

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 1 of 70

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2 - Groton Area COVID-19 Report](#)
- [2- Tigers beat North Central](#)
- [3-Thurston interns at Next Level Nutrition](#)
- [4- Governor Noem Responds to False CNN Report](#)
- [4- Governor Noem Signs Bills into Law](#)
- [5- Governor Noem Vetoes Senate Bill 76](#)
- [5- City Council Meeting Agenda](#)
- [6-SDDVA Secretary Whitlock's February Column](#)
- [- Don't Be Scammed](#)
- [7- Weather Pages](#)
- [11- Daily Devotional](#)
- [12- 2022 Community Events](#)
- [13- Subscription Form](#)
- [14- News from the Associated Press](#)

UpComing Events

Thursday, Feb. 10

Basketball Double Header at Milbank. 4 p.m.: Girls JV at elementary gym, Boys C game at HS Gym; 5 p.m.: Girls C game at elementary gym, Boys JV at HS Gym. 6:15 p.m.: Girls Varsity at HS Gym, 7:45 p.m. Boys Varsity at HS Gym. **NOTE: The elementary gym is the new gym attached to the school. It is basically down the hall from the HS Gym and to the left.**

Friday, Feb. 11

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Saturday, Feb. 12

9 a.m.: State Junior High Wrestling at Pierre
Basketball Doubleheader with Mobridge-Pollock in Groton. Girls JV at 1 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Monday, Feb. 14

GBB at Flandreau Indian - JV at 5 p.m. followed by varsity

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 15

Boys Basketball at Sisseton
C game at 5 p.m. in the Practice Gym; JV at 5 p.m. in the varsity gym followed by Varsity game
Junior High Boys Basketball hosts Tiospa Zina. 7th Grade at 5:30 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.
City Council meeting, 7 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

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



Wednesday, Feb. 16

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Thursday, Feb. 17

Parent-Teacher Conference, 4-8 p.m.

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Friday, Feb. 18

NO SCHOOL

Parent-Teacher Conferences, 8 a.m. to Noon
Basketball Double-Header at Deuel (Clear Lake).
JV games start at 4 p.m.

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Saturday, Feb. 19

Region Wrestling at Britton

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Sunday, Feb 20

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Monday, Feb. 21

NO SCHOOL - President's Day

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla. - RETURNING

Boys Basketball hosts Tiospa Zina - C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity
Junior High Basketball vs. Warner. 7th grade game at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game

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 Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 2 of 70

Groton Area COVID-19 Report

Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated February 8, 2022; 1:56 PM

**Increase of 1
since Tuesday**

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

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

Tigers beat North Central

Groton Area led at the quarter breaks at 18-3, 43-10 and 53-16 en route to a 68-21 win over North Central. Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 15 points while Kaden Kurtz added 11.

Lane Tietz - 15 points, 1 rebound, 1 assist, 5 steals.

Kaden Kurtz - 11 points, 1 rebound, 3 steals.

Jayden Zak - 5 points, 1 rebound, 1 assist, 2 fouls.

Jacob Zak - 2 points, 7 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 foul, 1 block.

Tate Larson - 6 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists.

Cole Simon - 6 points, 2 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 foul.

Wyatt Hearnen - 7 points, 6 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal, 1 foul, 1 block.

Colby Dunker - 6 points, 2 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal.

Logan Ringgenberg - 1 rebound, 1 foul.

Cade Larson - 1 rebound, 2 fouls.

Taylor Diegel - 5 points, 2 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal, 2 fouls.

Dillon Abeln - 3 points, 1 steal.

Holden Sippel - 2 points, 3 rebounds, 1 foul.

Groton Area made 17 of 33 field goals for 52 percent, six of 19 three-pointers for 32 percent, made 16 of 21 free throws for 76 percent, had 32 rebounds, nine turnovers, 10 assists, 12 steals, 11 fouls and 2 blocks.

Thurston interns at Next Level Nutrition

by Dorene Nelson

Groton Area High School offers a variety of business classes. One of these classes, School Internships, offers seniors the opportunity to work in various local businesses of their choice.

The purpose of this internship is to teach students responsibility by working for someone other than their family. It helps them learn how to work with the public and with customers who might not be all that agreeable at times.

Internships could also help students decide on a part-time job while they are in college or maybe even to help them choose a future occupation.

The business teacher, Becky Hubsch, has set up this experience for the seventeen students enrolled in her School Internship class.

All students must be at their chosen place of work during the first period of the school day. The student interns must contact the place they would like to work and have their own personal transportation.

Emilie Thurston is interning at Next Level Nutrition, owned by Ashley Bentz and located in downtown Groton.

"I decided to intern at Next Level because I am interested in the health field. The drinks we make here are not only very good nutrition but are tasty as well," Thurston stated. "The drinks have many great health benefits and provide energy and extra protein in your diet."

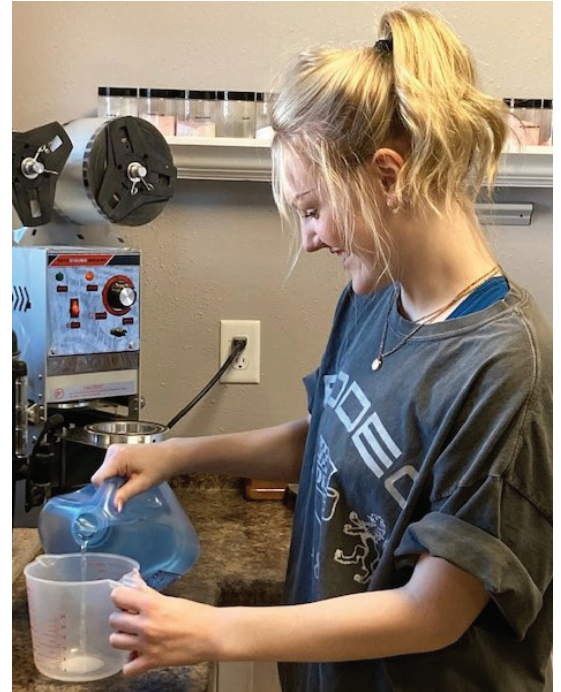
"It is also fun to work here, learn new nutritional facts, and wait on a variety of customers," she explained. "Working for Ashley has been very educational as well as enjoyable."

"Making the wide variety of drinks is the best part of this job, but learning how to make them and pleasing the customers is probably the hardest part!" Thurston exclaimed.

"After graduating from high school, I plan to attend Josef's School of Hair, Skin and Body to certify in aesthetics for the aesthetic and injectable cosmetic services portion of my profession as a registered nurse," Thurston explained.

"Aesthetic nurses are typically involved in non-surgical procedures. They perform cosmetic procedures such as facials, Hyaluronic acid fillers, neurotoxin injectables like Bot0x, laser skin resurfacing treatments like skin pen and radio frequency, and fat reduction procedures called cool-sculpting.

Emilie is the daughter of Todd Thurston and Debbie Thurston and has three brothers, Mitchel, Riley, and Drew. At school she is involved in track, dance, and FCCLA.



Emilie Thurston

Governor Noem Responds to False CNN Report

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem responded to a false CNN report claiming that hospitalizations are “surging” in Pennington County. The report, which aired on February 8, 2022, also shamed attendees of the Black Hills Stock Show and violated HIPPA by improperly including footage of patients.

“South Dakotans deserve the facts so that they can make the best decisions for themselves and their loved-ones. Unfortunately, CNN’s claims about COVID-19 in Pennington County were not factual,” said Governor Noem. “This political hit job ignored the mountains of factual data that we sent to them. We are demanding a correction.”

“South Dakota will continue to focus on working together to take care of people who get sick with COVID-19,” Noem continued. “We will not allow divisive out-of-state media outlets to get in the way of the partnerships between the State of South Dakota and our excellent hospital systems.”

Because of HIPAA violations in CNN’s coverage, Monument Health has also requested that the false story be retracted:

“A six-hour visit by CNN was summarized inaccurately in the story referenced. The quotes pulled were taken out of context to support a narrative that simply is not true,” said Robin Zebroski, Vice President of Strategic Marketing and Communications at Monument Health. “Monument Health has seen a steady decline in COVID-19 hospitalizations in recent weeks, and the overall testing positivity rate has gone down as well. We strongly support Governor Noem and are disappointed by the CNN report.”

COVID-19 hospitalizations in Pennington County peaked three weeks ago, on January 18, 2022. Since then, they have declined by 32%.

“CNN did not reach out to the South Dakota Department of Health for this story. The Department of Health and the Governor’s Office provided data to be included in their story, but CNN ignored it,” said Joan Adam, Interim Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Health. “Governor Noem and the Department of Health will continue to work with our hospital systems to take care of people and ensure that up-to-date data is available to all South Dakotans. To find resources and facts, visit COVID.SD.gov.”

Governor Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Noem signed five bills into law:

[SB 29](#) authorizes highway maintenance vehicles to operate at less than the posted minimum speed on interstate highways.

[SB 47](#) revises certain provisions regarding money transmission.

[HB 1003](#) updates references to certain federal motor carrier regulations.

[HB 1059](#) permits nonresponsive insurance producer applications to be deemed withdrawn as to not constitute a refusal or administrative action.

[HB 1062](#) revises a provision regarding when a license is not required of a person installing electric wiring.

Governor Noem has signed seven bills into law this legislative session.

Governor Noem Vetoes Senate Bill 76

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem vetoed [Senate Bill 76](#). The Governor’s veto message to the legislature reads as follows:

Dear Mr. President and Members of the Senate,

I respectfully return to you Senate Bill 76 with my VETO. Senate Bill 76 is an Act to revise certain provisions regarding the minimum amount of a lottery prize that is subject to setoff.

When the Lottery was created, a debt setoff system was established where debts could be deducted by the amount won by a winning lottery ticket. Some of those debts are past due child support payments. While this bill may appear harmless, increasing the setoff amount will have consequences on families and helps people avoid their obligations.

In the last two years, 44 prizes from winning lottery tickets were under \$599 and helped pay past due child support obligations. This resulted in South Dakota families receiving resources that were due to them. Under this legislation, those families may not have received that support to buy essentials.

While I support the current law for efficiency purposes, increasing that amount automatically paid to \$599 goes too far. South Dakota must stand as an example for the rest of the country that we put the well-being of our children before convenience. Our focus must be on leading for South Dakota’s next generation.

For these reasons, I oppose Senate Bill 76 and ask that you sustain my veto.

Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

February 10, 2022 – 6:00pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street

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

1. Discussion and Possible Award of Water System Improvements Phase II Water Main Extension “Sch A” Contract
2. Discussion and Possible Award of Water System Improvements Phase II Water Storage Tank Painting “Sch B” Contract
3. Adjournment

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 6 of 70

SDDVA Secretary Whitlock's February Column – Don't Be Scammed

There is no shortage of scammers looking to take advantage of people online, by phone, through the mail, or in person. And unfortunately, veterans are not excluded.

Scammers know too well that one of the best ways to scam a veteran is to pretend to be a veteran, or some group that is friendly to military consumers. They use jargon to craft a cause or a story that sounds genuine. Once a sense of camaraderie is established, the fraudsters pitch a fake charity, a false promise for free materials, or a variety of other scams targeting veterans, military personnel, and their families.

One of the recent scams we have heard about is scammers targeting veterans to help military personnel that are in trouble in a foreign country. Scammers know that veterans have a special bond and have unending support for the men and women that serve. There is a bond joining every veteran from every branch of the service. Whether drafted or enlisted, commissioned or non-commissioned, each took an oath, lived by a code, and stood ready to fight and die for their country.

You know what they say, "if it seems too good to be true, it probably is." Information is the key to foiling scam artists. Before committing to help and before you open your wallet, do your research. Be skeptical, take your time, and do your homework.

If you or someone you know falls victim to a scam, you should reach out to the South Dakota Attorney General's office (605.773.3215) or email consumerhelp@state.sd.us.

You can also file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission, either online or by dialing 877.382.4357. If the fraud came through the internet, you could also report it to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Internet Crime Complaint Center at 202.324.3000.

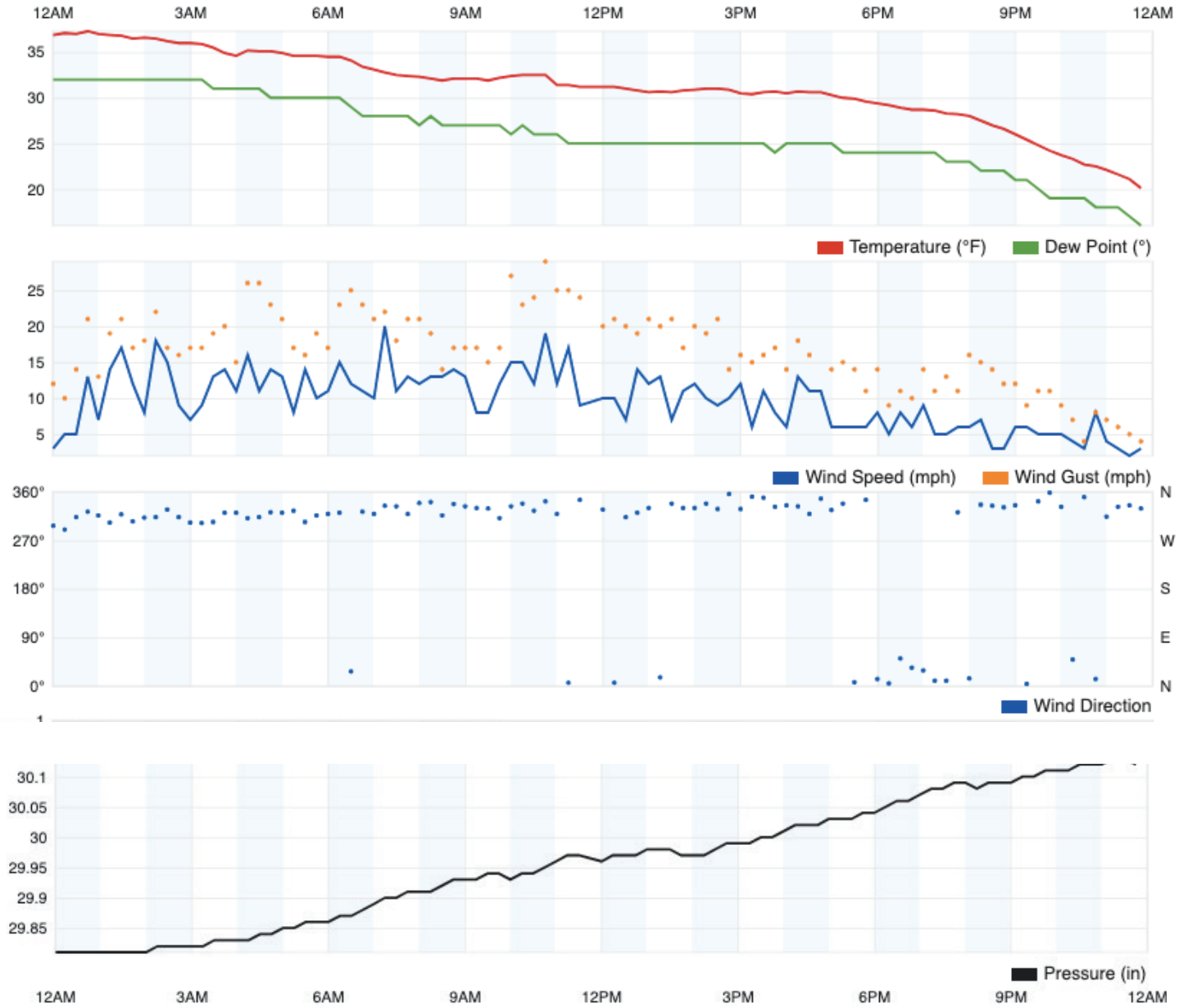
Again, if you think it's a scam, it's probably a scam. Don't get pressured to decide on the spot.

