viewership culture has become flawed."

Story lines about affairs or sexual relations are not uncommon in Arabic films. But female stars are commonly grilled in interviews over whether they would agree to wear swimsuits or kiss co-stars on camera.

"Our job is to let art be art," Mahmoud said. "We cannot critique art through a moral lens."

EXPLAINER: Russia's risky options beyond full Ukraine attack

By BEN FOX and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to be preparing to launch an invasion of Ukraine, with more than 100,000 troops positioned around the country. Certainly, the U.S. believes that's the case and President Joe Biden has warned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that an attack could come in February.

But Russia denies it's preparing to invade and Putin's intentions remain a mystery.

Russia, which is seeking a pledge that NATO won't expand to include Ukraine, has options it could pursue short of a full-blown invasion, and other ways to lash out at the U.S. and its allies. All of them carry varying degrees of risk, to Russia and the world.

A look at some of them:

SOMETHING SHORT OF A FULL-SCALE INVASION

In 2014, Russia seized the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine. That year it also started arming rebels in the eastern region known as the Donbas, starting a low-boiling conflict that has killed more than 14,000 people. Many Russia watchers speculate that the recent buildup of Russian troops and naval forces is the next chapter in a larger effort to chip away at Ukraine, perhaps taking advantage as the U.S. and its allies in Europe are distracted by COVID-19 and other issues. Possible scenarios include providing additional support to the Russia-backed rebels or launching a limited invasion, just enough to destabilize Zelenskyy and usher in a pro-Kremlin leader.

Stopping short of a full-scale invasion would give Russia more time to get more forces in place and test the commitment of the U.S. and its allies to the punishing sanctions promised by Biden, says retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, former commander of U.S. Army forces in Europe. "He's going to continue doing what he's doing right now, continuing to apply maximum pressure on Ukraine and to try to destabilize the government to alarm people," Hodges said. "There's a lot of capability in place to do more, should the opportunity present itself."

That might still end up triggering sanctions that could damage the Russian economy and hurt Putin at home. There's also the risk that a limited action isn't enough to achieve the Russian president's goal of undermining European security by rolling back, or at least halting, NATO expansion, says Dmitry Gorenburg, an analyst with CNA, a research organization in Arlington, Virginia. "I don't think it gets him what he wants," he said. "It didn't get them that before. So why now?"

ECONOMIC WARFARE

Russia is a major player in global energy, the third-largest oil producer after the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, and the source of about 40% of the natural gas used in Europe. It is also a major exporter of wheat, particularly to developing nations. Any move to cut the flow of energy could be painful to Europe in winter with gas and oil prices already high. Similarly, rising food prices are a problem around the world.

Putin has some economic leverage, but there's no indication he would use it and it could end up hurting Russia in the long run, says Edward Fishman, a former State Department official who is now a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center. Any move by Russia to cut off gas shipments would push European nations to find alternative sources for the future. "It's a weapon you can only use once," he said. "You do that once and you lose that leverage forever." The Biden administration is already working with Qatar and other suppliers to replace Russian gas if needed.

CYBERATTACKS

There's no doubt Russia has the capability to conduct significant cyberattacks in Ukraine and around the world, and would almost certainly do so again as part of any operation against its neighbor. The De-

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partment of Homeland Security warned law enforcement agencies on Jan. 23 that Russia would consider initiating a cyberattack on the U.S., including possible actions against critical infrastructure, if it perceived the response to an invasion of Ukraine "threatened its long-term national security."

Russia is the suspected culprit in a 2015 hack against the Ukraine power grid. Hackers this month temporarily shut down government websites in Ukraine, underscoring how cybersecurity remains a pivotal concern in the standoff with Russia. "Whatever the size and scale and nature of their ground and air attacks, cyber will be a big part of anything they do," warns Hodges.

The risk to the world is that hostile activity against Ukraine could spread, as the cyberattack known as notPetya did to devastating effect in 2017. The downside to Russia is the U.S. and other nations have the power to retaliate, as Biden warned Putin in June. "He knows there are consequences," Biden said.

THE CHINA FACTOR

China isn't a direct player in the standoff over Ukraine, but it plays a role. Observers have warned that Moscow could respond to Washington's rejection of its security demands by bolstering military ties with China. Russia and China have held a series of joint war games, including naval drills and patrols by long-range bombers over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea.

U.S. officials have said they don't think Russia would launch an invasion as President Xi Jinping presides over the opening of the Winter Olympics in Beijing. "The Chinese are not going to be pleased if their Olympics are disrupted by war," Gorenburg said. Putin plans to travel to Beijing to attend the opening of the games, as U.S. and European leaders sit it out to protest human rights abuses.

One theory among Russia watchers is that China is intently following the U.S. and European response over Ukraine to gauge what might happen if it were to move against Taiwan. Hodges sees that as a risk. "If we, with our combined diplomatic and economic power plus military power, cannot stop the president of the Russian Federation from doing something that is so obviously illegal and wrong and aggressive then I don't think President Xi is going to be too impressed with anything that we say about Taiwan or the South China Sea."

A RUSSIAN BUILDUP IN LATIN AMERICA

Senior Russian officials have warned that Moscow could deploy troops or military assets to Cuba and Venezuela. The threats are vague, though Russia does have close ties to both countries as well as Nicaragua. U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan dismissed the idea, and experts in the region and around the world view it as a strategy that probably wouldn't accomplish much, other than to divert Russian forces needed elsewhere, and thus is unlikely to happen.

A more likely scenario is that Russia steps up its already extensive propaganda and misinformation efforts to sharpen divisions in Latin America and elsewhere, including the United States.

A DIPLOMATIC SOLUTION

It's not a foregone conclusion that the standoff ends in an invasion. While the Biden administration said it would not concede to Russia's security demands, there still seems to be some room for diplomacy. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Thursday that the U.S. response "gives hope for the start of a serious conversation on secondary questions."

France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia have agreed to sit down for talks in two weeks, an effort aimed at reviving a 2015 agreement to ease the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Some fear this complicates efforts by the U.S. and NATO to show a united front against Russia.

A stand-down may be good for the world but could come at a cost for Putin, Russian journalist Yulia Latynina warned in a New York Times essay on Friday. She said the Russian president may have used his troop buildup as a bluff, hoping to compel the U.S. and Europe to relinquish any intention of closer ties to Ukraine. "Instead of trapping the United States, Mr. Putin has trapped himself," she wrote. "Caught between armed conflict and a humiliating retreat, he is now seeing his room for maneuver dwindling to nothing."

Trump facing legal, political headwinds as he eyes comeback

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

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CONROE, Texas (AP) — As he prepared to tee off at one of his Florida golf courses, a fellow player introduced Donald Trump as the “45th president of the United States.”

“45th and 47th,” Trump responded matter-of-factly, before hitting his drive.

The quip — a moment of levity on the links captured on shaky cellphone video — was a reminder that the former president often has another presidential run on his mind. But the declaration belied the growing challenges he’s confronting as a series of complex legal investigations ensnare Trump, his family and many associates.

The probes, which are unfolding in multiple jurisdictions and consider everything from potential fraud and election interference to the role he played in the Jan. 6 insurrection, represent the most serious legal threat Trump has faced in decades of an often litigious public life. They’re intensifying as a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found Trump’s iron grip on the GOP may be starting to loosen.

His popularity among Republicans is declining somewhat, with 71% saying they have a favorable opinion of Trump compared with 78% in a September 2020 AP-NORC/USAFacts poll. But the new poll shows only a narrow majority of Republicans — 56% — want him to run for president in 2024. The poll found that 44% of Republicans do not want Trump to run.

Despite the legal and political headwinds, those around Trump describe him as unbothered, emboldened by a sense of invincibility that has allowed him to recover from devastating turns, including two impeachments, that would have ended the careers of other politicians. He’s powering ahead, and continuing to tease a comeback run for president.

“He’s in great spirits,” said Darrell Scott, an Ohio pastor and Trump ally who met with the former president this week.

Trump huddled with top aides in Florida this week as he plots a midterm strategy that could serve as a springboard for future efforts. He’ll hold another campaign-style rally in Texas on Saturday ahead of the state’s March 1 elections that formally kick off the midterm primary season.

Representatives for Trump did not respond to requests for comment on the investigations or polling. In interviews and appearances, mostly on right-wing media outlets, he often boasts of his endorsement record as he aims to reward candidates who pledge loyalty to his vision of the party and parrot his election lies.

But his effort to freeze the field of Republicans eyeing the 2024 field has been uneven. Some, including former Vice President Mike Pence and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have so far refused to demur, making speeches and traveling to key states that suggest they are strongly considering campaigns. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is also seen as another contender for the nomination and drew attention recently when he said that one of his biggest regrets as governor was not pushing back when Trump urged Americans to stay home in the early days of the COVID pandemic to stop the virus’s spread.

As Trump tries to move forward, so do the legal cases against him.

On Monday, judges in Georgia approved a request for a special grand jury by the Fulton County prosecutor who has been investigating whether Trump and others broke the law by trying to pressure Georgia officials to throw out President Joe Biden’s victory in the 2020 election. Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis has said her office received information “indicating a reasonable probability” that the election had been “subject to possible criminal disruptions.”

In New York, state Attorney General Letitia James claimed in a court filing last week that her office uncovered evidence that Trump’s company used “fraudulent or misleading” valuations of its golf clubs, skyscrapers and other property to secure loans and tax benefits. While her lawyers said they hadn’t decided whether to bring a lawsuit in connection with the allegations, they revealed the company overstated the value of land donations made in New York and California on paperwork submitted to the IRS and misreported the size of Trump’s Manhattan penthouse, among other misleading valuations.

The Manhattan District Attorney’s Office has also been working with James’ office on a parallel criminal investigation, which resulted in charges last summer against Trump’s company, the Trump Organization, and its longtime finance chief, Allen Weisselberg.

Meanwhile, in Washington, the Jan. 6 committee investigating the violent insurrection has interviewed

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hundreds of witnesses, issued dozens of subpoenas and obtained tens of thousands of pages of records, including texts, emails and phone records from people close to Trump, as well as thousands of pages of White House records that Trump fought to shield from public view. Among them: a draft executive order that proposed using Defense Department assets to seize voting machines, the committee's chairman, Rep. Bennie Thompson, has said.

A top Justice Department official said this week that prosecutors are investigating fake certificates sent to the National Archives with made-up slates of electors who wrongly declared Trump the winner in seven states he lost as part of a desperate campaign to subvert the voters' will. Attorney General Merrick Garland has said the Justice Department remains committed to "holding all January 6th perpetrators, at any level, accountable under law, whether they were present that day or were otherwise criminally responsible for the assault on our democracy."

As president, Trump was largely shielded from legal consequence. But no longer.

David Weinstein, a former federal prosecutor in Miami, said that, until now, Trump's legal problems have largely been relegated to "money things," with various lawsuits seeking payouts. But he described what Trump is facing now, particularly in Georgia and Washington, as "more significant, because with those comes the potential exposure to criminal punishment."

"If they can prove intention, knowledge, involvement in an ongoing conspiracy," he said, "that's potential criminal exposure, something he's never faced before."

But those who have worked with Trump said he and those around him are likely to continue to brush off the probes as nothing more than politically motivated "witch hunts" aimed at damaging his future political prospects. After spending so many years jumping from one crisis to the next, from the Russia investigation to inquiries about everything from his Washington hotel lease to payoffs to a former porn star, being under investigation in TrumpWorld is the norm.

For many in his circle, "It's a badge of honor to be subpoenaed," said Stephanie Grisham, the former White House press secretary who quit on Jan. 6 and has since penned an anti-Trump book.

"It's easy to say 'It's just another witch hunt' because that's what we said about everything," she said. "People are doubling down. That's what we do in TrumpWorld, we double down. And you just claim it's a witch hunt, you claim it's political theater. And that's how you get your supporters to continue to donate money and to continue to believe they're on the good side."

Supreme Court pick holds import for Black women in the law

By JAMIE STENGLE and JONATHAN DREW Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. (AP) — When Markicia Horton graduates this spring from the Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall School of Law in Houston and takes the bar, she'll be stepping into a world where a Black woman is set to be on the U.S. Supreme Court for the first time in its 232-year history.

With Stephen Breyer's retirement from the court and President Joe Biden's commitment to name a Black woman as his nominee, it is likely that, as the 25-year-old Horton moves into a profession, there will be a Black woman as a Supreme Court justice. What that means for her and thousands of other young women of color in law schools or serving as lawyers around the country is incalculable.

But it also comes with concerns. According to the National Association for Law Placement, Black women made up 3.17% of associates at America's law firms in 2021 but less than 1% of partners. Women of color overall made up nearly 16% of associates at America's law firms but only about 4% of the partners.

And across the federal bench, Black women hold 45 of the 850 lifetime appointments to district and appeals judgeships — or about 5%, according to government data.

"I feel like it's really important to have African Americans in positions that really do affect us," said Horton, who has a bachelor's degree in geoscience, and plans to pursue work in energy and environmental law in hopes of representing Black communities that are affected by environmental issues.

"A lot of times, when I see environmental issues that are in predominantly African American communities or low socio-economic communities, as a whole, I never see any other faces that represent the whole. I

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kind of want to be that driving force.”

That, Horton said, is what a Black woman on the Supreme Court will bring to the table. “I think it will open so many doors for a lot of us, especially when you look at the numbers in the legal profession and how often African American women do leave big law firms because of the lack of opportunities,” she said, adding that African American women are not making partner at the same rate as others.

“Having someone sit on the highest bench in the country, I definitely feel like it will open a lot of doors for us,” Horton said.

She said having a Black woman on the court will also be an important way to bring a new viewpoint to the court that hasn’t been there before.

“Reading cases, reading opinions of justices, it’s very interesting to see the difference in opinions based on gender, based on race,” Horton said.

Her point of view at the Houston school is one shared more than 1,100 miles away at the North Carolina Central University School of Law, where Professor Brenda Reddix-Small raised the issue during a Zoom session of the constitutional law course she teaches.

Second-year law student Antoinette Stone, 26, said that, with liberal-leaning justices still outnumbered, Biden’s nominee might not sway overall case outcomes, but that even dissenting opinions “still hold weight.”

Fellow second-year student Destiny Boone, 27, thought the diversity on the court was important but felt that whoever the nominee is, her credentials would be questioned more because of her race.

“I personally believe that diversity is important,” the student from Suffolk, Virginia, said, but “I feel that unfortunately, we do live in a society where African Americans ... have to work twice as hard to get to certain positions.”

In North Carolina, examples of prominent Black female jurists include current state Supreme Court Justice Anita Earls, who has been suggested as someone Biden could consider for the vacancy created by Breyer, and former state Supreme Court Chief Justice Cheri Beasley, who is favored to win the Democratic nomination in the state’s U.S. Senate race. Beasley was the first Black woman to oversee North Carolina’s judicial branch.

After the class ended, several students lingered to ask questions about assignments, and talk turned back to Biden’s upcoming pick. Adaora Oguno, a 28-year old second-year student from Nashville, Tennessee, said that Biden’s pick will fill a century’s old vacancy that has left issues specific to Black women unaddressed.

“At the end of the day, we’re the only ones who have not had a seat at the table,” she said. “The fact that there has not been a Black female justice yet is kind of ridiculous.”

In subsequent phone interview, Oguno said that she’s cautiously optimistic about Biden’s promise and hopes he’s able to fulfill it. She said that she hopes to work as a prosecutor and eventually become a judge herself, so having a Black woman as a U.S. Supreme Court justice would prove that a pathway to the top echelon of the legal profession is attainable.

“I’ve always wanted to be a judge, but a lot of times you have these dreams and they’re just a dream. It’s not reality. But for me, it makes it where, ‘Oh, this can be a reality,’” she said.

Alleged Maduro co-conspirator says CIA knew about coup plans

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press Writer

MIAMI (AP) — A retired Venezuelan army general says U.S. officials at the highest levels of the CIA and other federal agencies were aware of his efforts to oust Nicolás Maduro — a role he says should immediately debunk criminal charges that he worked alongside the socialist leader to flood the U.S. with cocaine.

The stunning accusation came in a court filing late Friday by attorneys for Cliver Alcalá seeking to have thrown out narcoterrorist charges filed nearly two years ago by federal prosecutors in Manhattan.

“Efforts to overthrow the Maduro regime have been well known to the United States government,” Alcalá’s attorneys said in a November 2021 letter to prosecutors that accompanied their motion to have the charges dismissed.. “His opposition to the regime and his alleged efforts to overthrow it were reported

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to the highest levels of the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Council, and the Department of the Treasury.”

The court records raise fresh questions about what the Trump administration knew about the failed plot to oust Maduro involving Jordan Goudreau, an idealistic if battle-scarred former U.S. Green Beret, and a ragtag army of Venezuelan military deserters he was helping Alcalá train at secret camps in Colombia around the time of his arrest.

Alcalá has been an outspoken critic of Maduro almost since he took office in 2013 following the death of Hugo Chávez.

But despite such open hostility toward Maduro, he and his sworn enemy were charged together in a second superseding indictment with being part of a cabal of senior Venezuelan officials and military officers that worked with Colombian rebels to allegedly send 250 metric tons of cocaine a year to the U.S. .

While the attorneys provided no details about what U.S. government may have known about Alcalá's coup plotting, they said they believe his activities “were communicated at the highest levels of a number of U.S. government agencies” including the CIA, Treasury and Justice departments, the NSC and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

To that end they are seeking documents and information, much of it classified, regarding communications between U.S. officials and members of Venezuela's opposition about Alcalá. Those U.S. officials include former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former Attorney General William Barr as well as senior officials at the White House and unnamed CIA operatives in Colombia.

The CIA didn't immediately respond to a request for comment sent Friday night.

Also named as having knowledge of Alcalá's activities are two allies of opposition leader Juan Guaidó — who the U.S. recognizes as Venezuela's legitimate leader — as well as Miami-based political strategist J.J. Rendon, who signed on behalf of Guaidó a never-executed agreement for Goudreau to carry out a snatch and grab operation against Maduro.

“The evidence is clear that he has been openly and actively opposed to his alleged co-conspirators for at least the past eight years,” attorneys wrote in the letter to prosecutors included in Friday's filing. “Indeed, his conduct, in support of the democratic ideals in which he believes, constituted treason against the very people whom the government alleges were his co-conspirators for which they seek his detention, imprisonment, and life.”

In the telling of Alcalá's attorneys, on the eve of launching what would've been his second armed raid against Maduro, the former army major general received a knock on the door from a U.S. law enforcement official at his home in Barranquilla, Colombia informing him that he had been indicted.

“The agent informed (him) that he could either board a private jet bound for New York or be held in a Colombian jail where he would no doubt be targeted by the Venezuelan intelligence services for assassination,” Alcalá's attorneys claim. “Left with little choice, (he) agreed to accompany the agent back to the United States.”

Although Alcalá was out of the picture in a Manhattan jail, a small group of would-be freedom fighters pushed ahead and on May 3, 2020 — two days after an investigation by The Associated Press blew the lid on the clandestine camps — launched a crossborder raid that was easily mopped up.

Operation Gideon — or the Bay of Piglets, as the bloody fiasco came to be known — ended with six insurgents dead and two of Goudreau's former Special Forces buddies behind bars in Caracas. It also delivered a major propaganda coup to Maduro, who has long accused the U.S. of seeking to assassinate him.

The U.S. has always denied any involvement in violent attempts to overthrow Maduro. However, Pompeo's cryptic statement that the U.S. had no “direct involvement” in Operation Gedeon left some observers wondering what the U.S. may have known about the plot in a region where the CIA has a long history of coup-plotting during the Cold War.

Evidence that the U.S. was aware of Alcalá's clandestine activities could bolster his defense at trial that even if he had been a member of a drug smuggling ring — which he denies — he took steps to withdraw from the criminal conspiracy years before being charged.

Alcalá's attorneys also argue that despite having pored over thousands of documents, video and audio

recordings turned over by prosecutors, they could find no evidence demonstrating Alcalá was involved in the alleged narcotics conspiracy.

The only act tying Alcalá to the conspiracy in the 28-page indictment is a 2008 meeting he allegedly attended with Chávez's former spy boss Hugo Carvajal and socialist party boss Diosdado Cabello in which it was agreed Alcalá would take on unspecified "additional duties" to coordinate drug trafficking.

Alcalá has been living in Colombia since fleeing Venezuela in 2018 after the discovery of a conspiracy that he was secretly leading in hopes of ousting Maduro. The U.S. offered a \$10 million reward for his arrest when Barr at a press conference announced he, Maduro and several other senior Venezuelan officials had been indicted.

Alcala's attorneys also contend that around 2018, Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Lockard indicated in various discussions that his office had decided not to charge Alcala with narcotics-related crimes because the evidence against him was "equivocal."

They also produced a copy of a 2014 email by one of Alcala's attorneys, Adam Kaufmann, to the then-assigned prosecutor recounting a conversation he had with DEA agents who purportedly told him the government had located a witness with information that had led them to drop their investigation.

Alcala's defense says it didn't receive any materials substantiating the government's apparent misgivings. Under what's known as Brady rules, prosecutors are required to hand over to defendants evidence that may help them prove their innocence.

Before surrendering in 2020, Alcalá shocked many by claiming responsibility for a stockpile of U.S.-made assault weapons and military equipment seized on a highway in Colombia for what he said was a planned incursion into Venezuela to remove Maduro. Without offering much in the way of details, he said he had a contract with Guaidó and his "American advisers" to purchase the weapons but blamed the U.S. backed opposition for betraying the cause.

"We had everything ready," Alcalá said in a video published on social media moments before turning himself in. "But circumstances that have plagued us throughout this fight against the regime generated leaks from the very heart of the opposition, the part that wants to coexist with Maduro."

Follow Goodman: @APJoshGoodman

Willow Biden joins long and varied line of White House pets

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Welcome, Willow, to a long line of presidential pets.

President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden have added a green-eyed tabby from Pennsylvania to the White House family, the first feline tenant since President George W. Bush's controversially named cat India.

The 2-year-old Willow joins Commander, a recently acquired German shepherd puppy who follows two other German shepherds, Champ and Major. Champ died in June at age 13, while Major, a 3-year-old rescue, was sent off to a quieter life after behaving aggressively.

With Presidents James K. Polk and Donald Trump among the no-pets exceptions, animals have a long history in the White House.

Highlights of past presidential pets:

PRESIDENTS AND PONIES

There have been a few ponies and many horses, including the very first pets to occupy the White House with President John Adams and first lady Abigail. They had horses named Cleopatra and Caesar, along with dogs Juno and Satan.

Caroline Kennedy, the daughter of John F. Kennedy, and her friends famously enjoyed riding her pony Macaroni on the South Lawn, along with another one named Tex, but Macaroni was usually stabled at the Kennedy family home in Virginia.

The White House once had stables of its own used by many presidents, the last being Theodore Roosevelt. The Rough Rider and ex-ranch owner loved horses. Sons Quentin and Kermit once smuggled their pony Algonquin onto the second floor of the White House in an elevator to visit a sick sibling, said Andrew

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Hager, a presidential pet historian from the unofficial online Presidential Pet Museum.

The White House stables were damaged in a fire in 1864, killing several horses and ponies of Abraham Lincoln and his children. One account has a distraught Lincoln trying in vain to save son Tad's pet pony.

THE CAT PEOPLE

While dogs have been more frequent residents, there have been plenty of cat people in the White House: The Clintons, the Carters and the Fords to name a few.

It was the Bushes' cat India, however, who sparked protests in 2004 among nationalists in Kerala, India's southernmost state. They considered the name an insult.

Lincoln and first lady Mary Todd also kept cats, Hager said.

"There's a story that he would feed one of his cats from the plates in the White House dining room, then his wife objected and he said something like, 'Well, if these plates were good enough for James Buchanan, they're good enough for the cat,'" he said.

Caroline Kennedy briefly had a cat, Tom Kitten (aka Tom Terrific) but he made her allergy-prone dad sneeze and was sent off to live with a staffer. The media was invited to take photos of Tom Kitten upon his arrival in 1961. He lasted only a few weeks at the White House.

William McKinley had two Angora kittens named Valeriano Weyler and Enrique DeLome, along with roosters and a parrot he named Washington Post, Hager said.

THE DOG PEOPLE

There have been oh so many dogs. The Obama's Bo, a male Portuguese water dog, joined the family at the White House in April 2009. Sunny, a female of the same breed, came along in August 2013.

Among President John Tyler's pets were a pair of "gentle giant" Irish wolfhounds. He gave them to his second wife, Julia, as a gift. Theodore Roosevelt, an avid animal lover, had a pack of dogs, snakes, guinea pigs and, by one account, a one-legged rooster.

Kennedy was gifted the mixed-breed Pushinka by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

Franklin Roosevelt had several pets but his favorite was a dog named Fala, named for a family ancestor. (Fala's full name: Murray the Outlaw of Falahill.) He was often seen at the 32nd president's side, until Roosevelt's death in 1945. Given to the Roosevelts by a cousin, the Scottish terrier outlived him by seven years and was buried nearby.

Perhaps the most famous of dogs was Checkers, though he had his coming out before Richard Nixon became president. As Dwight Eisenhower's vice presidential running mate in 1952, Nixon vowed to keep the cocker spaniel given to his family by a Texas supporter amid allegations he misused campaign contributions.

UNUSUAL PETS

Word has it that Andrew Johnson had no official pets but left a basket of flour and some water for the resident White House mice every night and refused to have them exterminated.

"So I like to consider them pets but, you know, that's kind of an open question," Hager said.

Other presidents kept unusual animals.

William H. Taft had two prize cows: Mooly Woolly and Pauline. They grazed on the White House lawn and provided the home's milk and butter.

Theodore Roosevelt was gifted a badger by a girl in Kansas during a train stop.

"He was really excited, but it bit him so he wasn't happy about that," Hager said.

And Benjamin Harrison once received two opossums from supporters in Maryland, naming them Mr. Reciprocity and Mr. Protection in homage to two of his party's political platforms.

A special guest at the 1927 White House Easter Egg Roll? First lady Grace Coolidge's beloved pet raccoon.

Woodrow Wilson, according to Hager, had a not-so-nice Shropshire ram named Old Ike. According to a newspaper account in 1920, the purebred ram was "forceful and strategic," often charging White House staff and police. Wilson, the 28th president, eventually banished Old Ike from the White House to Maryland.

Old Ike had a habit of chewing tobacco. Cigars, to be exact. He'd feast on discarded cigar butts. According to the ram's obituary in the Spartanburg (S.C.) Herald in 1927, Old Ike's caretaker gave him one final chew in his old age, and "he dropped off peacefully munching it."