Greg Whitlock, Secretary
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 7 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 8 of 70

Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
70% → 30%	30%	20%		
Breezy. Rain/Snow Likely then Chance Rain	Blustery. Mostly Cloudy then Chance Rain/Snow	Blustery. Slight Chance Snow then Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Partly Sunny
High: 48 °F	Low: 17 °F	High: 21 °F ↓	Low: -1 °F	High: 23 °F

Timing Precipitation & Wind Gusts Today

Probability of Precipitation

Forecast Wind Gust

Probability of Precipitation Forecast

2/10
Thu

	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm
Aberdeen	0	1	11	26	46	64	61	42	24	6	13	14	12	12	11
Britton	0	1	7	13	59	90	79	58	37	32	21	21	22	21	15
Eagle Butte	2	7	27	36	48	44	14	11	9	0	10	12	12	12	18
Eureka	2	4	29	40	67	73	36	26	17	0	13	16	15	15	11
Gettysburg	1	2	13	28	53	82	63	43	24	9	16	19	19	20	17
Kennebec	0	0	6	5	14	26	52	40	28	18	19	20	21	22	26
McIntosh	8	20	47	42	30	23	17	14	12	0	14	13	14	11	8
Milbank		5	2	6	23	47	50	53	69	34	30	34	32	27	
Miller	0	0	8	17	28	32	34	33	31	27	19	20	22	22	20
Mobridge	2	8	27	42	64	48	22	19	17	0	14	15	15	16	12
Murdo	0	1	6	6	12	31	49	35	20	6	15	16	17	17	21
Pierre	0	0	7	11	32	66	55	38	21	6	15	17	18	18	23
Redfield	0	0	7	13	34	52	51	41	32	22	18	19	21	21	17
Sisseton		6	7	19	55	68	57	46	52	26	25	30	31	23	
Watertown		5	2	8	26	56	58	60	73	37	33	36	36	26	
Wheaton	0	0	6	4	8	35	64	63	63	82	40	38	41	42	31

*Table values in %
**Created: 4 am CST Thu 2/10/2022
***Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

Highest Wind Gusts Today

Between 6 AM CST and 6 PM CST
Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Feb 10, 2022 3:59 AM CST

Wind Gust (mph)

www.weather.gov/abr

NWS Aberdeen, SD
Updated: 2/10/2022 5:57 AM CST

A low pressure system will generate some light snow and perhaps some light freezing rain today, before things warm up enough for any lingering precipitation to fall as light rain. Strong northwest winds will develop today in this warmer air as well. The Grassland Fire Danger Index will also increase today into the high to very category across much of central and north central South Dakota.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 9 of 70

Today in Weather History

February 10, 1993: Snow fell across South Dakota from the 10th to the 12th, with over 8 inches in south-central, west-central, and southwest. Some reports included 13 inches at Harrington, 12 inches at Midland, 10.5 inches at Winner, 10 inches near Stephan, Ardmore, and Wagner, 8.5 inches near Lead and Milesville, and 8 inches at Mitchell and Usta.

February 10, 1996: Across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, an intense area of low pressure and an Arctic high-pressure area created strong winds from 35 to 50 mph with gusts to around 65 mph through the afternoon and into the late evening. These high winds combined with the falling snow and the snow on the ground create blizzard conditions and slick roads across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Highway 12 from Webster to Summit was closed the evening of the 10th and Interstate-29 from Summit to Sisseton. Hundreds of travelers were stranded at Summit for several hours until conditions improved. Some wind gusts included 61 mph at Mobridge and 66 mph at Pierre and Aberdeen.

February 10, 2013: A powerful area of low pressure brought widespread heavy snow of 6 to as much as 19 inches across South Dakota and into Minnesota. The combination of heavy snow and powerful winds of 30 to 50 mph caused extensive blowing and drifting snow. Roads, highways, and Interstates 29 and 90 were closed for a time, and schools started late or closed on Monday the 11th.

1899 - The temperature at Monterey plunged to 29 degrees below zero, establishing record for the state of Virginia. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1921: Gardner, Georgia, was devastated by a massive, estimated F4 tornado that caused an entire small town section to disappear. The tornado killed an estimated 31 people and injured 100.

1959: St. Louis, Missouri, was hit by a massive F4 tornado that killed 21 and injured 345. Over 2000 buildings were damaged or destroyed, including the St. Louis Arena.

1973 - A major snowstorm struck the southeastern U.S. It produced as much as 18 inches in Georgia, and up to two feet of snow in South Carolina. (David Ludlum)

1978 - As much as eight inches of rain drenched southern California resulting in widespread flooding and mudslides. The heavy rainfall produced a wall of water which ripped through the mountain resort community of Hidden Springs drowning at least thirteen persons. The storm was one of the most destructive of record causing fifty million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1981: A morning tornado at Bay Minette, AL, struck the local middle school severely damaging the gymnasium. The tornado hurt 62 people were injured, 44 of whom were students.

1982 - Bismarck, ND, experienced its 45th consecutive day of subzero temperature readings which tied the previous record long string of subzero daily lows ending on the same date in 1937. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm in the northeastern U.S. produced heavy snow in southeastern Maine. Grand Falls and Woodland received 15 inches, mainly during the early morning hours, while most of the rest of the state did not even see a flake of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Bitter cold arctic air gripped the north central U.S. International Falls MN was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 35 degrees below zero. Record warm readings were reported in southern California, with highs of 78 at San Francisco and 88 at Los Angeles. San Juan Capistrano CA was the hot spot in the nation with a high of 92 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - For the first time all month winter relaxed its grip on the nation. The temperature at Brownsville TX warmed above 60 degrees for the first time in six days, ending their second longest such cold spell of record. (The National Weather Summary)

2010: Cyclone Pat slams The Cook Islands with 125 mph winds, which destroyed about 80 percent of the island of Aitutaki.

2011 - The coldest day in Oklahoma history sees the temperature plunge to -31°F at Nowata, OK. A US National Weather Service station at Bartlesville recorded a reading of -28°F. Both locations break the previous low temperature mark of -27°F set in 1905 and tied in 1930. The Weather Doctor

2017: An atmospheric phenomena know as "moonbow" was seen in the Seattle area.

2017: Denver saw their all-time warmest temperature in February with a reading of 79 degrees.

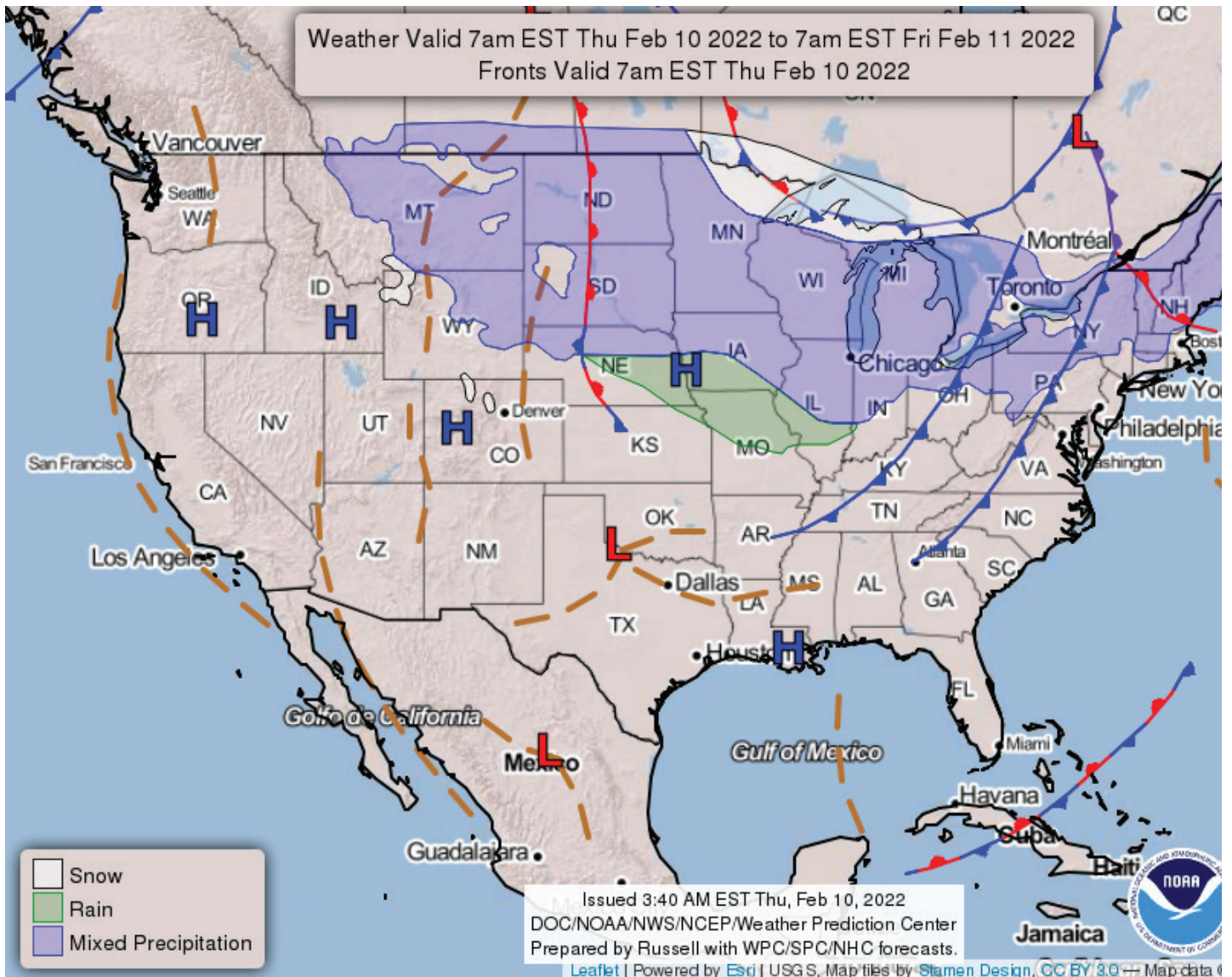
Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 10 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 37 °F at 12:49 AM
Low Temp: 20 °F at 11:56 PM
Wind: 30 mph at 10:48 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 53 in 1977
Record Low: -27 in 1988
Average High: 27°F
Average Low: 4°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.20
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.75
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 5:53:50 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:37:54 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 11 of 70



A SIMPLE WAY OUT?

It often seems that the simplest way out of an uncomfortable situation or the easiest solution to a big problem is a little "deception." Deception, or lies, have become part of most people's everyday conversations.

For example, "I'm really sorry but my husband has suddenly developed a migraine headache, and we'll have to cancel our plans for dinner."

Or "You know, I really appreciate the invitation to go to prayer meeting, but I have to make a report to my boss first thing in the morning, and I'll be working on it most of the night it's so important."

Then there's the "I'm sorry but the manager is away from his desk right now" when he's hiding behind his door.

And we've all heard the familiar phrase, "Well, I gave him the message, and I'm sure he tried to get back to you" when the message was immediately discarded.

Unfortunately, the first lie needs a crutch to stand on and then the second requires a brace and the third a wheelchair and the fourth a gurney. A lie just can't stand by itself. It is easy to tell a lie, but one is rarely enough. One lie can't stand by itself. It needs the help and support of other lies.

"Keep me from deceitful ways," wrote the wise Psalmist. But that is not enough for Christians. So, he continued, "Be gracious to me and teach me Your law."

God's law also emphasizes the fact that we must speak the truth even when it may cause us problems.

Prayer: Lord, give us courage to keep any lie from leaving our lips and to be bold when the truth hurts. Guard us so that we do not lie to ourselves, either. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me and teach me your law Psalm 119:29

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 12 of 70

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)
04/09/2022 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)
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
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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 13 of 70

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

06-19-30-34-35

(six, nineteen, thirty, thirty-four, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

02-18-20-32-36, Star Ball: 9, ASB: 2

(two, eighteen, twenty, thirty-two, thirty-six; Star Ball: nine; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$7.36 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$42 million

Powerball

02-17-33-51-63, Powerball: 26, Power Play: 2

(two, seventeen, thirty-three, fifty-one, sixty-three; Powerball: twenty-six; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$158 million

SD House lawmakers limit 'critical race theory' bills' reach

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota House lawmakers on Wednesday reigned in proposals from Gov. Kristi Noem aimed at barring so-called "divisive" concepts about race, religion and national origin from elementary, high school and university classrooms, but still recommended that the state government restrict what is taught in schools.

The Republican governor has touted the proposals as a way to "protect" students from critical race theory — the lightning rod concept that has become a political rallying cry on the right.

She said last week that a pair of bills, which would apply separately to universities and K-12 public schools, would ensure "our students are not taught that they are responsible for (the) different actions of our ancestors."

But Republican lawmakers, who control the House Education committee, made significant revisions to the bills Wednesday before giving it their recommendation. They stipulated that the proposed laws don't apply to what is taught in university courses and can't keep K-12 teachers from discussing so-called "divisive topics" as part of broader discussions, so long as they do it in an "objective manner."

Lawmakers also struck large sections from the bill for K-12 students that would have kept schools from giving credit for taking part in political activities.

The Board of Regents supported the bill applying to universities, asserting that it would not change how it already operates. However, organizations representing teachers, school administrators and school boards all voiced opposition to the bill for K-12 schools, arguing that it sought to address situations that rarely come up in schools and put more unnecessary regulations on teachers who are already governed by a code of ethics.

"There's fear and mistrust that generates this bill," said Jeremiah Murphy, representing the teacher's union, adding that those who brought it "want to further inflame this fear and mistrust."

University students also worried the legislation would stifle free speech on campus and keep difficult historical truths from being fully explored in classrooms.

"I'm an adult and I should be able to make a decision about my education on my own without government interference," Ally Feiner, the student body president at the University of South Dakota, told the committee.

The bill names a list of “divisive concepts,” which include ideas that any race, national origin or religion is “inherently superior or inferior” and that individuals are “inherently responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, religion, sex, ethnicity, or national origin.”

“What’s troubling is teachers are very confused about this language,” said Democratic Rep. Erin Healy. “Their understanding is that they cannot talk about anything that is a ‘divisive concept.’ But really that includes so much that it really just creates ... a chilling effect on the kind of conversations that we can have.”

During the committee hearing, Wade Pogany, president of the Associated School Boards of South Dakota, held up a copy of “To Kill a Mockingbird” as he questioned whether the book would be allowed to be taught under the proposed law.

Even the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, an organization that has supported past efforts from South Dakota conservative lawmakers to promote “intellectual diversity” on campuses, opposed the bill applying to universities.

Tyler Coward, an attorney with the organization, told lawmakers that such lists of “divisive concepts” can “create an unintended chilling effect on free speech.”

Critical race theory is a way of thinking about America’s history through the lens of racism. Scholars developed it during the 1970s and 1980s in response to what they viewed as a lack of racial progress following the civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

It centers on the idea that racism is systemic in the nation’s institutions and that they function to maintain the dominance of white people in society.

The concept has morphed from an obscure academic discussion point on the left to a hot-button issue in Republican-controlled statehouses this year.

“This hyper-focus on race that is dividing us needs to be checked,” said Republican Rep. Scott Odenbach.

South Dakota Senate OK’s funding for Oceti Sakowin schools

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate passed a proposal Wednesday to fund two new schools based around Oceti Sakowin language and culture.

The proposal, pushed by Democratic Sen. Troy Heinert, aims to address high dropout rates among some Native American students by structuring the schools around Lakota, Nakota and Dakota language, giving students and communities ownership over their education. It passed the Republican-controlled Senate on a 22 to 13 vote.

“My community deserves a chance to change,” Heinert said, referring to how Indigenous students have lagged behind the rest of the state in standardized tests. “And we shouldn’t have to change who we are as Lakota people.”

The bill caps the number of schools that can be created at two in the next five years. It doesn’t specify where they would be located, but groups in Rapid City and on the Rosebud Indian Reservation are hoping to apply if the bill passes.

It’s the third year that Heinert has brought a similar proposal to fund the schools. He faces opposition from organizations representing school districts that say it would take money away from public schools. They argue the Native American language immersion schools can be incorporated into public school districts.

“It is a private school that is receiving public funds,” said Wade Pogany, the director of the Associated School Boards of South Dakota, during a hearing for the bill last week.

Native American educators have pressed state lawmakers this legislative session on several proposals to incorporate Oceti Sakowin language and culture, but met limited success in the Republican-controlled Legislature.

Indigenous educators argued that the state needs to rethink how it teaches Native American history and culture to address historical wrongdoings and the present-day disparities in education for Native American students and their white peers.

“We’ve been in separate worlds and what we’re trying to say is tribal citizens are also South Dakota

citizens. South Dakota history is Native history, and it's not being consistently taught across the state," said Democratic Rep. Peri Pourier, who brought a proposal to push public schools to offer to all students the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings — a set of teachings on the Great Sioux Nation's languages, culture and history.

A House committee last week rejected her bill after the organization representing school administrators opposed it, arguing that schools could already incorporate the teaching and didn't need the extra push.

However, the passage of Heinert's bill Wednesday offers some hope to Indigenous educators. It will face a tough test in the House, likely in the same committee that rejected Pourier's proposal.

Sarah White, who directs a group of Indigenous educators called the South Dakota Education Equity Coalition, said she is hoping to point to the successes of schools that have already been started in Native American communities through private fundraising.

"We'll see be able to see what it looks like to give communities autonomy over what their children are receiving in their classrooms," she said.

Democratic Sen. Red Dawn Foster offered lawmakers a blunt choice.

"It would take some money away from the schools and invest it in these students," she said "We can invest it there and help these students or we can invest it in prisons."

Injunction blocks South Dakota abortion pill restriction

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A federal judge has granted a preliminary injunction against a South Dakota rule that would make the state one of the hardest places in the U.S. to get abortion pills.

U.S. District Judge Karen Schreier issued the injunction late Tuesday against a rule pushed by Republican Gov. Kristi Noem that would have required abortion-seekers to make three separate visits to a doctor to take abortion pills. Schreier previously issued a temporary restraining order last month to keep the state from implementing the rule.

Women in South Dakota can currently get both drugs in the two-dose medication-induced abortion regimen during a single visit and take the second dose at home.

Schreier, who was appointed under former President Bill Clinton, granted Planned Parenthood's request for the injunction, writing that the rule "likely imposes an undue burden on Planned Parenthood and its patients' right to seek an abortion."

Planned Parenthood, which operates the state's only clinic that regularly provides abortions, argued that the rule would have ended its ability to provide medication-induced abortions.

"Medication abortion is safe, common and essential health care," Sarah Stoesz, the president of Planned Parenthood North Central States, said in a statement. "It is imperative that every person who decides that an abortion is the best decision for them are able to access the care they need, when they need it."

Noem last year issued an executive order to clamp down on abortion pills in anticipation of the FDA permanently lifting a requirement that people seeking the drugs pick them up in person. The agency said a scientific review supported broadening access, including no longer limiting the dispensing of them to a small number of specialty clinics and doctors' offices.

Noem has argued that the FDA's policy would endanger women seeking an abortion.

"They can literally get on the phone or online and request a prescription and undergo this medical procedure in their home with no supervision whatsoever," she told reporters at a news conference last month, although the state already requires abortion-seekers to consult with a doctor twice in person before receiving the medication.

In fact, the FDA has found complications from the medication to be rare. About 40% of all abortions in the U.S. are done through medication rather than surgery, and the FDA has reported only 26 deaths associated with the drug since 2000, though not all of those can be directly attributed to the medication due to existing health conditions and other factors.

Noem has pushed a bill this year that would enact her rule into law. That bill has not yet been considered

by lawmakers, but Republican legislators last week rejected a separate proposal from Noem to further clamp down on abortion access.

Police investigate disturbance, death at Pierre motel

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Police are investigating a death after getting a call about a disturbance at a motel in Pierre early Wednesday, officials said.

Police Capt. Bryan Walz said officers were called to the Pierre Inn and Suites shortly before 4 a.m., KCCR reported. An unidentified person was found dead at the motel and investigators are trying to determine how that individual died.

A person of interest has been detained in the case, according to police.

The South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation and South Dakota Highway Patrol are assisting Pierre police with the case.

Man pleads guilty after after seniors ate his THC brownies

TYNDALL, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota man has pleaded guilty to a felony drug charge after his mother unknowingly served his marijuana-laced brownies to a group of seniors at the Tabor Community Center.

Michael Koranda, 46, appeared at the Bon Homme County Courthouse Tuesday where he waived his preliminary hearing and entered the plea.

As part of a plea deal, both the prosecution and defense jointly recommended Koranda receive a suspended imposition of sentence, which would allow the judge to place him on probation for a period of time.

A report from Bon Homme County Sheriff's Office says dispatchers received several calls about possible poisonings on Jan. 4. All the calls involved seniors who had earlier been at a community center card game.

An investigation into the incident led authorities to believe the patients were all under the influence of THC, the compound in cannabis that produces the high sensation and that the THC came from a batch of brownies brought by a woman to the community center, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

Seniors who ate the brownies identified the woman who brought them. She said her son had baked the brownies she brought to the card game.

The plea agreement also calls for Koranda to pay any medical bills that aren't covered by insurance for those who ate the brownies. He would also pay any fines and court costs.

Koranda is to be sentenced March 15. The drug charge carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

Explosion, fire at Yankton propane business injures one

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — An explosion and fire at a Yankton propane company has injured one person and left the business in ruins.

Strong winds fueled the fire at Long's Propane Tuesday and ignited a tanker truck parked next to the building.

There's no word on the condition of the employee who was hurt and taken to Avera Sacred Heart Hospital.

"There was an individual in the building," Fire Chief Brad Moser said. "He got out, but I don't know the extent of his injuries."

Thick smoke led authorities to close Highway 50, where the business is located, because of reduced visibility, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

Firefighters hauled in water from approximately a mile away to fight the blaze. A City of Yankton water truck was brought in to assist with water access.

Moser said that damage was heavy from the explosion and the resulting fire.

"I would say the building is a complete loss," he said.

Firefighters from Lesterville and Gayville provided mutual aid.

The cause of the explosion is under investigation.

Biden quest for judicial diversity goes beyond race, gender

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden spent a recent flight aboard Air Force One reminiscing with lawmakers and aides about his start as a young lawyer in Delaware working as a public defender in the late 1960s.

The flight from New York to Washington was short, and there wasn't much time to explore the president's brief time in the job during the civil rights era. But as Biden considers his first Supreme Court nominee, this lesser-known period in his biography could offer insight into the personal experience he brings to the decision. The account was relayed by a person familiar with the trip who insisted on anonymity to discuss it.

Biden has already made history by nominating more public defenders, civil rights attorneys and nonprofit lawyers to the federal bench during his first year in office than any other president, increasing not just the racial and gender diversity of the federal judiciary but also the range of professional expertise. And it's possible that theme will continue as he looks to make more history by nominating the first Black woman to the nation's highest court.

While three of the current justices have experience as prosecutors, none was a criminal defense attorney. The last justice with serious experience in defense was Thurgood Marshall, a civil rights attorney nominated about 55 years ago. He was the first Black person on the court and retired in 1991.

Some of the women on Biden's list of potential nominees have deep public defense or civil rights backgrounds: Ketanji Brown Jackson, 51, for example, worked as a public defender and served on the U.S. Sentencing Commission before she was nominated to the bench by President Barack Obama. Eunice Lee, 51, whom Biden named to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 2nd Circuit in August, is the first former federal defender to serve on that court.

Biden's judicial appointments thus far make clear his interest in professional diversity.

Nearly 30% of Biden's nominees to the federal bench have been public defenders, 24% have been civil rights lawyers and 8% labor attorneys. By the end of his first year, Biden had won confirmation of 40 judges, the most since President Ronald Reagan. Of those, 80% are women and 53% are people of color, according to the White House.

"It's so important to have a diversity of perspectives and having the judiciary really reflect the diversity of lived experiences and perspectives of the folks who are coming before them," said Lisa Barrett, director of policy at the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund.

The Supreme Court hears only a fraction of federal cases filed each year. Federal judges are hearing most of the cases, with roughly 400,000 cases filed in federal trial courts a year. The high court hears only about 150 of the more than 7,000 cases it is asked to review annually.

Most of the judges appointed to the federal bench have worked as prosecutors, corporate attorneys or both. A survey three years ago found more than 73% of sitting federal judges were men, and more than 80% were white, according to the Center for American Progress.

A diversity of professional expertise makes for a more fair and just bench, advocates say. Judges draw on their personal histories to help them weigh arguments and decide cases, and they also learn from each other. Public defenders often represent the indigent and the marginalized, those who often can't afford their own attorneys.

"They represent the 80% percent of people in the criminal legal system too low-income to afford a lawyer," said Emily Galvin-Almanza, a former public defender who founded the nonprofit Partners for Justice. "So when you put a public defender on the bench, you're putting a person on who listens with a very different ear. You have a person on the bench with an experience of the realities of very, very disempowered people."

Biden's brief time as a public defender isn't widely discussed, and it isn't listed in his official biography on the White House website. He's more prone to talk about his 36 years as a senator and his time as head of the Judiciary Committee, where he oversaw six Supreme Court nominations.

But the president has spoken at times about his brief time as a public defender before he became a U.S.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 19 of 70

senator at the age of 29. It's informed some of his decisions in office, like directing federal grant money for public defense and expanding other federal efforts on public defense.

"Civil rights, the Vietnam War and President Nixon's rampant abuse of power were the reasons I entered public life to begin with," Biden said in a 2019 speech in South Carolina during the presidential campaign. "That's why I had chosen at that time to leave a prestigious law firm that I had been hired by and become a public defender — because those people who needed the most help couldn't afford to be defended in those days."

In a 2007 memoir, he called the job "God's work."

The president promised during his campaign for president that he'd nominate a Black woman to the bench, and he spent his first year in office broadening his potential applicant pool through judicial appointments. Most Supreme Court justices have come from federal appeals courts, but it's not a requirement. Among the current justices, only Justice Elena Kagan wasn't a federal appeals court judge before joining.

Federal judges are often chosen from state courts, which also lack in diversity. But Biden's very public push to diversify federal judges could have an impact on how judges in the states look, too.

"Neither state courts nor federal courts reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, or the diversity of the legal profession. Courts across the country are falling short," said Alicia Bannon, the director of the Judiciary Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law. "But we're hoping that is slowly changing."

Biden has promised a rigorous selection process for his Supreme Court nominee. His team, led by former Democratic Sen. Doug Jones, is reviewing past writings, public remarks and decisions, learning the life stories of the candidates and interviewing them and people who know them. Background checks will be updated and candidates may be asked about their health. After all, it's a lifetime appointment.

The goal is to provide the president with the utmost confidence in the eventual pick's judicial philosophy, fitness for the court and preparation for the high-stakes confirmation fight. Interviewing potential candidates comes later, but Biden has already spoken to some of the women who may be under consideration back when they were being appointed to other courts.

Biden will also continue to seek the advice of lawmakers. He was to host Senate Judiciary Committee Democrats on Thursday, a White House official said.

Olympics Live: US wins first aerials medals in dozen years

BEIJING (AP) — The Latest on the Beijing Winter Olympics:

The Americans have won gold in the Olympics' first mixed team aerials event, giving the U.S. its first medals in the freestyle skiing discipline in a dozen years.

The trio of Ashley Caldwell, Christopher Lillis and Justin Schoenefeld each earned their first Winter Games medals. Lillis' back double full-full-double full was given the highest score of any trick in the finals, and the U.S. title was assured when Schoenefeld followed with a clean back double full-full-full.

The 28-year-old Caldwell, a 2017 world champion, is in her fourth Olympics but has never finished higher than 10th. She and the 23-year-old Schoenefeld have been dating for about three years.

Two-time medalist Jia Zongyang cost China a chance at gold when he flipped forward on his landing, and the host country settled for silver. Canada won bronze.

The U.S. hadn't medaled in aerials since 2010, when Jeret Peterson won silver in the men's event. The last Americans to win gold were Eric Bergoust and Nikki Stone in 1998.

The mixed team event made its debut at these Games. Each country gets three jumpers and can't use more than two per gender. All six countries in the finals went with two men and one woman.

Sweden beat the U.S. men 7-4 in a rematch of the Pyeongchang gold medal match in curling.

That gives Sweden an early lead in the round-robin standings. It was the first loss of the Beijing Games for the defending champions.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 20 of 70

The result left the Americans hoping for a rematch against Niklas Edin's foursome, which could happen only if they both qualify for the playoffs.

Four years after Team Shuster won five straight elimination games — including a victory over Edin that clinched the first U.S. gold medal in Olympic curling history — it was the Swedes celebrating.

Trailing 7-4 in the 10th and final end, John Shuster conceded after Edin left the Americans with just one stone in the target area and just one more to play.