The ram led a herd of sheep that kept the grounds trimmed up in a show by Wilson to tighten his belt and free the White House gardeners to join the first world war effort. Although many other presidents had farm animals, Wilson auctioned off the flock's fleece in 1919. Combined, the auction earned \$58,823 for the Red Cross, a huge sum at the time.

"Thankfully, we don't have to pay that much for a sweater," Hager said.

Pittsburgh bridge collapses, drops city bus into ravine

By GENE PUSKAR and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — A 50-year-old bridge collapsed in Pittsburgh early Friday, requiring rescuers to rappel down a ravine and form a human chain to reach a few occupants of a municipal bus that plummeted along with the span. No deaths were reported.

The collapse came hours before President Joe Biden arrived in the city to promote his \$1 trillion infrastructure law, which has earmarked about \$1.6 billion for Pennsylvania bridge maintenance.

At least four people required hospital treatment. Five other vehicles were also on the bridge at the time. The cause was being investigated, and crews searched under the debris for additional victims.

A large crack showed on the end of the bridge where the segmented bus landed 150 feet (46 meters) down in the ravine, as if hit by an earthquake. A car landed upside down in front of the bus, which was operated by the Pittsburgh area's transit agency.

The Forbes Avenue bridge over Fern Hollow Creek in Frick Park came down at 6:39 a.m., city officials said. The loud noise from the collapse was followed by a hissing sound and the smell of natural gas, witnesses said.

"The first sound was much more intense, and kind of a rumbling, which I guess was the structure, the deck hitting the ground," said Ken Doyno, a resident who lives four houses away. "I mean, the whole house rattled at that point."

Ruptured gas lines along the bridge produced the leak, and the supply of gas was shut off within a half-hour, city officials said.

As Biden toured the scene, an officer told him a person who was running by helped first responders get people out of cars. He called it a miracle.

"It really is, it's astounding," Biden said.

By midafternoon, three adults were being treated, and all were in fair condition, the UPMC hospital system said. A fourth person had received treatment and was released.

The National Transportation Safety Board sent a team to investigate. The agency tweeted a photo late Friday of Chair Jennifer Homendy at the scene.

A search-and-rescue team combed the area, said Sam Wasserman, a spokesperson for Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey. Drones were brought in to help.

Most of the 10 people evaluated for injuries were first responders who were checked for exhaustion or because of the cold and snowy weather, Gainey said.

The segmented bus operated by the Port Authority of Allegheny County had two passengers in addition to the driver, said Adam Brandolph, spokesperson for the agency.

The bus driver, Daryl Luciani, told WPXI-TV that as soon as he reached the bridge, he believed it was collapsing.

"I could just feel it," Luciani told the station. "The bus was bouncing and shaking and it seems long, but it was probably less than a minute that the bus finally came to a stop, and I was just thankful that nobody on the bus was hurt."

The passengers appeared to be OK, he said, so he pulled the air brake and waited for help to arrive. First responders reached them after descending with flashlights in the predawn darkness and used a rope to help him and other occupants get to safety, Luciani said.

About two hours after the collapse, Brandolph said, one of the passengers was on another bus, began complaining of injuries and was taken to a hospital. The driver and other passenger were not hurt, according to Brandolph.

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The bus had started its route in downtown Pittsburgh and had been heading to the suburban community of Braddock.

"Judging by the time of day, had this bus been traveling inbound, toward downtown, there likely would have been more people on the bus and obviously could have been a much, much more dire situation," Brandolph said.

The bus had seven or eight cameras, and any footage they captured of the collapse will be part of the investigation, Brandolph said.

Neighbors said a gas company worker went door to door to get them to evacuate from the immediate vicinity before the gas was successfully shut off.

"Apart from just this abiding noise, we could begin to smell gas and that was the truly frightening thing, then with that smell we both said, let's get dressed and get out of here," said Lyn Krynski, whose home is nearest the bridge.

"It sounded like a weather phenomenon more than anything," said Douglas Gwilym, who was shoveling about an inch of snow when he heard the noise. "It was all I had to compare it to — it was this odd, whooshing sound."

The bridge is an important artery that leads to the Squirrel Hill and Oakland neighborhoods and is a popular route toward downtown Pittsburgh. Authorities told motorists to avoid the area. Several neighbors said a weather-prompted two-hour school delay may have prevented a far worse human tragedy.

At the site of the collapse, Pennsylvania Lt. Gov. John Fetterman called it "just an awful, surreal scene."

"I hope it's a wake-up call to the nation that we need to make these infrastructure investments," Fetterman said.

The steel bridge, which was built in 1970, carries about 14,500 vehicles a day, according to a 2005 estimate. Wasserman said the most recent inspection occurred in September but the report was not immediately available.

But a September 2019 inspection of the city-owned bridge revealed the deck and superstructure to be in poor condition, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation's National Bridge Inventory.

A spreadsheet on the state Department of Transportation website listed the bridge's overall condition as poor, which, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, means "deterioration of primary structural elements has advanced."

East Coast buttons up ahead of snow; Boston could get 2 feet

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Last-minute shoppers cleared grocery shelves and raided snowblower dealers Friday along the East Coast ahead of a storm that could drop 2 feet or more of fast-falling snow on some of the nation's biggest metro areas, including Philadelphia, New York and Boston.

Officials from Virginia to Massachusetts declared states of emergency, imposed parking bans and warned of hazardous travel in advance of wet, heavy snow that could fall as fast as 5 inches per hour. Parts of 10 states were under blizzard warnings.

The storm threatened whiteout conditions, high winds and coastal flooding, followed by intense cold that could leave many people shivering amid power outages. Airlines canceled thousands of flights in advance.

Merrick McCormack was among hundreds who packed a Shaw's Supermarket in Warwick, Rhode Island, with the entire state under a blizzard warning and officials mobilizing more than 500 snowplows.

"I don't fuss with storms. I know in a couple of days, we're going to be free and clear. No need to panic," the 51-year-old Cranston resident said, flashing some New England stoicism as he unloaded his groceries.

Regional supermarket giant Stop & Shop pleaded with customers to practice restraint, warning that staffing and supply woes caused by the coronavirus pandemic will mean barer shelves and longer checkout lines.

"We ask shoppers to buy what they need and save some for their neighbors," the grocery chain said in a statement.

The Boston area, which was under a blizzard warning, could get buried under 18 to 24 inches (45 to 61 centimeters) of snow, with some isolated spots of eastern Massachusetts seeing as much as 30 inches

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(76), according to the National Weather Service.

Coastal New Jersey was forecast to get as much as 18 inches (46 centimeters) of snow and eastern Long Island up to 17 inches (43). Philadelphia, New York City, and parts of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia could get 10 (25) or more.

Washington was forecast to be spared the worst of the snowfall, with only 1 to 3 inches (2.5 to 8 centimeters).

Airlines canceled about 1,300 U.S. flights Friday and more than 3,100 on Saturday. More than 90% of Saturday schedules at Boston's Logan Airport and New York's LaGuardia were scrubbed, according to FlightAware.

Delta Air Lines said it would suspend flights at the three major New York City-area airports and at Logan on Saturday, with the hope of resuming service Sunday afternoon.

Amtrak canceled or limited weekend train service along its busy corridor from Washington to Boston.

Snow began falling Friday evening in parts of Appalachia and was sweeping northward from there and the Carolinas.

The system was expected to intensify into a nor'easter — a coastal storm that churns up the East Coast — and blow into New England early Saturday with wind gusts as high as 70 mph (113 kph).

The refrain from New York Gov. Kathy Hochul and other state executives was: "Just stay off the roads."

Massachusetts banned heavy trucks from interstate highways for most of Saturday, and the Boston area's transit agency said many buses would run only on snow routes.

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan mobilized the National Guard. In Virginia, where a blizzard this month stranded hundreds of motorists for hours on Interstate 95, Gov. Glenn Youngkin said officials had begun positioning resources in anticipation of toppled trees, power outages and tidal flooding.

About 1,800 snowplows were ready in New York City, Sanitation Commissioner Edward Grayson said, while in New England, some officials fretted about a shortage of drivers.

Connecticut Transportation Commissioner Joseph Giulietti said Friday his staffing is down about 30% this weekend because of COVID-19 and other issues.

The state expects to have more than 600 plow and sanding trucks out in addition to contractors, but with snow expected to fall so fast, it might not be enough, he said.

"It depends on the length of the storm," Giulietti said. "Because these people have to keep circling and going back out on the routes."

The worst of the storm was expected to blow by Sunday morning into Canada, where several provinces were under storm warnings.

Shoppers — some of them looking forward to hibernating — crammed grocery stores for bread, eggs, milk and other staples.

Marc Rudkowski — a 28-year-old machine learning engineer — stocked up at the Star Market in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on French bread and wine, as well as balloons and toys for his dog, who turned 1 on Friday.

"He's going to love it. He's a snow dog," Rudkowski said.

In Maine, which was also under a blizzard warning, Rick Tucker kept busy — and cheerful — as customers bought generators, snowblowers, shovels, ice melt and lanterns at Maine Hardware in Portland.

"It sounds like it's going to be a big one," said Tucker, the store president. "We haven't had one of those for a while. It's going to be fun."

'Tiger King' Joe Exotic resentenced to 21 years in prison

By JILL BLEED and SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A federal judge resentenced "Tiger King" Joe Exotic to 21 years in prison on Friday, reducing his punishment by just a year despite pleas from the former zookeeper for leniency as he begins treatment for early-stage cancer.

"Please don't make me die in prison waiting for a chance to be free," he tearfully told a federal judge

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who resentenced him on a murder-for-hire charge.

Joe Exotic — whose real name is Joseph Maldonado-Passage — was convicted in a case involving animal welfare activist Carole Baskin. Both were featured in Netflix's "Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness."

Wearing an orange prison jumpsuit, Maldonado-Passage, 58, still had his trademark mullet hairstyle, but the bleach-blonde had faded to brown and gray.

Baskin and her husband, Howard Baskin, also attended the proceedings, and she said she was fearful that Maldonado-Passage could threaten her.

"He continues to harbor intense feelings of ill will toward me," she told the judge.

Baskin said even with Maldonado-Passage in prison, she has continued to receive "vile, abusive and threatening communications" over the last two years. She told the judge she believes Maldonado-Passage poses an even more serious threat to her now that he has a larger group of supporters because of the popularity of the Netflix series.

Maldonado-Passage's attorneys told the judge their client is suffering from stage-one prostate cancer, along with a disease that compromises his immune system, making him particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

Stage-one prostate cancer means it has been detected early and hasn't spread. Maldonado-Passage previously said that he planned to delay treatment until after his resentencing. Federal officials have said Maldonado-Passage will need up to eight weeks of radiation treatments and would be unable to travel during the treatments.

His attorney Amy Hanna told the judge he's not receiving the proper medical care inside the federal prison system and that a lengthy prison sentence is a "death sentence for Joe that he doesn't deserve."

Prosecutors also told the judge Friday that Maldonado-Passage received a disciplinary write-up in September for being possession of a contraband cellphone and unauthorized headphones that was not included in his pre-sentencing report. Palk added that Maldonado-Passage had four previous disciplinary write-ups, although he described those as "relatively minor and not violent."

Friday's court proceedings came about after a federal appeals court ruled last year that the prison term he's serving on a murder-for-hire conviction should be shortened.

Supporters packed the courtroom, some wearing animal-print masks and shirts that read "Free Joe Exotic." His attorneys said they would appeal the resentencing and petition for a new trial.

"The defense submitted a series of attachments that showed excessive government involvement in the creation of the offense for which he's been convicted," attorney Molly Parmer told reporters after the hearing.

"We are going to continue our post-conviction litigation, but we did preview for the court the evidence we have through our post-conviction investigation."

The former zookeeper was sentenced in January 2020 to 22 years in prison after he was convicted of trying to hire two different men to kill Baskin. A three-judge panel of the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with Maldonado-Passage that the court should have treated them as one conviction at sentencing because they both involved the same goal of killing Baskin, who runs a rescue sanctuary for big cats in Florida and had criticized Maldonado-Passage's treatment of animals.

Prosecutors said Maldonado-Passage offered \$10,000 to an undercover FBI agent to kill Baskin during a recorded December 2017 meeting. In the recording, he told the agent, "Just like follow her into a mall parking lot and just cap her and drive off." Maldonado-Passage's attorneys have said their client — who once operated a zoo in Wynnewood, Oklahoma, about 65 miles (105 kilometers) south of Oklahoma City — wasn't being serious.

Maldonado-Passage, who maintains his innocence, also was convicted of killing five tigers, selling tiger cubs and falsifying wildlife records.

Austin says Putin now has full range of options in Ukraine

By LOLITA C. BALDOR, VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Friday the buildup of Russian forces along Ukraine's border has reached the point where President Vladimir Putin now has a complete range of mili-

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tary options, including actions short of a full-scale invasion.

"While we don't believe that President Putin has made a final decision to use these forces against Ukraine, he clearly now has the capability," Austin told a Pentagon news conference.

In Moscow, the Kremlin said Putin told French President Emmanuel Macron that the West has failed to take Russian security concerns into account, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told a radio interviewer that Russia doesn't want war but sees no room for compromise on its demands.

Austin said Putin could use any portion of his force of an estimated 100,000 troops to seize Ukrainian cities and "significant territories" or to carry out "coercive acts or provocative political acts" like the recognition of breakaway territories inside Ukraine. He urged Putin to de-escalate tensions, and appeared to warn Moscow against what the White House recently said was Russia's intent to paint Ukraine as the aggressor using a "false-flag operation" to justify an attack.