"When you're playing against the reigning world champions and you get opportunities, you got to take advantage of those," Shuster said. "We're going to have to fight tooth and nail to get every win here."

The U.S. ski team says two-time Olympic gold medalist Mikaela Shiffrin will compete in the super-G.

That event Friday will be her third of the Beijing Games so far.

Shiffrin failed to finish either the giant slalom or slalom, missing a gate in each within seconds of starting each time.

She took two training runs on the super-G course Thursday but it was not known at the time whether she would decide to start in the race itself.

The 26-year-old from Colorado never has entered a super-G at an Olympics but she did win it at the 2019 world championships.

Norwegian cross-country skier Therese Johaug won gold in the 10-kilometer classic race at the Beijing Olympics. It was her second gold of the Games — she won the women's 15-kilometer cross-country ski-athlon on Saturday.

Johaug glided around the cold, windy course in 28 minutes, 6.3 seconds. As she watched others come in with slower times, realizing the gold was hers, she shouted and howled, throwing her head back and pumping her arms in the air.

Finland's Kerttu Niskanen was ahead of Johaug at the 8.6-kilometer mark but crossed the finish line just 0.4 seconds behind the Norwegian. Krista Parmakoski of Finland secured the bronze 31.5 seconds back.

Natalia Nepryaeva of Russia threatened Parmakoski's time but crossed the line 31.6 seconds behind Johaug.

The Beijing Olympic 10-kilometer (6.2-mile) cross country race was in the classic ski style. Ninety-eight women went off at 30-second intervals to ski two laps on a 5-kilometer course.

The 10K race alternates between classic and freestyle, or skate, every Olympic cycle, so the Pyeongchang event was freestyle and the 2014 Sochi Games were classic.

Figure skating's governing body has declined to address reports that the 15-year-old who helped the Russians win gold in the team event at the Beijing Olympics previously tested positive for doping.

Russian media say Kamila Valieva tested positive for a banned heart medication before the Beijing Games.

The International Skating Union says it "cannot disclose any information about any possible anti-doping rule violation."

Valieva scored maximum points in the women's individual sections of the team event, which the Russians skaters won. The U.S. won silver and Japan won bronze. The medal ceremony was supposed to be held Tuesday evening, but it was pulled from the schedule.

The International Olympic Committee has said legal talks are ongoing with the ISU on the issue, though it gave no more details.

A positive test could cost Russia the gold medal from the team competition and threaten Valieva's chance to win the individual competition that starts Tuesday.

Alessandro Haemmerle of Austria held off Canada's Eliot Grondin in a photo finish to win the men's snowboardcross at Genting Snow Park.

The 20-year-old Grondin made it close by almost diving toward the finish line with his board. It wasn't

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 21 of 70

enough to overtake Haemmerle, who took home a medal — gold at that — in his third Olympics. Omar Visintin of Italy took home the bronze.

This was the first men's Olympic snowboardcross race not won by either Seth Wescott or Pierre Vaultier. The retired racers cleared the stage for Haemmerle's win.

Jake Vedder wound up sixth as a late injury replacement for the United States. He took the place of Alex Deibold, who suffered a head injury in a crash during qualifying at a World Cup event leading up to the Olympics and couldn't compete.

Austrian skier Johannes Strolz won the Olympic gold medal in the Alpine combined race 34 years after his father did the same.

The 29-year-old Strolz was fourth fastest after the downhill run but he was half a second quicker than anyone else in the slalom. He edged first-run leader Aleksander Aamodt Kilde of Norway by 0.58 seconds. Jack Crawford of Canada took bronze.

The combined adds the times from one downhill run and one slalom run.

Strolz's father won gold in combined at the 1988 Calgary Olympics. Hubert Strolz also won silver in the giant slalom that year.

Kilde won his second medal of the Beijing Games. He also took bronze in the super-G on Tuesday.

Figure skater Nathan Chen has won gold, joining an exclusive club of U.S. Olympic champions in the sport and capping a four-year journey that started after his medal hopes were dashed at the Pyeongchang Games.

The 22-year-old's win in Beijing will make him the seventh U.S. men's skater to step atop the podium. Chen delivered a rousing performance of his "Rocketman" free skate, drawing cheers from the limited crowd of spectators.

Japan's Yuma Kagiyama and Shoma Uno won silver and bronze, respectively.

In Pyeongchang, Chen was taken out of medal contention after delivering what he called a "disastrous" short program. Afterward, he worked relentlessly with coach Rafael Arutyunyan to strengthen every aspect of his figure skating. His path back to the Olympics included three straight world titles and his sixth national championship.

Then earlier this week, Chen vindicated his disappointing performance from four years ago with a record-shattering short skate that put him nearly 6 points ahead of his next closest challenger.

Long-time rival Yuzuru Hanyu, the two-time defending Olympic champion from Japan, came into the free skate with a deficit so great that not even his planned quad axel in the free skate — which he missed — would've made up for it. He finished in fourth place after falling in his attempt to become the first figure skater to land the quad axel in competition.

American Vincent Zhou, who competed with Chen in the team event, withdrew after testing positive for COVID-19.

Italian standout Sofia Goggia has decided not to enter the super-G race at the Beijing Olympics as she works her way back from a crash last month. She is still hoping to defend her downhill title on Tuesday.

The powerhouse Italian team says its four starters for Friday's super-G are Federica Brignone, Marta Bassino, Elena Curtoni and Francesca Marsaglia.

Brignone, Curtoni and Goggia are 1-2-3 in this season's World Cup super-G standings. Goggia won two races in the discipline this season. But she also sprained her left knee, partially tore a cruciate ligament, had a "minor fracture" of the fibula bone in her leg, plus some tendon damage, after the crash in a super-G in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, on Jan. 23.

Japanese figure skater Yuzuru Hanyu fell on his attempt to become the first figure skater to land the quad axel in competition, then fell again on a quad salchow during what could be the two-time gold medalist's final Olympic performance.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 22 of 70

Hanyu has toyed with the 4 1/2-rotation jump for months, and the 27-year-old Japanese star viewed it as not only a jump to keep him enthused about skating but also one that could even the playing field with Nathan Chen.

His longtime American rival, while playing with the quad axel in practice, has never seriously considered it for competition.

The Winnie-the-Pooh-loving Hanyu, whose difficulties in his short program left him out of the final group for Thursday's free skate, finished the rest of his performance without any other problems. But those miscues alone were enough to dash his chances of earning a medal at the Beijing Games.

Kamila Valieva, the 15-year-old Russian superstar expected to deliver her nation its third straight Olympic gold medal in women's figure skating, practiced Thursday, hours after reports that she tested positive for a banned substance.

Valieva tested positive for a banned heart medication before the Beijing Games, the Russian newspaper RBC reported.

The sample was reportedly obtained before Valieva won the European championship last month in Estonia, a performance that solidified her status as the leader of Russia's "quad squad" of elite women's figure skaters headed to Beijing.

It's unclear if Russia is appealing or fighting the result. Her appearance at practice implies that the federation isn't accepting the ruling.

A positive test could cost Russia the gold medal from the team competition and threaten Valieva's chance to win the individual competition that starts Tuesday. She is the heavy favorite.

American Chloe Kim has won gold in the women's halfpipe at the Beijing Olympics.

She turned in a strong opening run as she easily defended her Olympic halfpipe title.

The last rider to drop into the halfpipe, and the contest already over, the 21-year-old American still attempted to go big one last time.

She fell, quickly got back up and casually glided the rest of the way down the halfpipe Thursday as the Olympic champion. She greeted her fellow medalists at the bottom with an embrace.

The only real drama was for second place, with 32-year-old Queralt Castellet of Spain taking silver at her fifth appearance at the Olympic Games. Sena Tomita of Japan held off Cai Xuetong of China for bronze.

No one was matching Kim's height or demanding array of tricks. Not after an opening performance that featured a variety of different spins and rotations, including a front and backside 1080 (three spins each). That flawless run even appeared to surprised her as she covered her mouth in excitement. She later told her coach it was the best one she's done.

There are zero Americans entered in the men's Alpine combined skiing race at the Beijing Games, the first time in Olympic history that event will take place without at least one U.S. representative.

Thursday's race only has 27 total entrants from all countries, compared to 43 for the downhill and 47 for the super-G earlier in the week.

A spokesperson for the U.S. ski team said the original plan was to enter super-G silver medalist Ryan Cochran-Siegle and Bryce Bennett in the combined, which adds the times from one downhill run and one slalom run.

But Bennett, who is from California, tweaked his back before finishing 17th in the super-G on Tuesday and is headed home.

Cochran-Siegle, who is from Vermont, decided to train in giant slalom ahead of that event, which is scheduled for Sunday.

At least one U.S. man has been in the Alpine combined at each of the previous 11 Winter Games where it was held. It was off the schedule between the 1948 and 1988 Olympics.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 23 of 70

Donovan Carrillo has completed his free skate at the Beijing Olympics. He's the first athlete from Mexico ever to advance to the final round of an Olympic figure skating competition.

The country hasn't had an Olympic skater at all in three decades.

In Beijing, Carrillo is one of 33 athletes from nine Latin-American teams. And he's the only one of the four athletes representing Mexico who stayed in the country to nurture his talents.

He was in fourth place after the first group of six at the men's free skate, with a total score of 218.13.

Chloe Kim grabbed the lead after the first run of the women's halfpipe as she tries to defend her Olympic title.

Kim performed two 1080s, three spins, and was so ecstatic over her performance she covered her mouth following her finish. She had the highest amplitude of any rider.

Her score of 94 topped Sena Tomita of Japan. In third place after the first run was Cia Xuetong of China. There are three runs and the winner is whoever has the best score on any of the runs.

Olympic figure skating favorite Kamila Valieva tested positive for a banned heart medication before her arrival at the Beijing Olympics, the Russian newspaper RBC reported, putting in jeopardy the team gold medal that she helped win earlier this week.

The sample was reportedly obtained in December, when the 15-year-old Valieva was still in Russia but did not come to light until after she had helped her team win the gold medal with dynamic performances in her short program and free skate.

The drug, Trimetazidine, is used to treat angina — a type of chest pain marked by reduced blood flow to the heart — and is banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency as a stimulant. It is the same drug that was involved in a Russian bobsled case at the 2018 Olympics that ended in a settlement and an athlete accepting an eight-month ban.

It is unclear whether Valieva has any heart problems.

Diplomats meet in Moscow and Berlin as Russia holds drills

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Britain's top diplomat urged Russia on Thursday to defuse tensions over Ukraine and take the path of diplomacy even as thousands of Russian troops engaged in sweeping maneuvers in Belarus as part of a military buildup near Ukraine that has fueled Western fears of an invasion.

U.K. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss again warned Russia that attacking its neighbor would "have massive consequences and carry severe costs," urging Moscow to abide by its international agreements that commit it to respecting Ukraine's independence and sovereignty.

Seated across a table from Truss with a grim face, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov set a stern tone for the talks, emphasizing that Moscow won't accept Western lecturing.

"Ideological approaches, ultimatums and moralizing is a road to nowhere," Lavrov said, noting that his talks with Truss marked the first meeting of the two countries' top diplomats in more than four years. Russia-U.K. ties have been badly strained by the March 2018 poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in England and other sources of tension.

Russia has concentrated more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine's border and launched a series of military maneuvers in the region, but says it has no plans to invade the nation.

Moscow wants guarantees from the West that NATO won't allow Ukraine and other former Soviet countries to join as members, and for the alliance to halt weapon deployments to Ukraine and roll back its forces from Eastern Europe. The U.S. and NATO flatly reject these demands.

During an exchange of icy comments after the British and Russian minister's talks, Truss reaffirmed a strong call for Moscow to pull its troops back to their bases. Lavrov rejected the demand as inappropriate and pointed at British and NATO troop buildups in Eastern Europe.

"The demands to remove the Russian troops from the Russian territory cause regret," Lavrov said. "We

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 24 of 70

don't want to threaten anyone. It's us who are facing threats."

He alleged that Western politicians were fanning tensions over Ukraine for domestic political purposes. Russia planned from the start to move its troops back after conducting maneuvers, Lavrov said, and once it does, "the West will likely claim that it has forced Russia to deescalate."

"It's selling hot air," he snapped.

Russia's military buildup includes the deployment of troops on the territory of its ally Belarus for sweeping joint drills that entered a decisive phase Thursday. The Ukrainian capital is located about 75 miles (47 miles) south of the border with Belarus, and Western nations voiced worry that Russia could use Belarusian territory to invade Ukraine.

Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a bitter conflict since 2014, when protests drove Ukraine's Kremlin-friendly leader from office, Moscow annexed Crimea and then backed a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine. The fighting between Russia-backed rebels and Ukrainian forces has killed over 14,000 people.

A 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany helped end full-scale hostilities, but frequent skirmishes have continued along the tense line of contact while efforts to negotiate a political settlement stalled. The Kremlin has accused Kyiv of sabotaging the peace agreement, and Ukrainian officials in recent weeks said that implementing it would hurt their country.

Foreign policy advisers from Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine, who met in Paris on Jan. 26 without scoring any visible progress, are scheduled to have another round of talks in Berlin on Thursday to try to reach a common interpretation of the 2015 agreement and plan further steps.

The talks in Berlin are part of renewed diplomatic efforts to resolve the biggest security crisis between Russia and the West since the Cold War. French President Emmanuel Macron visiting Moscow for more than five hours of talks Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin before meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv the next day.

Macron said Putin told him he wouldn't initiate an escalation, but also acknowledged that it will take time to find a diplomatic solution.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz plans to visit to Kyiv and Moscow on Feb. 14-15. He met Monday with U.S. President Joe Biden, who vowed that the Nord Stream 2 Russia-to-Germany gas pipeline would be blocked in the event of an invasion. Such a move against the pipeline, which has been completed but isn't yet operating, would hurt Russia economically but also cause energy supply problems for Germany.

NATO also has stepped up the deployment of troops to bolster the alliance's eastern flank.

The U.S. has begun to move the 2nd Cavalry Regiment's stryker squadron from Vilseck, Germany, to Romania, which borders Ukraine. U.S. officials have said they would send about 1,000 NATO troops.

About 1,700 soldiers from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division are being sent to Poland. About half of them have arrived, and more are expected to follow in coming days, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said. Britain also has pledged to send 350 more troops to Poland and already has sent anti-tank weapons to Ukraine.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Thursday after meeting in Brussels with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg that the Russian military buildup near Ukraine marks "the biggest security crisis that Europe has faced for decades."

"I honestly don't think a decision has yet been taken" by Russia about whether to invade Ukraine, adding that "Our intelligence, I'm afraid to say, remains grim."

Stoltenberg echoed that, noting that "the number of Russian forces is going up, the warning time for a possible attack is going down."

"NATO is not a threat to Russia, but we must be prepared for the worst," he said.

Stoltenberg said he had sent a new letter to Moscow repeating the alliance's invitation for more talks. Johnson planned to meet later Thursday with British troops deployed to Poland.

Russian star practices despite report of positive drug test

By DAVE SKRETTA and GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writers

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 25 of 70

BEIJING (AP) — Kamila Valieva, the 15-year-old Russian superstar who was expected to deliver her nation its third straight Olympic gold medal in women's figure skating, practiced as usual on Thursday, hours after reports surfaced that she had tested positive for a banned substance.

Valieva tested positive for the heart medication before the Beijing Games, the Russian newspaper RBC reported.

The sample was reportedly obtained before Valieva won the European championship last month in Estonia, a performance that solidified her status as the leader of Russia's "quad squad" of elite women's figure skaters.

It's unclear if Russia is appealing or fighting the result, though her light-hearted appearance at her regularly scheduled practice implies that the federation isn't accepting any finding that would eliminate her.

"She is not suspended," Russian figure skating federation spokeswoman Olga Ermolina said, offering no further detail.

The International Skating Union, the sport's governing body, said in a statement it "cannot disclose any information about any possible anti-doping rule violation."

Valieva ran through her program and skated with teammate Alexandra Trusova while getting pointers from coach Eteri Tutberidze at the practice rink. Valieva flashed a smile to one of her coaches near the end of the roughly 30-minute session, and none of the skaters took questions from reporters.

When Valieva left the media area, she gave a gesture with a fist in the air. It appeared that she responded to something inaudible that was asked by a journalist speaking to her in Russian.

A positive test could not only cost Russia the gold medal from the team competition but threaten Valieva's chance to win the individual competition. It starts Tuesday and she is the overwhelming favorite to win gold.

The drug detected, trimetazidine, is a metabolic agent that helps prevent angina attacks and treats vertigo, according to the European Union's medicines agency. It is banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency because it can help endurance and increase blood flow efficiency, both of which could help a figure skater.

The most famous case of trimetazidine in sports doping involved Chinese star swimmer Sun Yang, the three-time Olympic champ who served a three-month ban in 2014. Russian bobsledder Nadezhda Sergeeva also tested positive for it at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics; she was disqualified from the two-woman bobsled event and served an eight-month ban.

It is unclear whether Valieva applied for a therapeutic use exemption or has a history of heart problems.

Russian athletes are in Beijing competing as ROC, short for Russian Olympic Committee, after the country was banned because of a massive state-sponsored doping scheme at the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov referred reporters to the International Olympic Committee.

"As always, not knowing the essence, everyone began to yell left and right. We will not join this orderly line of screamers," he said.

The IOC and Switzerland-based International Testing Agency, which oversees the Olympic drug testing program, have declined to comment on the case.

On Thursday, IOC spokesman Mark Adams said it would not be appropriate to talk of an ongoing legal case or "all sorts of speculation that I have also seen overnight."

The case is more complicated because minors have protection within the World Anti-Doping Code from being identified.

"Obviously everyone has been worried, waiting for a decision," said Morisi Kvitalashvili of Georgia, who trains with Valieva in Moscow and has been in contact with her. "Her condition is good, and it seems like everything is fine."

The uncertainty in Valieva's case contrasts with swift action taken by the ITA against an Iranian skier at the Beijing Games. Hossein Saveh Shemshaki gave a sample Monday that tested positive for an anabolic steroid and was provisionally suspended late Wednesday.

The International Skating Union can also take out athletes with interim bans if they test positive at its events, or in samples it gets before Jan. 27, when the ITA took over the Olympic anti-doping program.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 26 of 70

The ISU also has not commented.

The first indication of a problem with the results of the three-day team competition — which concluded Monday with Russia winning gold, the U.S. silver and Japan bronze — came when the medal ceremony was postponed indefinitely.

If the Russian team is disqualified, the U.S. team would be elevated to the gold medal for the first time in the event. Japan would be awarded silver and fourth-place finisher Canada would receive the bronze.

If any athlete and team is disqualified or had results nullified, an appeal is likely, which could further delay the medals presentation. The Court of Arbitration for Sport has set up an office in Beijing to hear urgent cases.

"I think there's a lot of other factors that are being put in play," said American skater Nathan Chen, who won the individual title on Thursday and could now end up with another gold medal. "Whatever ends up being the case will be the case, but I'm still wrapped up in what I was able to do today. Looking forward to hearing what is ultimately decided."

Shoma Uno of Japan, who was third in the individual event and now stands to get a team silver medal, said he wasn't certain of all the facts surrounding Valieva's case but seemed to indicate the very notion of doping troubled him.

"Everybody is giving our best in practice to perform for an event like this," Uno said. "What I think, good or bad, is not a big deal, but doping is something (to which) all athletes pay extra attention."

The longer the uncertainty drags on, the more skaters will finish their competitions and leave the tightly controlled Olympic bubble for home.

"Everyone is doing absolutely everything that the situation can be resolved as soon as possible," Adams said, though he cautioned "as you know, legal issues can sometimes drag on."

Traditional doping is uncommon in figure skating because additional muscle mass is generally a negative. But many skaters have been caught over the years trying to control their weight with diuretics, which are banned for their ability to mask steroid use, and other medications that could give them the slightest edge.

Russian skaters in particular have a history of positive results dating to 2000, when decorated pairs skater Elena Berezhnaya was stripped of a gold medal from the European championships for testing positive for pseudoephedrine.

In July 2020, Maria Sotskova was dealt a 10-year ban just months after announcing her retirement for allegedly forging a medical certificate to explain a doping violation. Sotskova finished eighth at the 2018 Olympics in Pyeongchang.

Hindu nationalism pushed in voting test for Modi's politics

By KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

AYODHYA, India (AP) — Under grey skies, construction cranes towered over laborers building a mega three-story temple demanded by millions of Hindus for over 100 years. The shrine is dedicated to their most revered god, Ram, and is being built on a plot of land where a 16th-century mosque stood, before a Hindu mob tore it down in 1992.

It's one of several frenetic constructions — massive roads, hotels and a swanky new railway station — underway in Ayodhya, a dusty, holy city in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party is seeking reelection by touting Hindu-first politics coupled with economic prosperity.

This was the first sign of progress Manish Yadav, a 25-year-old student, had seen in this once-sleepy city.

Modi's BJP has won emphatically twice on the national stage. But the state polls in Uttar Pradesh — India's most populous with over 230 million people — are crucial, a barometer of the party's popularity ahead of general elections in 2024. Over 150 million people will vote in the state across seven phases starting Thursday before results are declared in March. Four other states will also vote in February and March — the BJP is fighting to retain power in all but one.

"We need Ayodhya to be a success. We need companies to come and invest, we need factories, techni-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 27 of 70

cal colleges, institutes and jobs here so people don't leave," said Yadav. He said he voted for the BJP in 2019 because it promised to build the temple, and "now we need more."

Uttar Pradesh is currently governed by the BJP's Yogi Adityanath, a polarizing Hindu monk turned politician. Yadav said the government has failed to provide him – and millions like him – jobs. Still, he will vote for them again.

The BJP's answer appears to be infrastructure, including mammoth expressways and airports to boost connectivity and tourism. But analysts are doubtful whether huge public spending on such projects is enough to kickstart growth in Uttar Pradesh, a largely poor and agrarian state where joblessness is rising.

Under Adityanath, youth unemployment has increased fivefold, according to economist Santosh Mehrotra, who analyzed national labor data.

The BJP, however, has made grand promises. It says it will attract investment, provide free electricity for farmers and generate jobs for 20 million people, but has provided few details.

It is also wooing voters with welfare measures, doubling free rations for the poor and a tough stance on crime.

But the party's core Hindu nationalist agenda is unmissable. In December, Modi took a dip in the Ganges River before thousands after he inaugurated a \$45 million corridor that connects two iconic religious sites in the state. Such events, analysts say, have turned temple inaugurations into political spectacles that drive focus away from pressing issues.

"There is a limit to how much employment and development you can create around a temple," Mehrotra said.

The big-ticket projects, which deftly mix religion and infrastructure, are aimed at pleasing the BJP's Hindu base amid reports of discontent among key voters. The party won in the state last time by consolidating Hindu votes across castes. But multiple defections to the opposition Samajwadi Party, whose secular appeal has swayed voters from a wide range of castes as well as the Muslim community, have raised uncertainties.

Farmers, an influential voting bloc, are still furious at Modi for pushing agriculture laws that triggered a year-long protest before he bowed to the pressure and revoked them in November. The BJP is also facing allegations of COVID-19 mismanagement in the state after a calamitous surge in infections last year saw numerous corpses floating in the Ganges.

The polls are a referendum on the saffron-robed Adityanath, a poster figure for the Hindu right-wing, who some analysts believe is vying to be the next prime minister. In 2017, he was appointed the chief minister — the top state official — after the BJP won.

"It is an electoral test on his brand as a leader because he incarnates a more radical form of Hindu nationalism and is overly more communal than others in the BJP," said Gilles Verniers, a political science professor at Ashoka University.

The head of an influential Hindu temple, Adityanath's rise has been marked by an increase in violence against Muslims, with numerous reports of lynching and other attacks. Recently, Adityanath declared the forthcoming election as a "80% versus 20%" contest, which roughly match Uttar Pradesh's Hindu and Muslim demographics. He later clarified the figures in an interview with local media as a majority that want development and safety over a minority that opposed it.

"The BJP has built houses and toilets for the poor without differentiating between their caste and religion. No one can claim the benefits of government schemes have reached only Hindus and not Muslims," said Vijay Bahadur Pathak, the BJP state vice president.

But the meaning wasn't lost on Mohammed Noor, an auto-rickshaw driver in Lucknow, the state capital. "Until the Yogi government came, nobody pointed out a Hindu from a Muslim here. But ever since the BJP has risen, they've created a feeling of divide, of difference – this has only grown," he said.

"The Muslim community have just given up – we have no hope, we have stopped reacting," said Shabbar Siddique, an 18-year-old in Lucknow.

Even the construction of the temple in Ayodhya has been met with resignation from the city's Muslims.

"What can we say? Since the judgement has come from the highest court, we'll have to abide by it," said Syed Zia Haider Rizvi, a watch store owner. "As a businessman, I should gain."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 28 of 70

The Supreme Court in 2019 ruled in favor of the temple, ending one of India's most protracted land disputes, and ordered alternative land to be given for a mosque. Many Hindus, who believe Ram was born at the site, rejoiced at the verdict, while a key Muslim body deplored it.

The mosque's destruction in 1992 set off riots in which 2,000 people across India were killed, mostly Muslims. There's a feeling among many Muslims in Uttar Pradesh of rising fear and uncertainty, although Hindu and Muslim residents in Ayodhya itself say there have been no religious tensions since the mosque unrest.

The BJP spun the court verdict, which came after the 2019 national elections, as their success. Observers said the fervor behind the ruling likely boosted Modi's electoral sweep.

But now analysts believe the party has squeezed all it can from the temple.

"They certainly take the cake for keeping Hindu passions alive in the name of the temple for decades and decades," said Lucknow-based political analyst Sharat Pradhan. "But electorally, I think it has outlived its potential."

BJP leaders are already invoking another holy city in Uttar Pradesh. In December, Adityanath first mentioned Mathura, believed to be the birthplace of Krishna, a major Hindu deity. A recent court case filed by Hindu priests over a 17th-century mosque there could rekindle tensions.

Mathura, like Ayodhya, will also get a temple – work for it was already "in progress," Adityanath was quoted as saying by local media.

"Now that they have won Ayodhya, they will need another battle - which site are they going to fix their eyes on next?" said Verniers, the political science professor. "The moment they inaugurate the Ram temple, they will have to find something else."

Biden puts focus on drug prices as he tries to revive agenda

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is trying to jump-start progress on his stalled domestic agenda by refocusing attention on one of his most popular proposals, limiting the cost of prescription drugs.

Biden is traveling on Thursday to Culpeper, Virginia, where White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the president will call attention to the "unacceptable" cost of medications.

"We need to act to stop the abuse of American families," she said.

Biden's trip to Virginia will also be an opportunity for him to start promoting his party's candidates in November's midterm elections. He's expected to appear alongside Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-Va., who is in danger of losing her seat representing a central Virginia district.

"He is eager to go out there and hit the road for Democrats who are fighting for an agenda for the American people," Psaki said Wednesday.

Spanberger is one of several Democrats who have raised alarms about slipping support from voters. She suggested in a November interview with The New York Times that Biden had overreached with his plans for new government programs that recalled the Depression-era agenda of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"Nobody elected him to be FDR; they elected him to be normal and stop the chaos," she said.

However, prescription drugs remain a politically safe focal point for Biden's visit.

"I am grateful for the administration's attention to this issue — but more than that, I look forward to hearing the president's strategy for how we can sign a transformative prescription drug-focused bill into law," Spanberger said in a statement when Biden's trip was announced.

Efforts to lower prescription drug costs have long been popular with voters, but bipartisan consensus has proved elusive. It's unclear if there's a political path forward for Biden's plans in Congress.

His proposals include capping out-of-pocket medication costs for Medicare recipients at \$2,000 per year and insulin at \$35 per month. In addition, Medicare would be allowed to negotiate prices for a limited number of prescription drugs and drugmakers would be required to pay rebates if they raise costs faster than inflation.

"It's safe to say that all of us can agree that prescription drugs are outrageously expensive in this coun-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 29 of 70

try," Biden said Dec. 6.

The provisions are part of Biden's expansive domestic agenda, known as "Build Back Better." However, the legislation is at a standstill because of resistance from moderate Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.V., and Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz.

Republican rift exposes choice: With Trump or against him

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Politics Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Senate Republicans blame the Republican National Committee. The RNC blames two Republican House members. They blame former President Donald Trump. And Trump blames Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

In the midst of the GOP's first major election year blowup, each bloc believes it represents the real Republican Party and its best interests in the bid to regain control of Congress.

The Republican rift over a symbolic RNC vote to censure Trump's two GOP House critics has exposed in stark contrast the competing forces fighting to control the party. The sudden burst of infighting shattered a period of relative Republican peace just as party leaders insist they need to come together to defeat Democrats in the looming midterms.

But this week, at least, Republican unity is hard to find.

"Mitch McConnell does not speak for the Republican Party, and does not represent the views of the vast majority of its voters," Trump said in a statement Wednesday. Instead of fighting President Joe Biden's agenda, the former president said, McConnell "bails out the radical left and the RINOs" — shorthand for Republicans In Name Only.

To drive home his point, Trump issued another statement later in the day saying McConnell's position is "so against what Republicans are about."

At issue were McConnell's comments a day earlier in which he criticized the RNC for censuring Reps. Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Adam Kinzinger of Illinois at the party's winter meeting in Salt Lake City. The two Republicans sit on a Democrat-led House committee that is aggressively investigating the violent Jan. 6 siege at the U.S. Capitol and has subpoenaed many in the former president's inner circle.

The RNC resolution accused the House panel of leading a "persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse" — words that drew outrage from Democrats and firm pushback from several GOP senators.

The fight has quickly emerged as a proxy for the larger political tug-of-war between Trump and the party's establishment wing. While Trump's allies believe there should be no limits in their loyalty to the former president, McConnell and other establishment leaders believe there is a line Republicans should not cross.