"We remain focused on Russian disinformation, including the potential creation of pretext for further invasion or strikes on Donbas," said Austin. "This is straight out of the Russian playbook. They're not fooling us."

Austin spoke alongside Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in what were their first extensive public comments about the crisis, marking a subtle shift in the administration's approach to public communications about the escalating situation. While both have consulted regularly with their NATO and Ukrainian counterparts, the public discourse has focused on the diplomatic efforts.

The U.S. has put 8,500 troops on higher alert for potential deployment to support and reassure NATO allies, and Austin and Milley said Friday that no U.S. forces have yet been deployed or moved around Europe. President Joe Biden, however, signaled a possible move soon. Returning to Washington after a trip Friday to Pennsylvania, Biden was asked if he had decided when he would move U.S. troops to eastern Europe.

"I'll be moving U.S. troops to eastern Europe and the NATO countries in the near term. Not a lot," Biden said. Earlier this week Biden said he might move them in the nearer term, "just because it takes time."

Austin and Milley said the U.S. has taken into account the risk that any troop movements could inflame the situation, but stressed the need for America to reassure its allies. Moving large units with heavy equipment and weapons often requires more time due to travel and logistical challenges.

Milley painted a grim picture of Russian military capabilities around Ukraine, saying there are not only ground troops and naval and air forces but also cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, as well as special operations forces. He said the buildup is the largest he's seen in recent memory, and he urged Putin to choose a diplomatic path over conflict.

"If Russia chooses to invade Ukraine, it will not be cost-free, in terms of casualties and other significant effects," Milley said. He was referring to Russian costs, while also noting that Ukraine's armed forces are more capable today than in 2014, when Russia seized Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and intervened in support of pro-Russian separatists in the eastern industrial heartland.

Earlier Friday, the Kremlin said Putin told Macron that the West has failed to consider Russia's key conditions of halting further NATO expansion, stopping the deployment of alliance weapons near Russian borders, and rolling back its forces from Eastern Europe.

The U.S. and NATO formally rejected those demands this week, although Washington outlined areas where discussions are possible, offering hope that there could be a way to avoid war.

Despite that, U.S. President Joe Biden on Thursday warned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that there is a "distinct possibility" that Russia could take military action against the former Soviet state in February. Russia has repeatedly denied having any such plans.

Zelenskyy sought to play down the war fears, saying Western alarm over an imminent invasion has prompted many investors in the country's financial markets to cash out.

"We don't need this panic," he said at a news conference. "It cost Ukrainians dearly."

Putin told Macron that Moscow will study the U.S. and NATO response before deciding its next move, according to a Kremlin account of their call. The Russian president has made no public remarks about the Western response, but Lavrov said it leaves little chance for reaching agreement.

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"While they say they won't change their positions, we won't change ours," Lavrov told Russian radio stations in a live interview. "I don't see any room for compromise here."

"There won't be a war as far as it depends on the Russian Federation, we don't want a war," he added. "But we won't let our interests be rudely trampled on and ignored."

A senior Biden administration official said the U.S. welcomed Lavrov's comments that Russia does not want war, "but this needs to be backed up with action. We need to see Russia pulling some of the troops that they have deployed away from the Ukrainian border and taking other de-escalatory steps." The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk publicly.

Lavrov said the U.S. suggested the two sides could talk about limits on the deployment of intermediate-range missiles, restrictions on military drills and rules to prevent accidents between warships and aircraft. He said the Russians proposed discussing those issues years ago, but Washington and its allies never took them up on it until now.

He also said those issues are secondary to Russia's main concerns about NATO. He said international agreements say the security of one nation must not come at the expense of others, and said he would send letters to ask his Western counterparts to explain their failure to respect that pledge.

Washington has warned Moscow of devastating sanctions if it invades Ukraine, including penalties targeting top Russian officials and key economic sectors. Lavrov said Moscow had warned Washington that sanctions would amount to a complete severing of ties.

NATO, meanwhile, said it was bolstering its deterrence in the Baltic Sea region.

Russia has launched military drills involving motorized infantry and artillery units in southwestern Russia, warplanes in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, and dozens of warships in the Black Sea and the Arctic. Russian troops are also in Belarus for joint drills, raising Western fears that Moscow could stage an attack on Ukraine from the north. The Ukrainian capital is just 75 kilometers (50 miles) from the border with Belarus.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said there will be no war unless Belarus or Russia come under attack and he accused the West of trying to "drown our Slavic brotherhood in blood."

Despite the alarming rhetoric, Ukrainian officials have repeatedly tried to project calm.

Zelenskyy said the decision by the U.S., Britain, Australia, Germany and Canada to withdraw some of their diplomats and dependents from Kyiv was a "mistake," and said internal destabilization poses the greatest risk to his country.

He also bemoaned NATO's failure to offer Ukraine a roadmap to membership, saying the alliance should state clearly if it doesn't plan to embrace Ukraine and not offer vague promises.

Zelenskyy also challenged U.S. warnings of an imminent Russian attack, insisting "we aren't seeing any escalation bigger than before." He said the Russian buildup could be part of Moscow's attempts to exert "psychological pressure" and sow panic.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told parliament the number of Russian troops near Ukraine — about 130,000 — is comparable to Moscow's military buildup last spring, when Moscow eventually pulled its forces back after major exercises.

Jan. 6 committee subpoenas fake Trump electors in 7 states

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the U.S. Capitol insurrection subpoenaed more than a dozen individuals Friday who it says falsely tried to declare Donald Trump the winner of the 2020 election in seven swing states.

The panel is demanding information and testimony from 14 people who it says allegedly met and submitted false Electoral College certificates declaring Trump the winner of Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, New Mexico, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, according to a letter from Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, the committee's Democratic chairman. President Joe Biden won all seven states.

"We believe the individuals we have subpoenaed today have information about how these so-called alternate electors met and who was behind that scheme," Thompson said in the letter. "We encourage

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them to cooperate with the Select Committee's investigation to get answers about January 6th for the American people and help ensure nothing like that day ever happens again."

The nine-member panel said it has obtained information that groups of individuals met on Dec. 14, 2020 — more than a month after Election Day — in the seven states. The individuals, according to the congressional investigation, then submitted fake slates of Electoral College votes for Trump. Then "alternate electors" from those seven states sent those certificates to Congress, where several of Trump's advisers used them to justify delaying or blocking the certification of the election during the joint session of Congress on Jan. 6, 2021.

Lies about election fraud from the former president and his allies fueled the deadly insurrection on the Capitol building that day, as a violent mob interrupted the certification of the Electoral College results.

Last March, American Oversight, a watchdog group, obtained the certificates in question that were submitted by Republicans in the seven states. In two of them, New Mexico and Pennsylvania, the fake electors added a caveat saying the certificate was submitted in case they were later recognized as duly elected, qualified electors. That would only have been possible if Trump had won any of the several dozens of legal battles he waged against those states in the weeks after the election.

In the other five states, however, Republicans certified that they were their state's duly elected and qualified electors.

U.S. Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said in a CNN interview this week that the Justice Department has received referrals from lawmakers regarding the fake certifications, and that prosecutors were now "looking at those."

An Associated Press review of every potential case of voter fraud in the six of the battleground states disputed by Trump has found fewer than 475 — a number that would have made no difference in the 2020 presidential election.

Biden won Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and their 79 Electoral College votes by a combined 311,257 votes out of 25.5 million ballots cast for president. The disputed ballots represent just 0.15% of his victory margin in those states.

The fake electors are the latest subpoenaed in the large-scale investigation the committee has been pursuing since it came together last summer. The congressional probe has scrutinized Trump family members and allies, members of Congress and even social media groups accused of perpetuating election misinformation and allowing it to spread rampantly.

The committee plans to move into a more public-facing phase of its work in the next few months. Lawmakers will be holding hearings to document to the American public the most detailed and complete look into the individuals and events that led to the Capitol insurrection.

Governor kept mum amid conflicting accounts of deadly arrest

By JIM MUSTIAN and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat in a deep-red state, was immersed in a difficult reelection campaign when he received a text message from the head of the state police: Troopers had engaged in "a violent, lengthy struggle" with a Black motorist, ending with the man's death.

Edwards was notified of the circumstances of Ronald Greene's death within hours of his May 2019 arrest, according to text messages The Associated Press obtained through a public records request. Yet the governor kept quiet as police told a much different story to the victim's family and in official reports: that Greene died from a crash following a high-speed chase.

For two years, Edwards remained publicly tight-lipped about the contradictory accounts and possible cover-up until the AP obtained and published long-withheld body-camera footage showing what really happened: white troopers jolting Greene with stun guns, punching him in the face and dragging him by his ankle shackles as he pleaded for mercy and wailed, "I'm your brother! I'm scared! I'm scared!"

The governor has rebuffed repeated interview requests and his spokesperson would not say what steps,

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if any, Edwards took in the immediate aftermath of Greene's death. "The governor does not direct disciplinary or criminal investigations," said spokesperson Christina Stephens, "nor would it be appropriate for him to do so."

What the governor knew, when he knew it and what he did have become questions in a federal civil rights investigation of the deadly encounter and whether police brass obstructed justice to protect the troopers who arrested Greene.

"The question is: When did he find out the truth?" said Sen. Cleo Fields, a Baton Rouge Democrat who is vice-chair of a legislative committee created last year to dig into complaints of excessive force by state police.

The FBI has questioned people in recent months about Edwards' awareness of various aspects of the case, according to law enforcement officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the probe. Investigators have focused in part on an influential lawmaker saying the governor downplayed the need for a legislative inquiry.

The governor's spokesperson said he is not under investigation and neither is any member of his staff.

Edwards kept quiet about the Greene case through his reelection campaign in 2019 and through a summer of protests in 2020 over racial injustice in the wake of George Floyd's killing. Even after Greene's family filed a wrongful-death lawsuit that brought attention to the case in late 2020, Edwards declined to characterize the actions of the troopers and refused calls to release their body-camera video, citing his concern for not interfering with the federal investigation.

But when the AP obtained and published the long-withheld footage of the encounter that left Greene bloody, motionless and limp on a dark road near Monroe, Edwards finally spoke out.

Edwards condemned the troopers, calling their actions "deeply unprofessional and incredibly disturbing."

"I am disappointed in them and in any officer who stood by and did not intervene," the governor said in a statement. He later called the troopers' actions "criminal."

But Edwards, a lawyer from a long family line of Louisiana sheriffs, also has made comments since the release of the video that downplay troopers' actions, even reprising the narrative that Greene may have been killed by a car crash.

"Did he die from injuries sustained in the accident?" Edwards said in response to a question on a radio show in September. "Obviously he didn't die in the accident itself because he was still alive when the troopers were engaging with him. But what was the cause of death? I don't know that that was falsely portrayed."

Weeks after those remarks, a reexamined autopsy commissioned by the FBI rejected the crash theory outright, attributing Greene's death to "physical struggle," troopers repeatedly stunning him, striking him in the head, restraining him at length and Greene's use of cocaine.

The federal investigators have taken interest in a conversation Edwards had last June with state Rep. Clay Schexnayder, the powerful Republican House speaker who was considering a legislative inquiry into the Greene case following the release of the video.

Schexnayder said this week that the governor told him there was no need for further action from the legislature because "Greene died in a wreck." The speaker said he never moved forward with the investigation to avoid interfering with the federal probe.

The governor's spokesperson acknowledged he briefed the legislative leadership on his "understanding of the Greene investigation" and said his remarks were consistent with his public statements. The U.S. Department of Justice declined to comment.

"It's time to find out what happened, who knew what and when, and if anyone has covered it up," Schexnayder told the AP. "The Greene family deserves to know the truth."

Edwards received word of the Greene case in a text from then-Louisiana State Police Superintendent Kevin Reeves on May 10, 2019, at 10 a.m., about nine hours after the deadly arrest.

"Good morning. An FYI," the message read. "Early this morning, troopers attempted to stop a vehicle in Ouachita Parish. The driver fled thru two parishes in excess of 110 mph, eventually crashing. Troopers

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attempted to place the driver under arrest. But, a violent, lengthy struggle took place. After some time struggling with the suspect, troopers were joined by a Union Parish deputy and were able to take the suspect into custody. ... The suspect remained combative but became unresponsive shortly before EMS arrived."

The explanation given to Edwards, which his spokesperson called a "standard notification," was far different from what Greene's family says it was being told by troopers at almost the same time -- that the 49-year-old died on impact in a car crash at the end of a chase. A coroner's report that day indicates Greene was killed in a motor vehicle accident and a state police crash report makes no mention of troopers using force.

Reeves ended his text by telling the governor that the man's death was under investigation.

"Thank you," Edwards responded.

Those words were among the few statements from Edwards himself released in response to an extensive public-records request the AP filed in June for materials relating to Greene's death. The governor's office has not released any messages from Edwards to his staff and has yet to fully respond to a separate December request for his texts with three top police officials.

Hundreds of other emails and text messages released by the governor's office show that while he has publicly distanced himself from the case and issues of state police violence, his staff has been more engaged behind the scenes, including his top lawyer repeatedly contacting state and federal prosecutors about the Greene case.

Alexander Van Hook, who until December oversaw the civil rights investigation into Greene's death as the acting U.S. attorney in Shreveport, said in November there has been no attempt by the governor to influence the investigation. "That wouldn't go over very well with us if there had been," Van Hook told AP.

Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry, a Republican, said Edwards had a duty to at least follow up with the head of the state police after being informed of Greene's death.

"When something goes wrong ... he's shocked," Landry said, "when behind the scenes he is intimately involved in trying to control the message and distort it from the public."

Meanwhile, state police recently acknowledged that the department "sanitized" the cellphone of Reeves, intentionally erasing messages after he abruptly retired in 2020 amid AP's initial reporting on Greene's death. The agency said it did the same to the phone of another former police commander, Mike Noel, who resigned from a regulatory post last year as he was set to be questioned about the case by lawmakers. Police said such erasures are policy.

Edwards' office said the governor first learned of the "allegations surrounding Mr. Greene's death" in September 2020 — the same month in which a state senator sent Edwards' lawyers a copy of the Greene family's wrongful-death lawsuit that had been filed a few months earlier.

No one has yet been charged with a crime in Greene's death and only one of the troopers involved in his arrest has been fired. Master Trooper Chris Hollingsworth, who was recorded saying he "beat the ever-living f--- out of" Greene, died in a car crash in 2020 soon after learning he would lose his job.

In early October 2020, after AP published audio of Hollingsworth's comments, the governor reviewed video of Greene's fatal arrest, his spokesperson said.

Some observers of Edwards' response to the Greene case see it as partly political calculation. At the time of the deadly arrest, the centrist Democrat was in a tough reelection campaign in a deeply conservative state against a Republican backed by Donald Trump. His path to reelection depended on high Black turnout and crossover support from law enforcement

Greene's death — and the footage that ultimately went viral — would have "politically threatened both voting groups simultaneously," said Joshua Stockley, a political scientist at the University of Louisiana Monroe.

But the first public indications that Greene had been abused did not emerge until months after Edwards eked out 51% of the vote over businessman Eddie Rispone. He won in large part due to massive turnout by Black voters in urban areas, taking 90% of the vote in Orleans Parish, the 60% Black parish that includes New Orleans.

"I find it hard to believe that the release of this video during the election would not have had a profound consequence," Stockley said. "It would have been enormous."

Omicron drives US deaths higher than in fall's delta wave

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Omicron, the highly contagious coronavirus variant sweeping across the country, is driving the daily American death toll higher than during last fall's delta wave, with deaths likely to keep rising for days or even weeks.

The seven-day rolling average for daily new COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. has been climbing since mid-November, reaching 2,267 on Thursday and surpassing a September peak of 2,100 when delta was the dominant variant.

Now omicron is estimated to account for nearly all the virus circulating in the nation. And even though it causes less severe disease for most people, the fact that it is more transmissible means more people are falling ill and dying.

"Omicron will push us over a million deaths," said Andrew Noymer, a public health professor at the University of California, Irvine. "That will cause a lot of soul searching. There will be a lot of discussion about what we could have done differently, how many of the deaths were preventable."

The average daily death toll is now at the same level as last February, when the country was slowly coming off its all-time high of 3,300 a day.

More Americans are taking precautionary measures against the virus than before the omicron surge, according to a AP-NORC poll this week. But many people, fatigued by crisis, are returning to some level of normality with hopes that vaccinations or prior infections will protect them.

Omicron symptoms are often milder, and some infected people show none, researchers agree. But like the flu, it can be deadly, especially for people who are older, have other health problems or who are unvaccinated.

"Importantly, 'milder' does not mean 'mild,'" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said this week during a White House briefing.

Until recently, Chuck Culotta was a healthy middle-aged man who ran a power-washing business in Milford, Delaware. As the omicron wave was ravaging the Northeast, he felt the first symptoms before Christmas and tested positive on Christmas Day. He died less than a week later, on Dec. 31, nine days short of his 51st birthday.

He was unvaccinated, said his brother, Todd, because he had questions about the long-term effects of the vaccine.

"He just wasn't sure it was the right thing to do — yet," said Todd Culotta, who got his shots during the summer.

At one urban hospital in Kansas, 50 COVID-19 patients have died this month and more than 200 are being treated. University of Kansas Hospital in Kansas City, Kansas, posted a video from its morgue showing bagged bodies in a refrigeration unit and a worker marking one white body bag with the word "COVID."

"This is real," said Ciara Wright, the hospital's decedent affairs coordinator. "Our concerns are, 'Are the funeral homes going to come fast enough?' We do have access to a refrigerated truck. We don't want to use it if we don't have to."

Dr. Katie Dennis, a pathologist who does autopsies for the health system, said the morgue has been at or above capacity almost every day in January, "which is definitely unusual."

With more than 878,000 deaths, the United States has the largest COVID-19 toll of any nation.

During the coming week, almost every U.S. state will see a faster increase in deaths, although deaths have peaked in a few states, including New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Maryland, Alaska and Georgia, according to the COVID-19 Forecast Hub.

New hospital admissions have started to fall for all age groups, according to CDC data, and a drop in deaths is expected to follow.

"In a pre-pandemic world, during some flu seasons, we see 10,000 or 15,000 deaths. We see that in the course of a week sometimes with COVID," said Nicholas Reich, who aggregates coronavirus projections for the hub in collaboration with the CDC.

"The toll and the sadness and suffering is staggering and very humbling," said Reich, a professor of biostatistics at University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

In other developments:

— The White House said Friday that about 60 million households ordered 240 million home-test kits under a new government program to expand testing opportunities. The government also said it has shipped tens of millions of masks to convenient locations around the country, including deliveries Friday to community centers in Delaware, Maryland and Virginia.

— The national drugstore chain Walgreens is among pharmacies receiving the government-provided masks. The chain has started offering N95 masks for free at several stores, as long as supplies last. The company's website lists locations in the Midwest for the initial wave of stores offering masks, but Walgreens said more stores will offer them soon.

— The leading organization for state and local public health officials has called on governments to stop conducting widespread contact tracing, saying it's no longer necessary. The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials urged governments to focus contact tracing efforts on high-risk, vulnerable populations such as people in homeless shelters and nursing homes.

After huge pandemic losses, governments see rapid rebound

By DAVID A. LIEB and CAMILLE FASSETT Associated Press

State and local governments lost at least \$117 billion of expected revenue early in the pandemic, according to an Associated Press analysis, but many are now awash in record amounts of money, boosted partly by federal aid.

In response to the dramatic turnaround, governors, lawmakers and local officials have proposed a surge in spending as well as a new wave of tax cuts.

"The ultimate effect of the pandemic was a net positive," said Stephen Parker, assistant city manager for the Los Angeles suburb of Upland, where sales tax revenues are soaring. "Isn't that unbelievable? It's just crazy to think of that."

Upland, a city of 79,000, was representative of many cities at the outset of the pandemic. It reported an estimated loss of nearly \$6.1 million in 2020 — the result of a steep but short-lived national recession and what Parker describes as a "generous" Treasury Department method for calculating losses. That figure was the median amount among more than 900 cities that reported their revenues to the department under the American Rescue Plan Act.

Upland's financial situation turned around even before the end of 2020, Parker said. Federal COVID-19 stimulus checks played a role. So did a shift in consumer spending to goods instead of services. That lifted city revenues, Parker said, because services often are exempt from sales taxes, while goods are not.

The pandemic relief law championed by Democrats and signed by President Joe Biden last March included \$350 billion in aid to states and local governments. The Treasury Department required states, counties and larger cities to file reports last year detailing their initial plans for the money. Those governments also were asked to estimate their losses for 2020 by comparing actual revenue to expected revenue under a Treasury formula.

Though revenue figures were left blank by nearly one-quarter of the roughly 3,700 governments that filed reports, the data nonetheless provides the most comprehensive picture yet of the financial strain on governments during the pandemic's first year.

More than two-thirds of state and local governments reported at least some losses, ranging from a few thousand dollars in some rural counties to more than \$12 billion for the state of Texas, according to the AP's analysis. The total was \$117.5 billion.

The Treasury Department last October declined an AP request to release the revenue-loss data under

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the federal Freedom of Information Act, saying it would be publicly available later. It recently posted the data on its website. The next reports are due Monday for some governments and April 30 for others.

The department used lost revenue to determine how much flexibility to give governments in spending the aid. Under guidelines issued last May, governments that showed a loss were free to spend an equal amount on almost any government services, including roads and other projects not otherwise allowed under the rules.

A final rule released earlier this month expanded that flexibility by allowing governments to claim up to \$10 million of revenue losses, even if actual losses were less.

Upland, which is getting \$15 million, plans to use part of its flexible spending to repave parking lots and repair hundreds of sections of sidewalks that might not otherwise have been eligible.

Federal assistance was not the only factor that helped governments bounce back.

Financial analysts also cite inflation, which pushed up prices and bolstered sales tax collections. Many consumers also had more to spend because of the stimulus checks. A strong stock market drove up capital gains taxes. And an early pandemic rise in unemployment spared many higher earners, who shifted to working from home while continuing to pay income taxes.

In many places, the revenue rebound exceeded pre-pandemic levels. Total state tax revenues from last April through November rose 20% compared to the same period in 2019, according to an Urban Institute report released earlier this month.

For governments that already were financially strained, the pandemic deepened their losses but also resulted in a cash windfall.

The Hudson River Valley city of Poughkeepsie was rated by the New York comptroller as the state's most financially stressed community in 2020. With a pre-pandemic deficit around \$7 million and no reserves, the city quickly cut spending, sold property, froze hiring and instituted an early retirement program "in a desperate effort to close the gap" when the pandemic began, City Administrator Marc Nelson said.

The city reported a 2020 revenue loss of nearly \$4.5 million under the Treasury Department's formula. It's getting more than \$20 million from the American Rescue Plan. Though the relief money cannot be used to wipe out the deficit, the city plans to make major improvements to parks and swimming pools, including a complete rebuild of a run-down bathhouse that has been relying on portable toilets.

"These are things that would not have been within the city's ability to take on were it not for the COVID relief money," Nelson said.

Though they're spending the federal aid, some Republican officials insist it was unnecessary in light of the rapidly rebounding tax revenues.

Missouri reported an estimated \$900 million loss for 2020 but ended its 2021 fiscal year with a record cash balance. Republican Gov. Mike Parson recently proposed a \$47 billion budget that is up nearly one-third over the current year because of surging federal and state revenues. He wants to spend more on infrastructure and public employee salaries while also saving more.

"When other states will be using federal dollars to fill spending gaps and budget shortfalls, we will be making investments in the future," he said in his State of the State address.

In some cases, government losses weren't as severe as the Treasury numbers might suggest.

Greer County in rural southwest Oklahoma reported a 2020 revenue loss of \$363,630 — around the national median for counties reporting their revenues. That comprised 10% of the county's expected revenue under the Treasury Department formula, but it didn't prompt budget cuts, County Clerk Tiffany Buchanan said.

"The county didn't feel that much of a loss," Buchanan said, explaining: "We live on a very tight, strict budget as it is."

The county plans to use some of its \$1.1 million from the American Rescue Plan to help fund the sheriff's office and pay emergency medical personnel.

Some states, including California and Texas, projected large revenue losses at the outset of the pandemic but have since posted big gains.

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When it passed a budget early in the pandemic, California had expected the recession to cause a \$54 billion deficit. That led officials to defer payments to schools and community colleges and to reduce state employee pay, according to the state's Treasury report.

Now California is projecting a nearly \$46 billion surplus spurred by record tax collections, leaving officials searching for ways to use the money. Gov. Gavin Newsom recently proposed a budget that would expand health coverage to all low-income adults living in the state illegally while simultaneously cutting taxes. The Democratic governor also said a substantial tax rebate was likely in order.

"I will be holding the governor's feet to the fire and keep him at his word to refund surplus dollars to the taxpayers," GOP state Sen. Melissa Melendez said.

Kyle Rittenhouse gun from Kenosha shootings to be destroyed

By MICHAEL TARM and TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

KENOSHA, Wis. (AP) — A judge on Friday approved an agreement by lawyers to destroy the assault-style rifle that Kyle Rittenhouse used to kill two people and wound a third during a 2020 street protest in Wisconsin.

Assistant District Attorney Thomas Binger said the state crime lab would destroy the gun, probably in April. Judge Bruce Schroeder, the Kenosha County judge who presided over Rittenhouse's trial, approved the agreement. Rittenhouse was not in court for Friday's hearing.

The judge also ordered that Rittenhouse's \$2 million bail be divided among his attorney, a foundation that solicited donations for his defense and actor Ricky Schroder, who donated to the defense fund.

Rittenhouse shot the men during the protest in Kenosha in 2020. He killed Anthony Huber and Joseph Rosenbaum and wounded Gaige Grosskreutz in the arm. Rittenhouse argued he fired in self-defense after each of the men attacked him. A jury last year acquitted him of multiple charges, including homicide.

Rittenhouse's attorney, Mark Richards, filed a motion Jan. 19 asking prosecutors to return Rittenhouse's rifle, his ammunition, his face mask and other clothing he was wearing the night of the shooting to him. Richards and David Hancock, a spokesman for Rittenhouse, said last week that Rittenhouse, who is now 19, wanted to destroy the rifle and throw the rest of the items away so nothing can be used as a political symbol or trophy celebrating the shootings.

"We didn't think anyone should profit from it," Richards told reporters after the hearing. Asked if anyone had reached out about purchasing the gun, Richards responded: "Lots of people." He didn't elaborate.

Destruction of the gun will be recorded as part of the agreement that was approved Friday. The rest of Rittenhouse's property has already been returned to him, Binger told the judge.