McConnell, for example, has refused to amplify Trump's baseless claims of voter fraud, even as polls suggest a vast majority of the Republican electorate wrongly believes that Biden did not legitimately win the 2020 election.

The Senate Republican leader said he opposed the RNC's vote to censure Kinzinger and Cheney, who are Trump's fiercest Republican critics in Congress, because the committee was "singling out members of our party who may have different views than the majority."

"That's not the job of the RNC," McConnell told reporters this week.

Sens. John Cornyn of Texas, Richard Shelby of Alabama, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Susan Collins of Maine and Mitt Romney of Utah were among those Republicans who also raised concerns about the RNC vote.

But Sen. Josh Hawley, the Missouri Republican who led the Jan. 6 push to block the certification of Biden's victory, said McConnell and like-minded Republicans were hurting the party's midterm ambitions by speaking out.

"Whatever you think about the RNC vote, it reflects the view of most Republican voters," Hawley said. "So I'm just telling you, in my state, it's not helpful to have a bunch of DC Republicans commenting on the RNC."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 30 of 70

For many Republicans, the emerging choice heading into the midterm elections is clear: Either you're with Trump or against him. That's especially the case as Trump indicates he's likely to seek the presidency again in 2024.

Keith Kellogg, who served as national security adviser to then-Vice President Mike Pence, outlined the situation quite simply Wednesday on Twitter: "As midterms draw close and 2024 looms large, choices will have to be made and lines will be drawn," Kellogg wrote. "For me — it's Trump."

Trump's former communications director Alyssa Farah slapped back: "Put me squarely in the Pence/McConnell camp. Certain denunciations must be unequivocal."

Democrats, meanwhile, tried to enflame the Republican divisions from afar.

"Take your party back from this cult," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a message to Republicans at her weekly news conference. "It has been hijacked."

Republican officials approached the rift with great sensitivity Wednesday. Many declined to speak publicly for fear their comments might upset one wing of the party or the other. And there was a common belief among strategists that the intra-party dispute was an unhelpful distraction from the party's planned focus on Biden's struggles.

The RNC hoped to move past the controversy after Chair Ronna McDaniel released an op-ed late Tuesday that blamed the media for taking the resolution out of context, while defending the committee's decision to discipline Cheney and Kinzinger for essentially legitimizing the Democrats' Jan. 6 investigation.

But she was asked about the resolution Wednesday on Fox News.

"Disagreement in our party is welcome. It makes us great. We can have a big tent," McDaniel said, before describing Cheney and Kinzinger's decision to join the Jan. 6 committee as "a step too far."

"And that's where the RNC members who represent the grassroots came down on this issue," she said.

Indeed, party strategists and Republican officials beyond Washington suggest the party's grassroots, which represent the heart of the GOP, beat squarely with Trump, regardless of what some Senate Republicans might say.

"The anti-Trump constituency is one out of 10 Republican voters — on a good day," veteran Republican pollster Gene Ulm said.

McConnell is standing up against "a circular firing squad," Ulm said, but Cheney and Kinzinger long ago ensured their political demise by crossing the former president so forcefully.

"There simply is no constituency for what they're doing," Ulm said.

The RNC, meanwhile, is desperate to project a unified front with control of Congress at stake in less than nine months.

"Republicans in both chambers of Congress and across the country remain united in our efforts to hold Democrats and Biden accountable for their failures to take back the House and Senate come November," said RNC spokesperson Emma Vaughn.

Shiffrin seeks Olympic reset; enters super-G after training

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

BEIJING (AP) — The on-the-slopes portion of what Mikaela Shiffrin hopes will be a "reset" at the Beijing Olympics — moving on from early mistakes that eliminated her from two races — began under a cloudless sky with a pair of trips about a half-hour apart down the competition hill during an official training session Thursday for the upcoming super-G.

Wearing a maroon racing helmet, bright red reflective goggles and a white racing suit with "USA" on the front in blue capital letters, the two-time Olympic gold medalist eased across the finish line each time, upright instead of in a speed-preserving tuck. After the first, she paused briefly to chat with two other racers. After the second, she swiftly made her way past a gathering of about a dozen folks and was on her way.

All of that was clear to anyone present. Less certain right there and then: How Shiffrin is faring with her off-the-slopes attempt to get over those sudden and surprising exits in her best disciplines.

What become known via the U.S. ski team a few hours later, though, was that Shiffrin will, indeed, take

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 31 of 70

part in the super-G on Friday as the women move from the technical to the speed events. That will be her third start of what still could end up being a six-race trip to China.

"It's hard to accept what happened, but she has to work through it. And one of the better ways to do that is to keep looking forward. She has multiple events here, which is great for her," U.S. head women's Alpine coach Paul Kristofic said. "You have to look at what's in front of you and try to put what's behind you to rest, as difficult as that is."

Kristofic said Thursday's practice "went well."

Shiffrin, a 26-year-old from Colorado, never has entered a super-G at an Olympics, but she did win it at the 2019 world championships.

"Being outside and switching events and doing something different — it's a different impulse, for sure, in speed, and it's a good feeling to be out here and pushing and skiing well," Kristofic said. "That's part of the process to get through it."

Shiffrin's boyfriend, Norwegian skier Aleskander Aamodt Kilde, described her as being "in a good state; she's all right."

"She's a hero and she can handle this. She handles pressure like no one else, and this is something she will come out of," said Kilde, who won a silver Thursday in Alpine combined. "But it's been a couple of tough days."

A U.S. ski team spokeswoman said Thursday that Shiffrin and her mother, Eileen, who also serves as a coach, would not "be doing any media for the foreseeable future."

Shiffrin spoke at length to reporters Wednesday, when her opening leg of slalom (which she won at the 2014 Olympics) ended after about five seconds, roughly half as long as her opening leg of giant slalom (which she won at the 2018 Olympics) had lasted Monday.

"I will try to reset again, and maybe try to reset better this time," Shiffrin said after the slalom.

"But I also don't know how to do better because," she continued, and then paused, before adding, "because I just don't."

So much success on skis came so quickly, and seemingly so easily, for Shiffrin.

On a World Cup podium at age 16. A world champion at 17. An Olympic gold medalist at 18. And the accolades kept on coming for the American, who now is 26: A second Winter Games gold, along with a silver. Six world championships in all. Three overall World Cup titles. A total of 47 World Cup slalom wins, more than any other athlete in any event, ever.

That's why her start in China is so difficult for everyone to comprehend, including her.

"It is strange to see. But it also makes her human. It makes her more like all of us — because, sometimes, you ask yourself whether she actually is. She's so precise, so strong mentally, that you ask yourself whether what she does is even possible," said Federica Brignone of Italy, who won a silver in the giant slalom this week and a bronze behind Shiffrin in that race four years ago. "She's an athlete who has won so much, but maybe she was too stressed out."

In the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, Shiffrin talked about the pressure and expectations she was all-too-aware of — from within, from fans, from coaches, friends and family.

Kristofic raised that topic when asked to explain what might have gone wrong with Shiffrin's skiing so far.

"Mikaela has her technical cues, and obviously they work. In a big event like this, the pressure is something that most of us aren't able to comprehend, especially when you're a medal favorite, or a gold medal favorite, for multiple events. That's the piece that's hard for anyone else, other than the actual person in it, to really wrap your head around," he said. "That kind of pressure is not the easiest thing to manage and it can manifest in physical ways."

Moroccan region held death recipe for boy trapped in well

By MOSA'AB ELSHAMY Associated Press

IGHRAN, Morocco (AP) — The death of a 5-year-old boy trapped for days in the dark depths of a well symbolizes for many villagers a curse that haunts their remote mountainous region in northern Morocco:

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 32 of 70

dirt poor, neglected and dependent on its illegal cannabis crop to survive.

The well that swallowed Rayan was dug by his father in a vain bid to forage for water so he could grow cannabis, or marijuana. Rayan's mother, Wassima Khersheesh, bitterly referred to the well that took her son as "that hole of dust."

Rayan's plight riveted world attention during five days of grim but vain efforts to save the little boy. Hundreds of Moroccans kept watch as rescue workers dug a parallel hole to extract the child from the 32-meter-deep (105-foot-deep) well outside his small brick home. Volunteers poured in hoping to lend a hand, including a man with snorkeling gear and a skinny boy whose father thought he could slip into the dark hole.

Despite five days of heroic efforts, Rayan was dead when rescuers finally pulled him from the well last weekend.

Such wells, many far deeper, dot the rugged Rif region, dug by villagers in need of water for their cannabis plants. The well outside Rayan's home was abandoned because his father, Khaled Oram, couldn't afford to dig deeper like some neighbors. He now does odd jobs in nearby villages.

"As the saying goes, the one who cooks the poison has to taste it," said Mohammed, a relative of Rayan who, like other villagers, identified himself only by his first name. Many cited concern for their illegal farming of cannabis.

Mohammed is among those who grows cannabis, long a vital crop for the economy of the village and the region. He showed an Associated Press reporter his own working well — at some 90 meters (nearly 300 feet) deep, it is three times the depth of the abandoned well that swallowed Rayan.

The smell of cannabis, which includes marijuana and hemp plants, permeates the air in Ighran, home to up to 1,000 people. Young men trying to stay warm as rescuers worked to dig out Rayan smoked hashish, a cannabis derivative, around bonfires. Sacks of the cannabis plant were seen around the house of Rayan's grandfather, where the wake for the little boy was held.

For the government of Morocco — a top world producer of cannabis — the illegal growing of the crop, centered in the Rif region, is diminishing.

An Interior Ministry report presented to a parliamentary commission last April said an estimated 400,000 people farm the illegal crop, helping around 60,000 families, according to Moroccan media reports. Among the main centers of production is Chefchaouen, the province where Ighran is located.

The government mostly turns a blind eye to the illegal farming. But for many villagers, it represents a stain on their reputation.

Saeed, a former villager, complained about "the lack of the three important things: water, electricity and education." He moved to the large city of Tetouan to spare his children, opening a clothing shop.

Hidden in the Rif mountains, Ighram is reached by narrow dirt roads and then a short hike. Villagers claim that rescuers arrived late at the well where Rayan was trapped because of the difficult access.

Neglect of the vast Rif region, known for its rebellious streak, goes back decades, and monarchs. King Hassan II never set foot in the Rif, crushing uprisings there in 1959 and 1984. His son and current ruler Mohamed VI broke the pattern, and in 2018 gave his yearly Throne Speech in nearby Al Hoceima.

Masoud, a young man whose family farms cannabis, said that people fear being stopped by police because their ID card showing they are from the region makes law enforcement suspicious.

"If we didn't live off kif (cannabis), we would have been braver to ask for our rights," Masoud said. "But we are under its sword."

Chen's near-perfect skate wins long-sought Olympic gold

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Nathan Chen remembers making the long drive with his mother from his home in Utah to Rafael Arutyunyan's training base in Southern California. He had started out in figure skating just a few years earlier, using his sister's skates and sleeping in the car to follow his Olympic dreams.

Ten years later, Chen sat alongside Arutyunyan as his scores were read and that dream realized.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 33 of 70

With a nearly perfect free skate on the heels of a record-setting short program, the 22-year-old Yale student walked away with the gold medal at the Beijing Games on Thursday. He became the first American figure skating champion since Evan Lysacek in 2010 and capped one of the most dominant four-year runs in the history of the sport.

"My mom and I grew up quite poor. We really didn't have much money," Chen said. "She would just scrap together some dollars to try to pay Raf, and Raf obviously knew about the situation and thanks to the kindness of his heart, was able to just continue taking me in, and taking as much money as we could provide him."

Arutyunyan would try to give the money back sometimes, Chen said, "but I would always try to stick it in his pocket."

On Thursday, Chen was able to give his old coach something priceless.

"I'm happy. Just emotional," Arutyunyan said. "He made it."

Inside historic Capital Indoor Stadium in China, the nation both his parents immigrated from, Chen landed all five of his quads during his "Rocketman" program set to the soaring film score by Elton John. The statistics and data science major finished with an insurmountable total of 332.60 points, just three off his own world record and 22 points ahead of his closest competition. Yuma Kagiyama and Shoma Uno of Japan took silver and bronze.

Chen also firmly put in the past any lingering memories of his brutal disappointment four years ago in Pyeongchang, when not even a monumental free skate could rescue his medal hopes after a disastrous short program.

"It means the world," he said. "I'm just so happy."

This gold medal might not be the last Chen takes home, either.

The Americans, who earned silver behind the Russians in the team event Monday, were awaiting confirmation from the IOC and International Skating Union that "legal issues" holding up the medal ceremony were related to reports of doping linked to their biggest star, Kamila Valieva. That could ultimately elevate the U.S. to the gold medal, a second for Chen.

"I mean, I don't really feel like I'm the most qualified person to talk about it," Chen said. "Whatever ends up being the case will be the case, but I'm still wrapped up in what I was able to do today."

The Salt Lake City native did his part for the American team with a winning short program last Friday. Vincent Zhou, who was forced to withdraw from the individual event due to a positive COVID-19 test, would also earn a gold medal for the U.S. because he performed his free skate on Sunday.

The suave, down-to-earth Chen and his Japanese rivals separated themselves from the field during their short programs, when Chen shattered the world record with a flawless performance to "La Boheme." When they took to the ice for the free skate, Kagiyama and Uno made just enough mistakes to clear the way for Chen's coronation.

Performing to "Bolero," one of the most popular musical selections of the Beijing Games, Uno under-rotated a quad salchow and quad toe loop, then was dinged for his combination spin late in the program to finish with 293 points.

Then it was the 18-year-old Kagiyama, performing to music from the film "Gladiator," who popped his triple toe loop and triple salchow. It was still enough to score 310.05 points and earn a fist pump in the kiss-and-cry area, but not enough to add any pressure on Chen, who was calmly skating across the placid ice as Kagiyama's score was read.

With a socially distanced crowd watching Thursday afternoon in Beijing, and millions back home on late-night TV, Chen soared through his opening quad salchow. He landed four more effortless quads, his only slight bobble coming on a late combination sequence, and couldn't wipe the grin from his face as he seemingly reached for the sky.

The lyrics to "Rocketman" that played through the old home of ping-pong diplomacy — "And I think it's gonna be a long, long time, 'til touchdown brings me 'round again" — seemed altogether fitting for the moment.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 34 of 70

Chen basked in the spotlight in the middle of the ice, then headed off to hear his scores, which by that point were a mere formality. Once they were read, Chen's longtime coach raised his arm like a triumphant boxer.

"He deserves it," said American Jason Brown, who finished in sixth place. "I've gotten to compete with him over the last four years — at all the world championships, every national championship, the Grand Prix. There is no one more deserving. He worked so hard. He's so unbelievably talented. I'm so proud to be a teammate."

While the spotlight shined bright as ever on Chen, it seemed to fade away for his longtime hero and Japanese rival.

Yuzuru Hanyu arrived in Beijing aiming to become the first men's skater since Gillis Grafstrom in 1928 to win a third straight Olympic gold medal. But after missing most of the past year to an ankle injury, the 27-year-old struggled through his short program on Tuesday, essentially taking him out of contention for a medal.

All that was left for Hanyu was a go-for-broke shot at the quad axel, a 4 1/2-revolution jump that has never been landed in competition. He came close but couldn't quite hold onto the landing, then fell again on his quad salchow before an emotional finish to what could be his final performance on Olympic ice.

His score left Hanyu in fourth, just out of the medals behind his two teammates.

And, of course, behind the new American champion.

Adrift after enslavement, Yazidi teen says she can't go home

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BARZAN, Syria (AP) — Roza Barakat's tormentors have been defeated, but the horrors she endured still hold her captive.

She was 11 years old when she was captured and enslaved by the Islamic State group, along with thousands of other Yazidi women and girls taken when the militants overran northern Iraq in their brutal 2014 campaign.

Torn from her family in the town of Sinjar, the enclave of the ancient religious Yazidi minority, she was taken to Syria, sold multiple times and repeatedly raped. She bore a child, a boy she has since lost. Now, at 18, she speaks little of her native Kurdish dialect, Kurmanji.

With the defeat of IS in 2019, Barakat slipped into the shadows, opting to hide in the turmoil that followed the worst of the battles. As IS fighters were arrested, their wives and children were packed into detention camps. Barakat was free, but she couldn't go home.

"I don't know how I'll face my community," she told The Associated Press, speaking in Arabic, as she nervously played with the ends of her long dark braid, the red polish on her dainty fingers fading.

For years, her IS captors told her she would never be accepted if she returned. "I believed them," she said.

Barakat's tale, corroborated by Yazidi and Syrian Kurdish officials, is a window into the complicated realities faced by many Yazidi women who came of age under the brutal rule of IS. Traumatized and lost, many struggle to come to terms with the past, while the Yazidi community is at odds over how to accept them.

"What do you expect from a child who was raped at 12, gave birth at 13?" said Faruk Tuzu, co-chair of Yazidi House, an umbrella of Yazidi organizations in northeastern Syria. "After so much shock and abuse they don't believe in anything anymore, they don't belong anywhere."

The AP does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they grant permission.

Barakat spoke to the AP from a safe house run by Tuzu's group just a few days after the leader of the Islamic State group, believed to have played a key role in the enslavement of Yazidi women, was killed in a U.S. raid in northwestern Syria.

She shrugged off the news, saying it doesn't make a difference.

IS first sold Barakat to an Iraqi from Tal Afar, a man older than her father. She shudders as she recounts

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 35 of 70

how he "made me call his wife 'mother.'" After a few months she was sold to another man.

Eventually, her IS captors gave her a choice: Convert to Islam and marry an IS fighter, or be sold again. She converted, she says, to avoid being sold. She married a Lebanese they chose for her, a man who ferried food and equipment for IS fighters.

"He was better than most," she said. At 13, she gave birth to a son, Hoodh. At the peak of the militants' self-proclaimed "caliphate," they lived in the city of Raqqa, the IS capital.

Once, she begged her husband to find out what happened to her older sisters who had been taken just like her. She had lost hope that her parents were still alive.

Some weeks later, he told her he found one of her sisters, holding up a photo of a woman in Raqqa's slave market where Yazidi girls were sold.

"How different she looks," Barakat remembers thinking.

By early 2019 as IS rule was crumbling, Barakat fled with her husband first to the eastern Syrian city of Deir el-Zour, and then to the town of Baghouz, which became IS's last stand. As U.S.-backed Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces surrounded Baghouz, a safe passage was offered to women and children.

At this point, Barakat could have stepped forward and identified herself as a Yazidi and sought safety. But instead, she clutched Hoodh in her arms and walked out of the town with other IS wives.

Today, over 2,800 Yazidi women and children are still missing, said Tuzu. Some have cut ties and are building new lives outside the community, believing that if they return, they'd be killed. Others fear being separated from their children, fathered by IS members.

Iraq's Yazidi community has forced women returning to Sinjar to give up their children as a condition to return. Many were told their children would be adopted by Syrian Kurdish families but dozens have ended up in an orphanage in northeastern Syria.

The fate of the children has been at the center of an ongoing debate within the Yazidi community. In 2019, the Yazidi Spiritual Council, the highest authority among Yazidis, called on members to accept all Yazidi survivors of IS atrocities. Days later, the council clarified the decision excluded children born of IS rape.

"This is our mistake, and we recognize that — we didn't allow the children to stay with their mothers," said Tuzu.

He confirmed that some Yazidi women are still at al-Hol camp, which holds tens of thousands of women and children, mostly wives, widows and children of IS members.

Many of the missing Yazidis scattered across Syria and Turkey, others live clandestine lives in the Syrian city of Aleppo and in Deir El-Zour. Tuzu expects the majority may have gone to the rebel province of Idlib, where al-Qaida is dominant but where IS also maintains a presence.

After walking out of Baghouz with other IS women in March 2019, Barakat slipped away to a nearby village rather than end up in a camp. With the help of IS sympathizers, she took a smuggling route and ended up in Idlib, in northwestern Syria, in a home for IS widows. Her husband was killed in Baghouz.

Here, Barakat's story diverges from what she told officials. Initially, she told them she had left her son behind in Idlib to find work elsewhere. She told the AP that Hoodh died after an airstrike in Idlib.

When pressed to clarify, she said: "It's hard. I don't want to talk about it."

With the help of a smuggler, she made her way to Deir el-Zour and eventually found work at a clothing market, saving up for a new life in Turkey.

She still dreamed of making it to Turkey when Kurdish internal security forces caught her last month, waiting in a house in the town of al-Tweinah to be taken by smugglers across the Syria-Turkey border.

She was held and interrogated for days.

"I did everything to hide that I was Yazidi," she said. She told the investigators she was from Deir el-Zour, and was hoping to get medical treatment in Turkey, but they didn't buy it.

One held up an old photo found on her mobile phone — a young Yazidi woman in an IS slave market — and asked her to explain.

"The words just came out: 'That is my sister,'" Barakat said.

Once the truth was out, Barakat was taken to a safe house in the village of Barzan, in Syria's Hassakeh province, where the Yazidi community welcomed her.

"I was in shock to hear their kind words, and to be welcomed the way I was," she said. She isn't ready to go back to Sinjar just yet. Her entire family was either killed or is still unaccounted for. What is there to go back to, she wonders. "I need time, for myself."

EXPLAINER: What are the key parts of Ukraine's peace deal?

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A peace agreement for the separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine that has never quite ended is back in the spotlight amid a Russian military buildup near the country's borders and rising tensions about whether Moscow will invade.

Top officials from Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany are meeting Thursday in Berlin to discuss ways of implementing the deal that was signed in Belarusian capital Minsk in 2015.

Here is a look at the document's key points and the contested issues regarding its implementation:

CONFLICT IN THE EAST

Russia responded to the February 2014 ouster in Kyiv of a Kremlin-friendly president by annexing Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and backing a separatist insurgency in the country's mostly Russian-speaking eastern industrial region known as the Donbas.

Ukrainian troops and volunteer battalions engaged in ferocious and devastating battles with the rebels involving heavy artillery, armor and combat aircraft.

Ukraine and the West accused Russia of backing separatists with troops and weapons. Moscow rejected the accusations, saying that any Russians who fought in the east were volunteers.

Amid the fighting, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 people aboard. An international investigation concluded the jetliner was destroyed by a missile fired from a rebel-controlled area. It said the weapon was brought into Ukraine from a military base in Russia, but Moscow categorically denied any involvement.

Leaders of France and Germany began efforts to negotiate a truce in talks with Russia and Ukraine when they met in Normandy, France, in June 2014, in what became known as the Normandy format.

FIGHTING AND NEGOTIATIONS

After a massive defeat of Ukrainian troops in August 2014, representatives from Kyiv and the rebels signed a truce in Minsk in September 2014.

The document, dubbed Minsk I, envisaged a cease-fire monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a pullback of foreign fighters, an exchange of prisoners and hostages, an amnesty for the insurgents and a promise that rebel regions could have a degree of self-government.

The agreement collapsed quickly and large-scale battles resumed. In January and February of 2015, Ukrainian troops suffered another major defeat in the battle of Debaltseve.

France and Germany moved quickly to help broker another peace agreement, and on Feb. 12, 2015, representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the rebels signed a deal that envisaged a new cease-fire, a pullback of heavy weapons from the line of contact between the troops and the rebels, and provisions for a political settlement. A declaration in support of the deal was signed by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany.

MINSK DEAL PROVISIONS

The deal, dubbed Minsk II, included an OSCE-monitored cease-fire, a pullback of heavy weapons and foreign fighters from the line of contact and an exchange of prisoners.

In a major diplomatic coup for Russia, the document obliged Ukraine to grant special status to the separatist regions, allowing them to create their own police force and have a say in appointing local prosecutors and judges. It also required Kyiv to offer a sweeping amnesty for the separatists and negotiate details of holding local elections with rebel leaders.

It stipulated that Ukraine could only regain control over the border with Russia in rebel regions after they get self-rule and hold OSCE-monitored local elections — balloting that would almost certainly keep pro-Moscow rebels in power there.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 37 of 70

In another gain for the Kremlin, the document didn't contain any obligations on the part of Russia, which insisted it's not a party to the conflict and cast it as part of Ukraine's internal affairs.

Many in Ukraine resented the deal, seeing it as a betrayal of national interests and a blow to the country's integrity. The widespread public dismay has effectively blocked the deal's implementation.

MOSCOW AND KYIV TRADE BLAME

While the Minsk deal helped end large-scale battles, frequent skirmishes have continued, with both sides blaming each other. The parties have negotiated a long series of renewed cease-fires, but all have been quickly violated.

Ukraine has accused Russia of failing to withdraw its troops from the conflict areas. Moscow has staunchly denied their presence there and pointed to the deployment of Western military instructors in Ukraine.

While denying any military involvement in eastern Ukraine, Russia has offered political and economic support to the rebels and granted citizenship to more than 700,000 residents of the region.

The leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany pledged adherence to the Minsk agreement when they last met in Paris in December 2019 but made no visible progress.

MORE TALKS

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pushed for another four-way summit, but the Kremlin said it would serve no purpose until Ukraine agrees to abide by the deal's obligations.

Amid soaring tensions over the Russian military buildup near Ukraine, France and Germany have intensified their efforts to broker more four-way talks on the conflict in the east, seeing that as a possible way to ease tensions in the larger crisis.

Representatives from the four countries met in Paris on Jan. 26, securing no progress but they agreed to hold the session in Berlin on Thursday, with a goal to agree on a common interpretation of the Minsk agreements.

French President Emmanuel Macron sought to revive the Minsk deal during his visits to Moscow and Kyiv this week, describing it as "the only path allowing to build peace ... and find a sustainable political solution."

THE PRESSURE ON UKRAINE

Facing Western calls for the implementation of the Minsk deal, Ukrainian officials have become increasingly critical of the document.

Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, told The Associated Press last week the deal was signed "under a Russian gun barrel," and warned that "the fulfillment of the Minsk agreement means the country's destruction."

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba argued that Moscow aims to use the deal to have the rebel regions reintegrated into Ukraine and use them to block the country's pro-Western aspirations, vowing: "This is not going to happen."

Zelenskyy was more diplomatic but noted that he dislikes every point of the Minsk document, a comment that drew a taunting and crude remark from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Like it or not, you have to bear with it, my beauty," Putin quipped, using a coarse verse from Russian folklore. "You have to fulfill it. It will not work otherwise."

BEIJING SNAPSHOT: Great Wall, a symbol of China's strength

By RAGAN CLARK Associated Press

JUYONGGUAN, China (AP) — Beijing's famous landmarks are, for the most part, outside the Olympic bubble, including the Great Wall, the ultimate symbol of Chinese history and strength.

A group of 60 athletes and journalists were given an opportunity to visit a section of the wall, making them among the few Olympic visitors able to bypass the virtual tours and cardboard cutouts of the wall in the Olympics media center and experience the real thing.

The group climbed the ancient steps of the Juyong Pass, just outside Beijing, a small taste of China outside the bubble that was made possible by closing off a portion during their visit, in keeping with the strict COVID-19 protocols imposed by the government.

Stretching thousands of miles along the crests of ridgelines and mountaintops, the wall has stood as a

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 38 of 70

barrier protecting the Chinese capital for more than 2,000 years. It stood through dynasties and discoveries. And now, it has seen two Olympics.

For those lucky enough to get on the bus for Wednesday's tour, the rough-hewn stone and dramatic vistas offered a stark contrast to the sterilized, modernized version of China on display inside the Olympic loop, where robots do everything from dunking fries in oil to scuttling around, collecting trash.

The country is expert in powerful gestures, whether through dazzling displays of light and fireworks during the opening ceremony, or a wall constructed over centuries through the labors of millions. And while cooking robots may be flashy, nothing compares to the grandeur of the Great Wall.

'Politics of grandeur': 2 Olympics and China's love of big

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Tiananmen Square. The Forbidden City. The Great Wall. The Three Gorges Dam. Dozens of high-end malls in Beijing.

China has thousands of years of doing things in a really big way, reinforcing its perceived place in the world and the political power of its leaders — from emperors to Mao Zedong to the current leader, Xi Jinping.

Beijing becoming the first city to hold both the Winter and Summer Olympics may not be a feature on the actual landscape. But it's in the same realm for the world's most populous country, which has long framed itself at the center of the world, evident in its name in Chinese, "Zhongguo," or "middle country."

This affinity for bigness isn't new. It goes back to a dozen dynasties that ruled China for thousands of years — one of which re-created an entire army of terra cotta warriors to be buried with an emperor. It's a tradition of projecting large-scale power that was adopted by the Chinese Communist Party when it took over in 1949.

Writing in his book "Mandate of Heaven," U.S. China scholar Orville Schell explained how Mao, who led China's communist revolution, expanded Tiananmen Square in the 1950s to make it the largest public square in the world — 100 acres.

That's five times larger than Moscow's Red Square. And Mao even went the Russians one better by adorning the square with Soviet-style architecture, the most famous of which is the Great Hall of the People. Eventually, after Mao's death in 1976, the square came to include his imposing mausoleum.

Schell wrote of Tiananmen, calling it "a propagandist's dream come true. Everything about it was gargantuan."

The colossal begins with the country's population of 1.4 billion and extends to public buildings all around China. Towering apartment blocks — some Soviet-inspired, others thrown up in a binge of modern development in the last few decades — are typically set far back from 10-lane avenues, shrinking the size of pedestrians on road-size sidewalks.

The vastness reaches to shopping malls, commercial spaces and to buildings like the Bird's Nest stadium, a 91,000-seat colossus put up for the 2008 Olympics and used a week ago for the opening ceremony of these Winter Games.

A shopping mall in the western city of Chengdu, the New Century Global Center, is billed as the largest building on Earth. How big? Three Pentagons could fit inside. Or at least 300 football fields.