Conservatives across the nation have praised Rittenhouse, saying he was defending Kenosha from far-left militants. Liberals have painted him as a trigger-happy vigilante.

The judge on Friday also ordered county officials to return Rittenhouse's \$2 million bail. His attorneys raised the money through donations from conservatives across the country.

The judge approved an agreement that calls for splitting the money between Richards' law firm and the #Fightback Foundation. Attorneys Lin Wood and John Pierce, who were representing Rittenhouse in the early days of case, formed the foundation to raise money for him. The agreement also calls for sending \$150,000 to Schroder, the former star of the 1980s television series "Silver Spoons."

The Patent and Trademark Hedge Fund Trust filed a motion Thursday laying claim to the \$2 million. The fund's co-trustee, Mariel Johnson, argued in an affidavit that the fund had given as much as \$2.5 million to Pierce to finance his cases and has been trying to recoup the money after Pierce's law firm dissolved. Johnson noted that the fund gave him \$300,000 to put toward Rittenhouse's bail and is entitled to every dollar Pierce used to cover Rittenhouse's bond.

Schroeder denied the motion, ruling that the fund's attorneys aren't licensed to practice in Wisconsin.

Richards declined to say after the hearing how much of the bond money would go to Rittenhouse. He didn't immediately respond to a follow-up email message.

Rittenhouse's case dates back to August 2020, when a white Kenosha police officer shot Jacob Blake,

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a Black man, during a domestic disturbance. The shooting left Blake paralyzed from the waist down and sparked several nights of protests.

The demonstrations turned chaotic at times, with people burning buildings. Rittenhouse and his friend, Dominick Black, joined a group of militia members to protect a used car lot on the night of Aug. 25, 2020.

Rittenhouse, who was 17 at time and living in Antioch, Illinois, was armed with an AR-15-style rifle that Black had purchased for him earlier that year because he was too young to buy a firearm under Wisconsin law.

According to the motion, Black had agreed that the rifle would become Rittenhouse's property on his 18th birthday, Jan. 3, 2021.

Bystander and surveillance video shows that just before midnight Rosenbaum chased Rittenhouse down and Rittenhouse shot him as he closed in on him. He shot Huber after Huber swung a skateboard at his head and Grosskreutz after Grosskreutz ran up to him holding a pistol. Everyone involved in the shooting was white.

Black pleaded no contest to two citations earlier this month for contributing to the delinquency of a minor in exchange for prosecutors dropping two felony charges of intent to sell a dangerous weapon to a person younger than 18.

Biden's vow of Black justice a nod to his most loyal voters

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

As he struggled to survive the 2020 Democratic primary, Joe Biden made a striking pledge before voting began in heavily African American, must-win South Carolina: His first Supreme Court appointment would be a Black woman.

On Thursday, with his poll numbers reaching new lows and his party panicking about the midterm elections, Biden turned again to the Democratic Party's most steadfast voters and reiterated his vow to replace retiring Justice Stephen Breyer with the first Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court.

The striking promise is a reflection of Black women's critical role in the Democratic Party and the growing influence of Black women in society. It's also a recognition that Black women have been marginalized in American politics for centuries and the time has come to right the imbalance of a court made up entirely of white men for almost two centuries, a change Biden said Thursday is "long overdue."

Black women are the most loyal Democrats — 93% of them voted for Biden in the 2020 presidential election, according to AP VoteCast, a national survey of the electorate.

And it's Black women's reliability as Democratic voters that makes it so important for the party to respond to their priorities and keep them in the fold, said Nadia Brown, a professor of government at Georgetown University. "Democrats know Black women are going to turn out for them so they have everything to lose if they don't do this."

Black women turned out to vote for Biden in greater numbers than for Hillary Clinton in 2016, and they were vital in Biden's wins in states like Georgia, Michigan and Pennsylvania. Overall, they made up 12% of Biden's voters and reached even higher percentages in heavily African American states like Georgia, where they represented 35% of his support. In that state, which Biden won by just over 12,000 votes, he earned the backing of 95% of Black women.

Biden, in particular, owes Black voters, and especially women, a debt from the primaries. His campaign was on life support before South Carolina's primary in late February 2020, when he secured the endorsement of Rep. James Clyburn, the kingmaker of the state's Democratic political orbit, by pledging to select a Black woman for the Supreme Court.

"His campaign was struggling," Clyburn recalled on Thursday, citing Biden's three straight losses in the early voting states of Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada. "This was quite frankly do or die for him, and I urged him to come out publicly for putting an African American woman on the Supreme Court."

Biden already made a fundamentally important statement about the importance of Black women in his coalition by selecting Kamala Harris as his vice president. But putting a Black woman on the court is another historic step. Republican Ronald Reagan, in his 1980 presidential campaign, vowed to put the first

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woman on the Supreme Court and nominated Justice Sandra Day O'Connor once in office.

But Biden's pledge also responds to issues Black women care about, said Glynda Carr, president of Higher Heights For America PAC, which advocates for Black women in politics. "Black women are very in tune with knowing the court is important to our daily lives," said Carr, citing big cases on voting rights and abortion.

The decision isn't just a win for Black women but for all voters concerned with ensuring that government reflects the actual population, said Tom Bonier, a Democratic data analyst. As such, he said, it should rally Democrats of all races.

"To the extent that Biden, at this point, is suffering from lower approval ratings, part of his challenge is just reassembling his coalition and reminding those voters who sent him to the White House why that vote mattered," Bonier said.

Biden's early discussions about a successor to Breyer have focused on U.S. Circuit Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, U.S. District Judge J. Michelle Childs and California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger, according to people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss White House deliberations.

Childs is a favorite of Clyburn. The House majority whip said Thursday that she had "everything I think it takes to be a great justice."

The robust roster of Black women for the Supreme Court is a testament to their growing professional progress over the past few decades, experts say. Black women — like women of all races — have been increasingly likely to earn college degrees over the past two decades. Although they still lag in other crucial categories such as pay, the court seat is another milestone.

"We could not have imagined the sheer number of overqualified women a few decades ago," Brown said.

The nomination of a Black woman is also significant for Black men, said Adrienne Shropshire of BlackPAC, a political organization that tries to elect more Black Democrats. That's in part because the current sole African American on the Supreme Court, Justice Clarence Thomas, is a conservative Republican whose decisions often go against the desires of the heavily Democratic Black community.

While Black men are not quite as Democratic as Black women, they still overwhelmingly back the party — 87% voted for Biden in 2020, according to AP VoteCast.

Still, Shropshire warned, a Supreme Court appointment is only one step in ensuring Black voters are motivated in 2022 and beyond.

"For Black folks in the country, the thing that looms largest is, are their daily lives changed?" Shropshire said. "For the president — and the vice president — it is going to be more than this appointment."

"I don't think it's helpful for people to say, 'Well, the one thing we got is a nomination on the Supreme Court,'" Shropshire added.

Dissed: Olympic snowboarders still irked by secondary status

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

ASPEN, Colo. (AP) — The wind-whipped ice pellets slammed against their faces and made their cheeks feel like frozen sandpaper. On another part of the mountain, the Alpine skiers had been sent back to their hotels, told the conditions were too dangerous for racing that day.

But for the snowboarders, the contest was on.

Four years later, that day at the Pyeongchang Olympics remains a source of bitter memories for the riders, including the gold medalist, Jamie Anderson.

It was, in their opinion, a loud and clear statement that, even 20 years after their sport was brought into the Olympics to give the Games a younger, more vibrant feel, they were still being treated like second-class citizens.

"Even if I was lucky to land a run, I think that was a really, really terrible call," Anderson said in an Associated Press interview earlier this winter, reflecting on a winning trip down the course that included watered-down tricks that hadn't been part of winning slopestyle runs for a decade or more. "And they really didn't give the riders any faith."

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That lack of faith was repeated in multiple interviews the AP conducted with riders and top industry executives in the lead-up to the Beijing Games, which start next week. They expressed similar feelings about the IOC, the Switzerland-based International Ski Federation (FIS) — which runs snowboarding at the Olympics — and the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association, all of which have benefitted by bringing snowboarding into the mainstream.

“When you really think about it, we’ve always been oil and water with the Olympics,” said Donna Burton Carpenter, whose late husband, Jake, invented the modern-day snowboard and got it accepted at resorts across the globe.

It started at the sport’s Olympic debut in Nagano in 1998, when the word “snowboarding” was misspelled on the scoreboard at the venue — “Snow-Bording.” The riders were placed on a rain-soaked halfpipe that made good performances almost impossible. The halfpipe contests were held in the wake of a positive marijuana test by giant slalom winner Ross Rebagliati that swamped the sport in controversy while reinforcing stereotypes that gave fuel to critics who felt snowboarding wasn’t quite a “real” sport.

Shaun White emerged as the sport’s true mainstream star after his gold medal in 2006, but in 2010 and 2014, subpar halfpipes hampered the quality of some contests, while others, including the 2010 parallel giant slalom races, were held in driving rainstorms that made umbrellas every bit as useful as snowsuits.

By 2018, snowboarders had earned a victory of sorts by altering an Olympic rule that had called for local companies to have a piece of the course-construction contracts at Olympic venues. It allowed for the industry’s top course and halfpipe shapers to take part in the building, which most people agree led to better riding conditions.

Still, accommodations and scheduling changes that were made for skiers on the Alpine course because of bad weather were not made for the snowboarders. On the day four years ago that underscored all the problems — the day of the women’s slopestyle contest — riders described communication as poor, and a general sense that if they didn’t go on the day in question, they might lose their chance to compete for a gold medal.

What resulted was a contest in which 25 Olympians each got two runs. Of the 50 total runs, 41 ended with a rider on her backside, or in a face plant, or riding off the course, unable to navigate the blustery conditions.

“It was a bloodbath out there,” said Mark McMorris, the Canadian snowboard star who won a bronze medal in the men’s slopestyle contest that also was held in windy, subpar conditions. “And to throw the women’s slopestyle out there where wind plays a bigger factor. Those people are on the ground in Alpine skiing, not flying through the air on 80-foot jumps. I think snowboarding is sometimes overlooked in that sense.”

Dean Gosper, an Australian member of FIS who has a hand in trying to give action sports a better standing both at the Olympics and within the Euro-centric organization, said FIS has done a lot of reviewing and rehashing of the events of that day. Ultimately, the tight Olympic schedule and lack of “weather days” — backup days that have long been built into an Alpine schedule — led to the event going forward under bad conditions.

“One of the prices that freestyle snowboard and freeskiing had to pay to get into the (Olympic) mix is that there’s a very tight schedule there for the execution” of their events, Gosper said.

As the riders head to Beijing for contests that begin Feb. 5, it feels strange to McMorris and many of his counterparts to be fighting essentially the same fights that their predecessors were waging in the ‘90s.

Back then, while snowboarding was mushrooming into the billion-dollar industry it is today, there already was a healthy competition side in a sport that also valued backcountry riding and freedom of expression that, some felt, should not be subjected to the whims of a judging panel.

That led to some riders, most notably Terje Haakonsen of Norway, who at the time was the best freestyle rider in the world, to say “no” to the Olympics. Always outspoken about his disdain for the IOC and the Olympics, Haakonsen was famously walking into Disneyland with his kids on Feb. 11, 2002, the day the American men swept the medals at the Salt Lake City Games, and a day often viewed as a turning point

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for the sport's mainstream popularity.

"I won more prize money in the '90s than people win in a FIS contest right now," Haakonsen said in an AP interview last winter. "So, have the Olympics been good for the sport when the prize money is lower than what it was in the '90s? I don't think so."

Though there is no official database for prize money, Haakonsen won \$100,000 at one halfpipe contest back in the day. These days, a good first prize is considered \$45,000.

A core issue that has never been resolved was the IOC's decision to make FIS the governing body for snowboarding. At the start, there was no synergy between skiing and snowboarding, which spent its early years trying to nudge its way onto the mountains, where most skiers didn't want it.

"With skiers, I don't know how much respect they have for snowboarders at the end of the day," said Austrian snowboarder Anna Gasser, who won gold in big air a few days after finishing 15th in the 2018 slopestyle contest.

A generation later, many on the snowboarding side claim they haven't seen much change.

Kelly Clark, a three-time Olympic medalist and one of the icons of the sport, said she recently spoke to a panel of Alpine experts in her role on the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association's fundraising arm. Part of her presentation was about the specifics needed to build a good halfpipe, the likes of which haven't been in play for at least half of the six Olympics at which snowboarding has been featured.

"A lot of people came up to me afterward and said they had no idea that conditions of the pipe mattered," Clark said. "I was just amazed at the response."

Gosper, the FIS executive, said the organization needs to keep working to include snowboarding and action sports as full partners, not simply add-ons to Alpine.

"I think there's a long way to go," he said. "And I think there's definitely been some discipline bias inside FIS. It's not through any malintent. It's just through traditional history."

One clear sign of Alpine's dominance in Europe: Heading into the Olympics, the continent has 15 of the 60 top-ranked snowboarders on the world points lists for their respective disciplines; by comparison, Europeans take up 90 of the 100 top-10 spots across the five Alpine disciplines.

But in America, snowboarders account for a huge chunk of the USSA's success. With help from current headliners White and Chloe Kim, snowboarders have won 31 Olympic medals since the sport joined the Games. Alpine skiers, including Lindsey Vonn and Mikaela Shiffrin, have won a total of 21 over that period.

Given those numbers, Burton Carpenter said she was shocked to find that only about 5% of the 88 people on the USSA fundraising board, on which she has a seat, have a background in snowboarding — a figure confirmed by an AP review of the panel.

"We've produced more medals and that's, ultimately, how you measure success," Burton Carpenter said. "So, giving us a fraction of the funding. It's (expletive) up."

The funding formula is more complex than that. In general, it takes more money to turn an Alpine skier into an Olympic medal contender, from the training and coaching costs, to the increased travel costs to compete on circuits that are largely in Europe.

While USSA does not give a public breakdown of the money given to skiing vs. snowboarding, two people with knowledge of the data told the AP the split could be at least as much as 75-25 in favor of Alpine. The people did not want their names used because the data is not public.

The head of the USSA fundraising board, Trisha Worthington, did not respond to an email sent by the AP.

At the heart of the argument is that snowboarders have always felt almost a tribal loyalty to their own, and the mantra long heard in the community is that snowboarders, not skiers, should run snowboarding — not only at the grassroots, but at the highest levels, too.

Burton Carpenter said she's considering a push to extract snowboarding from the FIS domain, and potentially into a partnership with the international roller sports federation, which runs skateboarding and might have more in common with its winter cousins.

"Jake would say he never imagined where the sport was going to go, but it was the riders who did it, not FIS or the IOC," Burton Carpenter said of her late husband. "I'm trying to find a way to have their voices heard. I don't know you can do that under skiing. They've proven they can't, and they don't listen to us."

Chinese soft power in Iraq: Speak the language, get jobs

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

IRBIL, Iraq (AP) — In a classroom in northern Iraq, Zhiwei Hu presides over his students as a conductor would an orchestra. He cues with a question, and the response from his students resounds in perfect, fluent Chinese.

The 52-year-old has been teaching the cohort of 14 Iraqi Kurdish students at the behest of the Chinese consulate in the northern city of Irbil.

His class is part of an experiment with the local Salahaddin University: If these students succeed in graduating, the Chinese Language Department would be officially open for enrollment, giving the growing plethora of Chinese companies in Iraq's Kurdish region their pick for hires.

Regin Yasin sits at the front. "I wanted to learn Chinese because I know China will have an upper hand in the future," the 20-year-old student said. "China will expand here, that's why I chose it."

China's interests in Iraq, anchored in energy to quench its growing needs, are expanding. Beijing is building power plants, factories, water treatment facilities, as well as badly needed schools across the country.

Dozens of contracts signed in recent years ensure China's growing footprint, even as major Western companies, including the U.S., plot their exit. While Iraqi officials say they desire a greater U.S. presence, they find appeal in China's offer of development without conditions for democracy or reform and its deft diplomacy.

"The language school is a projection of Chinese soft power, to familiarize the region with China. The more familiar they are, the more attracted they will be to Chinese goods," said Sardar Aziz, a researcher who recently wrote a Kurdish-language book about China-Iraq relations.

Chinese companies dominate Iraq's key economic sector, oil, and Beijing consumes 40% of Iraq's crude exports. But from a narrow focus on hydrocarbons, Chinese investments have grown to include other industries, finance, transport, construction and communications.

The shift was spurred following Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2013 announcement of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, dubbed the new Silk Road, composed of a vast array of development and investment initiatives from East Asia through the Middle East to Europe. The U.S. considers it unsettling, akin to a Trojan horse for Chinese expansion.

The initiative calls for China to develop relations with states along its path through political coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade and financial integration, and people-to-people bonds.

In 2017, the Chinese consulate approached Salahaddin University's College of Languages with the idea of a Chinese language department. Opening a school in the capital Baghdad came with security risks, but the northern Kurdish-run region was relatively secure.

At first, the university wasn't sure it would appeal to students or that it could find qualified instructors, the college's dean, Atif Abdullah Farhadi, said.

So Farhadi required the consulate to provide and pay for teachers, textbooks, an audio lab and other classroom technologies and exchange opportunities in Beijing.

"They fulfilled all of the demands," said Farhadi. The department opened in 2019 and is set to graduate its first cohort next year. "Then we will expand."

The students said learning to write in Mandarin, the official language of mainland China, was the hardest part. Thousands of special characters had to be memorized.

And then there was pronunciation.

"Their tongues trembled," Hu said. After five hours of lessons, five times a week over three years, "They are speaking very well."

Farhadi wishes it could be the same for the English Language Department; the U.S. and British consulates have seldom offered help, he said.

"They don't support us at all," he said.

As China grows its economic footprint, Western oil firms are reducing theirs. Many have expressed dis-

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content with Iraq's risky investment environment and unfavorable contract terms.

U.S. oil giant Exxon Mobil's exit from West Qurna 1 field last year came despite Iraqi pleas to stay, Oil Minister Ihsan Abduljabbar Ismail told The Associated Press at the time. The presence of a major U.S. company in Iraq had long served as a reassurance for other companies.

British Petroleum, operator of Iraq's largest oil field Rumaila, plans to spin off its business there with another entity jointly owned with China's CNPC. Other oil companies, including Russia's Lukoil, are demanding amendments to contract terms as a condition to remain.

Chinese companies dominate oil contracts, from operating fields to providing downstream services, and they continue to win more. Recently, Iraq finalized terms with China's Sinopec to develop Mansuriya gas field, which could produce 300 million standard cubic feet per day if approved by Iraq's next government.

Investing in Iraq is a risk that China is willing to take. With lower profit margins, Chinese firms always offer more attractive, lower-price contracts, industry officials and Iraqi officials said.

Thursday is "Chinese Corner" at the language department.

Chinese businesses -- from oil to wallpapering -- come and meet the students under the pretext of practicing language skills. Most end up with promises for future employment.

"We speak in Chinese and talk about business and the future," said one student, Hiwar Saadi. "They come to us to meet us and make a connection."

Two students are already working part-time for a Chinese telecommunications company as translators.

"It's the opposite in every other department in the university. Supply is high but the demand for jobs is low," Farhadi said. "Here, the students are turning down job offers in order to focus on study."

Lessons cover aspects of Chinese culture and history as well. Hu is always quick to remind the students of Beijing and Irbil's shared golden past: Iraq was part of the ancient Silk Road trade route, linking China's Han dynasty with the West.

A former Iraqi ambassador to Beijing, Mohammed Saber, said that during his time there, Chinese officials often recalled their shared history. Many Chinese also remembered how in the 1950s, Iraq shipped tons of dates to China to help during famine.

When Sabir began his post in 2004, Iraq-China trade stood at around half a billion dollars. When he left in 2010 it was \$10 billion. Last year it reached roughly \$30 billion.

"They need our oil, and we need to find a market to sell our oil. The road goes two ways," he said.

Yao Yan, a Beijing native selling Chinese-made goods in Irbil's Langa Market, agrees.

A small figure surrounded by mounds of handbags and shoes, she said Iraq offered her better economic prospects. She sends her earnings back home to care for her disabled teenage son.

"Even when there is an economic crisis here," she said, referring to last year's liquidity crisis spurred by falling oil prices, "The money is still good for China."

At the language school, Daa Sherzad has just completed an oral exam.

The 21-year-old said he is always thinking about what to do next. "The most important thing is how I can serve my people. If I know Chinese, it will help. For the future, for everything."

For tornado-ravaged churches, rebuilding means rethinking

By BOBBY ROSS Jr. Associated Press

MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Mayfield First United Methodist Church, a century-old temple with stately columns and stained-glass windows, has long been an anchor in the life of Kathy O'Nan, the city's 68-year-old mayor.

She directed the children's choir for 42 years and attended countless worship services and ceremonies, from weddings to funerals to the baptisms of both her children — before a massive tornado tore off the church's roof and covered the front entrance in rubble.

"It was just my home," O'Nan said. "For all of us, it was our home."

First United Methodist is one of a half-dozen historic churches in the central core of this western Kentucky community that were destroyed or heavily damaged, all with roots dating to the 1800s. Most of their sanctuaries were more than 100 years old, constructed when worship spaces tended to be grand

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with amenities such as giant pipe organs, heavy wooden pews and the now-collapsed dome that once crowned the nearby First Christian Church.

While the rubble is still being cleared, it's already apparent that Mayfield's historic congregations, most with graying, shrinking flocks, are unlikely to rebuild in anything resembling their previous architectural glory. Their leaders say they must instead adapt to meet 21st-century needs and possibilities.

"People at the turn of the last century took great pride in building buildings they thought honored God, and that is no longer the style anymore," said the Rev. Milton West, senior minister at First Christian.

"I think all of the congregations in the downtown area are using this experience to re-envision their ministries ... and how they might make a difference in our community," West added. "I think the whole town of Mayfield has an opportunity to reinvigorate itself. There were a lot of empty buildings when the storm hit."

Firefighters say the tornado damaged or destroyed about 1,300 homes, businesses and houses of worship Dec. 10 when it swept through the close-knit town of some 10,000 residents.

Besides First United Methodist and First Christian, the red-brick First Presbyterian Church on Mayfield's main street and Fairview Baptist Church, about a half-mile away, were destroyed as well. First Baptist Church and St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church sustained heavy damage that could take years to repair.

"These churches were a spiritual touchstone for the community," West said.

His First Christian expects to receive at least \$5 million from its insurance company. But that's not enough to rebuild like before — replacing just the \$800,000 organ and the Steinway piano would account for about one-fifth of the payout, according to the pastor.

Instead he envisions a more cost-efficient and workaday sanctuary for the future, noting that worshipers today are often content to attend services in run-of-the-mill settings such as a metal building or gym.

"I doubt if we'll ever have a building with a pipe organ in it again," West said. "We were one generation away from not even having anyone who could play one."

Leaders at the other three destroyed churches see things similarly.

The Rev. Joey Reed, who rode out the storm with his wife, Laurinda, in the basement at First Methodist, said that while he would love to see the original building restored, that will probably be too expensive. Instead, he said, it's important for the church to devote its resources and energy to its core spiritual mission.

"Our mission is not to create or restore or maintain that historic architectural presence," Reed said, "even though that is an important part of who we have been."

Likewise, Don Barger, lay pastor of First Presbyterian, said his church must use its expected budget of \$4.5 million to \$5.5 million to design a building with the future in mind. That includes an opportunity to correct past oversights — the original structure lacked elevators and other accessibility features for people with disabilities.

"We've got to get away from our minds what the building looked like when it was built in 1914," Barger said.

"We have become, at times, complacent," he added. "When you're having to start all over again, you can't take anything for granted."

The Rev. Leroy Brent, pastor for 33 years at Fairview Baptist, a predominantly Black congregation affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, recalled his shock at the devastation.

"I could stand on the steps that I would normally stand on every Sunday, and I didn't know where I was," he said. "There were no landmarks."

But he's optimistic about starting fresh due to the successes he's seen in his background in church planting, or the seeding of new congregations.

"It gives you a completely new outlook," Brent said.

The other two damaged downtown churches are not forced to rebuild from zero, but they still face costly and lengthy rehabs and have been rendered temporarily homeless while they try to minister to the shattered town.

"We don't have a building, but other churches within our denomination have been sending us supplies,"

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said Thomas Bright, steward at St. James, which suffered major damage to its roof and sanctuary. "We got some U-Haul containers in our parking lot and we set up tables, so we've been distributing supplies, food, clothes, cleaning supplies, whatever we can, to the community."

Bright has been shepherding the congregation even as he mourns his 80-year-old aunt, Ollie Reeves, who helped raise him as a boy. He found her body under debris at her home, one of 22 people in Mayfield and 77 statewide killed that night as storms tore through Kentucky.

Reeves' death is a loss not only for him but for the congregation — she sang in the choir at the historically Black church, baked pies and cakes and helped with fundraisers.

Still, he's keeping faith.

"Mayfield is a resilient town," Bright said. "We'll bounce back. Maybe not as big as we were before, but better."

The Rev. Wes Fowler, who hunkered down with his family in a tunnel under First Baptist, cried as he talked about the damage to the church and elsewhere. Five generations of his family have worshiped at the church, where he is senior pastor.

"I know theologically that it's just a building. And I know theologically that those who have placed our faith in Jesus Christ are the church. I know it deeply. I teach that all the time," he said.

But a house of worship where people gather weekly becomes part of one's identity, he continued, and losing that is traumatic.

"We're focusing right now on our true hope, which was never supposed to be in a building," Fowler said. "We serve a risen Savior who was the same before this tornado, was the same the day of the tornado and is the same now."

For now the six displaced congregations are meeting at schools, other churches, even a manufacturing company's break room.

O'Nan, the mayor, predicted a bright future for Mayfield's churches but said letting go is hard.

"The same people will be there, and the same memories will begin to be made there again," she said. "But looking in the beautiful stained glass, the beautiful organ, the smell of old oil that you know was used to clean the pews and that fragrance of candle wax when you walk into the church — that's gone."

A key inflation gauge rose 5.8% in 2021, most in 39 years

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A measure of prices that is closely tracked by the Federal Reserve rose 5.8% last year, the sharpest increase since 1982, as brisk consumer spending collided with snarled supply chains to raise the costs of food, furniture, appliances and other goods.

The report Friday from the Commerce Department also said that consumer spending fell 0.6% in December, with purchases of cars, electronics, and clothes declining. Higher prices might have discouraged some shoppers, along with a wave of omicron cases that kept many Americans from traveling, eating out or visiting entertainment venues.

At the same time, incomes rose 0.3% last month, providing fuel for future spending.

Stubbornly high inflation has hammered household budgets, wiped out last year's healthy wage gains and posed a severe political challenge to President Joe Biden and Democrats in Congress. It also led the Federal Reserve to signal Wednesday that it plans to raise interest rates multiple times this year beginning in March to try to get accelerating prices under control.

With consumer spending likely remaining weak, economists project that growth will slow in the first three months of the year to a 1.5% annual rate or even less. That would be down drastically from a strong 6.9% rate in the final three months of 2021.

In another cautionary sign, a measure of consumer sentiment dropped this month to its lowest level in more than a decade, the University of Michigan reported Friday. Consumers are particularly worried about inflation eroding their incomes.

Still, economists say steady job gains and increased savings should eventually drive more spending later

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this year, especially if the omicron wave keeps fading.

"You're going to see the labor market continue to heal, and, the pandemic permitting, the consumer will have enough firepower to grow spending at a reasonable rate as the year goes on," said Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at MFR Inc.

Most analysts still expect inflation to decelerate this year, though it will likely remain high as rents and wages increase.

Excluding the volatile food and energy categories, so-called core prices rose 4.9% last year, the biggest increase since 1983. That was up from a 4.7% year-over-year rise in core prices in November.

From November to December, prices rose 0.4%, down from a 0.6% increase from October to November. Core prices rose 0.5% for a second straight month.

The economy is expanding at its fastest pace in decades, and job creation reached a five-decade high last year. But the rebound occurred so quickly after the pandemic shutdowns that it left many companies flat-footed, with fewer workers and supplies than they needed. Spending on autos, electronics and other goods jumped 12% in 2021, the government reported Wednesday, the biggest increase since 1946.

Besides raising interest rates, Chair Jerome Powell said Wednesday that the Fed will move to shrink its huge \$8.9 trillion of bond holdings this year, another step that will likely tighten credit, slow spending and potentially weaken the economy.

Speaking at a news conference, Powell acknowledged that inflation has gotten "slightly worse" in the past month. He cautioned that higher prices "have now spread to a broader range of goods and services," after initially affecting sectors of the economy, like factory-made products for homes, that were most disrupted by the pandemic.

Powell also said the Fed is increasingly focused on the question of whether rising wages are acting as a primary driver of inflation, by forcing companies to charge more to cover their higher labor costs. Such a "wage-price spiral," which the United States hasn't experienced since the 1970s, can make inflation difficult to cool.

A separate report Friday provided some signs of cooling on that front. The Labor Department said that workers' salaries and benefits jumped 4% last year. That was the biggest rise in two decades. But over the past three months, the increase slowed from 1.3% to 1% and dropped even more for a category that includes restaurant and hotel workers.

Powell has said that a sharp rise in pay and benefits, reported in November, was a key reason why the Fed began shifting its policy toward higher interest rates. While rising wages are good for employees, they can also elevate inflation if they aren't offset by efficiency gains.

The inflation figure that the government reported Friday is its personal consumption expenditures index. Though the consumer price index is a better-known barometer, the Fed tends to track the PCE in setting its interest rate policies. The PCE index tracks actual purchases consumers make each month, while the CPI follows a fixed market basket of goods.

Earlier this month, the government said the CPI jumped 7% last year, also the fastest pace in nearly four decades.

On Thursday, McDonald's said that while sales last year grew at a healthy pace, higher costs for food and paper products and the need to raise pay to attract and keep workers eroded profits even after it had raised prices 6% last year.

Likewise, Procter & Gamble said last week that it plans to raise prices for detergents like Tide, Gain, and Downy and for personal care products. The company anticipates price increases for chemicals and other commodities this year.

Higher prices may be weighing on some Americans' willingness to spend. Still, last month's drop in consumer spending is likely to be temporary. Americans are already showing signs of heading back out to restaurants and movie theaters as the huge jump in omicron infections has started to decline.

JPMorgan Chase says spending on its credit cards for hotels, travel, and entertainment venues has rebounded this month, after falling in December. Spending has risen more in states where COVID-19 cases have come down the most.

US tries to name and shame Russian disinformation on Ukraine

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a break from the past, the U.S. and its allies are increasingly revealing their intelligence findings as they confront Russian preparations for a possible invasion of Ukraine, looking to undercut Russian President Vladimir Putin's plans by exposing them and deflecting his efforts to shape world opinion.

The White House in recent weeks publicized what it said was a developing Russian "false-flag" operation to create pretext for an invasion. Britain named specific Ukrainians it accused of having ties to Russian intelligence officers plotting to overthrow President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The U.S. also released a map of Russian military positions and detailed how officials believe Russia will try to attack Ukraine with as many as 175,000 troops.

Experts credit the White House for declassifying intelligence and moving to rebut false claims before they're made — a so-called "prebuttal" that undercuts their effectiveness better than an after-the-fact explanation.

But the release of information isn't without risks. Intelligence assessments carry varying degrees of certainty, and beyond offering photos of troop movements, the U.S. and its allies have provided little other proof. Moscow has dismissed Washington's claims as hysteria and invoked past American intelligence failures, including false information put forward about Iraq's weapons programs.

There are no clear signs of change so far from Russia, which continues to move forces toward Ukraine and into Belarus, an ally to Ukraine's north. There is growing pessimism in Washington and London about ongoing diplomatic efforts and a belief that Putin will likely mount some sort of invasion in the next several weeks.

Russia is known for using disinformation as a tactic to sow confusion and discord as part of its overall conflict strategy. When Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, it mounted a campaign to sway ethnic Russian residents of the territory. State media and social media accounts linked to Russia promoted allegations that the West was manipulating protests in Kyiv and false or unconfirmed tales of lurid crimes committed by Ukrainian forces.

This time, the U.S. and allies say, Russia is trying to portray Ukrainian leaders as aggressors and to persuade its own citizens to support military action. At the same time, the U.S. and its allies allege, Russia has positioned operatives in eastern Ukraine who could use explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia's own proxy forces and then blame Kyiv.

The White House has repeatedly highlighted what it sees as disinformation and is privately sharing additional intelligence with allies including Ukraine. The State Department recently published a fact sheet listing and rejecting several Russian claims. And the Treasury Department sanctioned four men accused of ties to influence operations intended to set the pretext in Ukraine for a new invasion.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki described a "strategic decision to call out disinformation when we see it."

"We are much more cognizant of the Russian disinformation machine than we were in 2014," she said Wednesday, adding, "We need to be very clear with the global community and the U.S. public what they're trying to do and why."

A European Union official told reporters Friday that Moscow-aligned outlets are promoting justifications for conflict in a similar manner to eight years ago. One narrative those outlets are promoting — in apparent response to the recent American allegations — is the U.S. may be planning its own false-flag operation to trigger a confrontation in eastern Ukraine.

Moscow continues to make demands that NATO not accept Ukraine or further expand to any other countries. And after British intelligence accused him of being a possible Russia-backed candidate for president, Ukrainian politician Yevheniy Murayev denied the claim and told the AP that it "looks ridiculous and funny."

Meanwhile, Washington and Moscow go back and forth online. Kremlin-backed RT.com on Dec. 21 posted

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a video alleging "US private military companies are amassing CHEMICAL COMPONENTS in Eastern Ukraine." The State Department rejected that claim in its fact sheet on Russian propaganda. Russia's Foreign Ministry then responded with tweets "debunking @StateDept 'facts' on Russian disinformation on Ukraine."

Washington's efforts have raised questions in Kyiv, where Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has taken a different public approach of trying to tamp down public fears of an expanded war even as many Ukrainians prepare for possible combat.

Ukrainian officials privately question why the Biden administration is warning about an impending invasion but not imposing preemptive sanctions or taking action against the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which has been criticized for giving Moscow more leverage over Ukraine and Western Europe. The Biden administration lobbied Democrats in Congress to oppose a Republican-sponsored bill that would have required the imposition of sanctions against the pipeline, which has not yet gone into operation.

The White House has threatened tough sanctions if Russia does invade and is preparing to move forces to NATO's eastern flank in the event of an invasion. The U.S. and Western allies are also sending weapons and missile systems to Ukraine.

Molly McKew, a writer and lecturer on Russian influence, said the administration's moves to counter Russia's influence efforts needed to be accompanied by a clearer statement of American goals and plans to repel any invasion.

Publicly identifying Russia's actions alone will not stop Russia from carrying them out, said McKew, a former adviser to President Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia, which fought a war in 2008 with Russia and still is trying to regain control of separatist regions backed by Moscow.

"They're trying to apply disinformation thinking to military domains," she said. "You absolutely cannot expose away the crisis."

In both the U.S. and Ukraine, experts say, there is far more societal awareness now of state-sponsored disinformation. Russia in the past several years has continued to bombard Ukrainians with text messages and false stories during the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine in which at least 14,000 people have died. And Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election led to several investigations and years of often fractious debates.

Bret Schafer, senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy, said that while there are risks to elevating false claims in the process of debunking them, "there is a need to head off information threats as opposed to responding to them after they've been let out into the wild."

But publicly accusing Russia of misbehavior is ultimately a limited deterrent. "They don't care about reputational damage," he said.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Jan. 29, the 29th day of 2022. There are 336 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 29, 1820, King George III died at Windsor Castle at age 81; he was succeeded by his son, who became King George IV.

On this date:

In 1919, the ratification of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which launched Prohibition, was certified by Acting Secretary of State Frank L. Polk.

In 1929, The Seeing Eye, a New Jersey-based school which trains guide dogs to assist the blind, was incorporated by Dorothy Harrison Eustis and Morris Frank.

In 1936, the first inductees of baseball's Hall of Fame, including Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth, were named in Cooperstown, New York.

In 1963, the first charter members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame were named in Canton, Ohio (they were enshrined when the Hall opened in September 1963). Poet Robert Frost died in Boston at age 88.

In 1964, Stanley Kubrick's nuclear war satire "Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and

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Love the Bomb" premiered in New York, Toronto and London.

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter formally welcomed Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping (dung shah-oh-ping) to the White House, following the establishment of diplomatic relations.

In 1984, President Ronald Reagan announced in a nationally broadcast message that he and Vice President George H.W. Bush would seek reelection in the fall.

In 1995, the San Francisco 49ers became the first team in NFL history to win five Super Bowl titles, beating the San Diego Chargers, 49-26, in Super Bowl XXIX.

In 1998, a bomb rocked an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama, killing security guard Robert Sanderson and critically injuring nurse Emily Lyons. (The bomber, Eric Rudolph, was captured in May 2003 and is serving a life sentence.)

In 2002, in his first State of the Union address, President George W. Bush said terrorists were still threatening America — and he warned of "an axis of evil" consisting of North Korea, Iran and Iraq.

In 2007, Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro was euthanized because of medical complications eight months after his gruesome breakdown at the Preakness.

In 2020, a charter flight evacuating 195 Americans, including diplomats and their families, left the Chinese city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the new viral outbreak; they would undergo three days of testing and monitoring at a California military base. World health officials expressed concern that the virus was starting to spread between people outside China.

Ten years ago: Eleven people were killed when smoke and fog caused a series of fiery crashes on I-75 in Florida.

Five years ago: Six people were killed in a shooting at a Quebec City mosque during evening prayers. (Alexandre Bissonnette, who was arrested nearby, pleaded guilty to murder and attempted murder charges and was sentenced to life in prison.) The White House vigorously defended President Donald Trump's immigration restrictions, as protests against the order banning travelers from seven predominantly Muslim countries spread throughout the country. Roger Federer won his 18th Grand Slam title, defeating Rafael Nadal 6-4, 3-6, 6-1, 3-6, 6-3 at the Australian Open.

One year ago: Raising the stakes in the slew of cases stemming from the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, the Justice Department said two New York men identified as members of the Proud Boys had been indicted on federal conspiracy and other charges. Congressional leaders announced that Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, who collapsed and died after engaging with the protesters at the Capitol, would lie in honor at the building's Rotunda. Johnson & Johnson said its vaccine appeared to protect against COVID-19 with just one shot. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an order requiring the wearing of face masks on airline flights and public transportation. Hilton Valentine, the founding guitarist of English rock and roll band The Animals, died at 77.

Today's Birthdays: Feminist author Germaine Greer is 83. Actor Katharine Ross is 82. Feminist author Robin Morgan is 81. Actor Tom Selleck is 77. R&B singer Bettye LaVette is 76. Actor Marc Singer is 74. Actor Ann Jillian is 72. Rock musician Louie Perez (Los Lobos) is 69. R&B singer Charlie Wilson is 69. Talk show host Oprah Winfrey is 68. Actor Terry Kinney is 68. Country singer Irlene Mandrell is 66. Actor Diane Delano is 65. Actor Judy Norton (TV: "The Waltons") is 64. Rock musician Johnny Spampinato is 63. Olympic gold-medal diver Greg Louganis is 62. Rock musician David Baynton-Power (James) is 61. Rock musician Eddie Jackson (Queensryche) is 61. Actor Nicholas Turturro is 60. Rock singer-musician Roddy Frame (Aztec Camera) is 58. Actor-director Edward Burns is 54. Actor Sam Trammell is 53. Actor Heather Graham is 52. Former House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., is 52. Actor Sharif Atkins is 47. Actor Sara Gilbert is 47. Actor Kelly Packard is 47. Actor Justin Hartley is 45. Actor Sam Jaeger is 45. Writer and TV personality Jedediah Bila is 43. Actor Andrew Keegan is 43. Actor Jason James Richter is 42. Blues musician Jonny Lang is 41. Pop-rock singer Adam Lambert (TV: "American Idol") is 40. Country singer Eric Paslay is 39.