The seven-story, block-long media center for these Olympics — a convention center in normal times — replaces another outsized building that's a block away and was used as the media center for the 2008 Games.

Add the Beijing headquarters of China Central TV, a 768-foot (234-meter), two-leg tower known around town as "Big Underpants" for its unusual design. Architect Rem Koolhaas famously said the building "could never have been conceived by the Chinese and could never have been built by Europeans. It is a hybrid by definition."

Then there's 40,000 kilometers (25,000 miles) of high-speed rail lines, and the Belt and Road Initiative — often described as the New Silk Road. Many view it as the largest building project in history, stretching from China and East Asia to Europe and consisting of rail lines, ports, highways and other infrastructure projects to expand China's trade and influence. Critics warn of the unsustainable debt burden for many

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 39 of 70

participating countries.

China's attack on COVID-19 is fittingly mammoth, too, capable of locking down millions in a show of state power built partly on Orwellian surveillance architecture. Need a medical facility? During the pandemic, China built 1,000-bed hospitals in 10 days.

Maria Repnikova, a China specialist at Georgia State University, termed China's policy of going large as the "politics of grandeur," something that reaches beyond concrete to include scholarships for foreign students, exchanges, training, and economic aid.

"The idea is to give more to impress upon external audiences that we have so much to give you, that nobody else can compete with that," Repnikova said in an interview.

"The first thing you see (in China) is the intensity of the scale, whether it's the presidential buildings or whether it's other sites or Olympic venues. That's something that at first catches someone's eye, and then it makes one wonder — how have they done it?"

But in the China context, what does big really mean? It's impressive and can literally change the landscape. Yet there's massive meaning, too, in the thinking behind it — particularly for a government that has long prized the projection of control outward to its sometimes disobedient hinterlands.

"Authoritarian use of political symbols and propaganda can serve two purposes: to persuade audiences of the regime's legitimacy, and to demonstrate state power," Sheena Greitens, who researches China at the University of Texas at Austin, wrote in an email.

"I suspect that Beijing will use both during the Olympics, presenting domestic and international audiences with humanizing stories about ordinary Chinese people while also making sure they witness impressive displays of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and state power."

Diana Fu, a China expert at the University of Toronto, said authoritarian states often build in a systematic way that she terms "spatial governance," which helps them put down any protests or insurrections.

"Small, winding streets and dense neighborhoods can foster a sense of neighborly feelings and trust, which is critical for collective action," Fu wrote to AP. "In contrast, large boulevards and predictably geometric patterns of streets and districts allow the state to better surveil and control its population. Authoritarian states like contemporary China are able to do so while facing little opposition from civil society."

For the 2008 Olympics, China even tried to control the weather, claiming to make rain to clear the polluted skies, and then drive rain away when it was called for. The rainmakers had installations outside Beijing, where peasants donned military fatigues and helmets and used anti-aircraft guns and rocket launchers to blast the sky with silver iodide, hoping to coax rain from the clouds.

That's going big.

Sixty years ago, during the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong made extravagant claims about new agricultural techniques that could lift China out of starvation. His plans to beat nature were based mostly on ideology and pseudo-science and caused widespread famine.

"Authoritarian parties and leaders try to create a sense of unassailability," Alexander Dukalskis, who teaches international relations at the University of Dublin, wrote to AP. "Through symbols and displays of state power they communicate that their rule is inevitable and that challenges are bound to be fruitless."

He added: "Projections of state power are also useful for an international audience: They can convince other states or companies that if they step out of line, then they can be punished."

Saga of San Francisco's school board heads to the ballot box

By JOCELYN GECKER Associated Press

A seemingly endless amount of drama, name-calling, lawsuits and outrage from parents and city officials have made the saga of San Francisco's school board a riveting pandemic sideshow that is about to play out at the ballot box.

A special election on Tuesday will decide the fate of three school board members, all Democrats, in a vote that has divided the famously liberal city. It has also motivated many Chinese residents to vote for the first time, driven by controversial school board decisions and a batch of unearthed anti-Asian tweets.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 40 of 70

The parents who launched the recall effort say it was born of frustration at the board's misplaced priorities, mishandling of a budget crisis and failure to focus on the fundamental task of reopening public schools during the pandemic. Most of San Francisco's 50,000 public school students did not see the inside of a classroom for over a year, from March 2020 until August 2021.

"It comes down to incompetence," said Siva Raj, a father of two who helped spearhead the recall effort. "The message we want to send is, if you don't do the job you are elected to do — your primary responsibility is to educate our children — you're fired."

Opponents call the recall a waste of taxpayer money and a right-wing attack on liberal San Francisco that is part of a national movement to oust progressives from power. Both sides agree that San Francisco's school board and the city itself became the focus of an embarrassing national spotlight.

Organizers say they would recall all seven board members if they could, but only three have served long enough to face a challenge: Board President Gabriela Lopez and two commissioners, Alison Collins and Faauga Moliga.

One of the first issues to grab national attention was the board's decision to rename 44 of the city's public schools they said honored public figures linked to racism, sexism and other injustices. On the list were names like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and trailblazing California Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

The renaming effort drew swift criticism for some of its targets, but also for its timing in January 2020, when public classrooms were closed because of COVID-19 restrictions. Angry parents asked why the board was focused on changing school names rather than getting children back into classrooms. The effort was also riddled with historical inaccuracies and shoddy research that drew criticisms of political correctness gone awry.

"It was so poorly executed that it made a mockery of the broader push for historical reckoning in the United States," the San Francisco Chronicle said in an editorial endorsing the recall. "It alienated instead of educated, and invited national ridicule."

Ultimately the plan was scrapped, after the city took the dramatic step of suing the board and school district to reopen more quickly. The lawsuit failed in court.

Then the board announced it was ending merit-based admissions at the city's elite Lowell High School as part of a broader push for equity and inclusion. It cited "pervasive systemic racism" and a lack of diversity at Lowell, one of the country's top public high schools, where the majority of students are Asian.

Many Asian Americans viewed the Lowell vote as a direct attack.

"It is so blatantly discriminatory against Asians," said Ann Hsu, mother of two San Francisco high schoolers. "It is so apparent that the sole purpose is that there's too many Asians at Lowell."

The vote blindsided the community, and a court ultimately reversed the decision, finding in favor of a Lowell alumni group that sued the board. The group argued the board failed to place the vote on its agenda, violating California's open meetings law.

Hsu and other parents formed a group called the Chinese/API Voter Outreach Taskforce in December, which she calls "the Chinese arm of the recall group." Holding voter drives and spreading word in San Francisco's Chinese-language newspapers, the group helped register over 560 new voters.

San Francisco's soaring cost of living has pushed out families for years, leaving the city with the lowest share of children under 18 — just 13% — of America's 100 most populous cities, according to 2020 US Census data. That made school board elections a low priority for most voters.

"That's how these people got elected, because nobody was paying attention," said Hsu. "But now, we're paying attention."

Collins has faced more criticism than her two colleagues, after recall organizers dug up 2016 tweets in which she said Asian Americans used "white supremacist" thinking to get ahead and were racist toward Black students, prompting her school board colleagues to strip Collins of her role as vice president.

Collins, who is Black, apologized for the tweets, which she said were taken out of context, and then sued the school district and five fellow board members for \$87 million, saying they violated her free speech rights. That suit was also tossed. Collins, who is aligned with Lopez on many issues, says the recall is part

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 41 of 70

of a Republican-led effort to dismantle a progressive school board, though there is no evidence to back that claim.

Collins says she is proud of trying to bring more diversity to Lowell, which dropped its admissions test for the incoming class of fall 2021 before the decision was overturned in court. The numbers of Hispanic and Black students increased this year when the change was in place, while the numbers of Asian and white students decreased.

"We desegregated a school. Lowell now has the most diverse incoming class that it ever has had," Collins said in an email. "I want to be on that side of history."

Collins and Lopez call the recall a waste of time and money, noting another election is just nine months away.

"People want us to say we were wrong, we regret doing what we did, we're sorry. And that will never be something I will do," Lopez said recently on a local podcast, Latina Latino Latinx News.

Lopez, 31, said under her leadership the board addressed long-standing issues like school renaming and the admissions process, but they "blew up" because of racism. She called the recall an opportunity "to bring down someone who is me," a young Latina woman.

If a majority of voters supports recalling any of the three, the mayor would appoint their replacements to serve until the November election.

"Sadly, our school board's priorities have often been severely misplaced," San Francisco Mayor London Breed said in her endorsement of the recall. "Our kids must come first."

US inflation might have hit a new 40-year high in January

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — With American consumers spending freely and many supply chains still snarled, year-over-year inflation may have notched yet another four-decade high in January.

The factors that have accelerated prices since last spring remain largely in place: Wages are rising at the fastest pace in at least 20 years. Ports and warehouses are overwhelmed, with hundreds of workers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the nation's busiest, out sick last month. Many products and parts remain in short supply as a result.

And reports indicate that the expiration of stimulus checks and other government aid has yet to slow Americans' appetite for shopping.

Economists have forecast that when the Labor Department reports January's inflation figures Thursday, it will show that consumer prices jumped 7.3% compared with 12 months ago, according to data provider FactSet. That would be up from a 7.1% year-over-year pace in December and would mark the biggest such increase since February 1982.

At the same time, other figures could suggest that the price increases have begun to slow. When measured from December to January, consumer inflation may have declined for a third straight month. Analysts have predicted that prices rose 0.4% from December to January, compared with 0.6% from November to December and 0.7% from October to November.

Still, the fastest year-over-year inflation in 40 years has wiped out the benefit of rising paychecks for most Americans, leaving them less able to afford food, gas, rent, child care and other necessities. Inflation has emerged as the biggest risk factor for the economy and a serious threat to President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats as midterm elections loom later this year.

The Federal Reserve and its chair, Jerome Powell, have pivoted sharply away from the ultra-low-interest rate policies that the Fed has pursued since the pandemic devastated the economy in March 2020. Powell signaled two weeks ago that the central bank would likely raise its benchmark short-term rate multiple times this year, with the first hike almost certainly coming in March. Investors have priced in at least five rate increases for 2022.

Over time, those higher rates will raise the costs for a wide range of borrowing, from mortgages and credit cards to auto loans and corporate credit. For the Fed, the risk is that in steadily tightening credit

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 42 of 70

for consumers and businesses, it could trigger another recession.

Many large corporations, in conference calls with investors, have said they expect supply shortages to persist until at least the second half of this year. Companies from Chipotle to Levi's have also said they will likely raise prices again this year, after having already done so in 2021.

Chipotle said it has increased menu prices 10% to offset the rising costs of beef and transportation as well as higher employee wages. And the restaurant chain said it would consider further price increases if inflation keeps rising.

"We keep thinking that beef is going to level up and then go down, and it just hasn't happened yet," said John Hartung, the company's chief financial officer.

Yet executives at Chipotle, as well as at Starbucks and some other consumer-facing companies, have said their customers so far don't seem fazed by the higher prices.

Levi Strauss & Co. raised prices last year by roughly 7% above 2019 levels because of rising costs, including labor, and plans to do so again this year. Even so, the San Francisco-based company has upgraded its sales forecasts for 2022.

"Right now, every signal that we're seeing is positive," CEO Chip Bergh told analysts.

Many small businesses, which typically have lower profit margins than larger companies and have struggled to match their sizable pay raises, are also raising prices. The National Federation for Independent Business, a trade group, said it found in a monthly survey that 61% of small companies increased their prices in January, the largest proportion since 1974 and up from just 15% before the pandemic.

"More small business owners started the new year raising prices in an attempt to pass on higher inventory, supplies and labor costs," said Bill Dunkelberg, chief economist at the NFIB. "In addition to inflation issues, owners are also raising compensation at record-high rates to attract qualified employees to their open positions."

Those pay gains could force additional price hikes in the future as companies seek to cover the costs of the extra wages.

In the past year, sharp increases in the cost of gas, food, cars and furniture have upended many Americans' budgets. In December, economists at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School estimated that the average household had to spend \$3,500 more to buy the same amount of goods and services than they did in 2020.

GOP scrutiny of Black districts may deepen after court move

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and BRENDAN FARRINGTON Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — For years, Democratic Rep. Al Lawson's Florida district has stretched like a rubber band from Jacksonville to Tallahassee, scooping up as many Black voters as possible to comply with requirements that minority communities get grouped together so they can select their own leaders and flex their power in Washington.

But the state's Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, is taking the unusual step of asking Florida's Supreme Court whether Lawson's plurality-Black district can be broken up into whiter — and more Republican — districts.

That type of request might typically face steep hurdles under state and federal laws that are meant to protect representation of marginalized communities in the nation's politics. But the ground rules may be shifting after the U.S. Supreme Court sided this week with Republicans in Alabama to block efforts to ensure that Black voters are adequately represented in Congress by adding a second majority-Black district in the state.

The ruling stunned civil rights groups, who have watched the court's conservative majority steadily eat away at the Voting Rights Act for decades. While the law's rules governing how to draw legislative lines based on race still stand, advocates worry the justices are prepared to act with renewed fervor to eliminate remaining protections in the landmark civil rights legislation. That, some worry, could embolden Republicans in places like Florida to take aim at districts like Lawson's and ultimately reduce Black voters'

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 43 of 70

influence on Capitol Hill.

"That has had an effect, as we've seen, on Black political power at all levels of government," Kathryn Sadasivan, an NAACP Legal Defense Fund attorney who worked on the Alabama case, said of prior erosions of the Voting Rights Act.

Republicans argue that the Alabama case is about providing clarity on redistricting rules. As it stands, mapmakers can be sued if they consider race too much but also if they fail to consider it the way the Voting Rights Act mandates and omit districts with certain shares of a minority population.

"In the last 15 years, the court has said if race predominates, your map is going to be struck down, but if you don't look" at race properly, you violate the Voting Rights Act, Jason Torchinsky, general counsel to the National Republican Redistricting Trust, said on a call with reporters on Wednesday. "The court has been very inconsistent with its guidance to legislators here, and we hope the Alabama decision brings some clarity."

Torchinsky is representing DeSantis in his case before the Florida Supreme Court and would not comment on the case. Republicans contend it is legally different from Alabama. The first hurdle is not the Voting Rights Act but rather Florida's own state redistricting law, which prioritizes racial equity in similar ways.

Torchinsky and other lawyers for DeSantis have argued that courts have to provide a clear legal standard for whether mapmakers can contort district lines in a quest for racial fairness.

"After all," Desantis' attorneys wrote to the Florida Supreme Court of the rationale for Lawson's district, "governmental actions based on race are presumptively unconstitutional."

The Florida case is becoming the latest test of how states' court systems handle the politically charged redistricting battle.

A decade ago, Florida's Supreme Court struck down maps drawn by the state's GOP-controlled Legislature because they violated the state's ban on partisan redistricting. This cycle, the state Senate proposed maps that mostly kept the status quo in the state's current 27 congressional seats while adding a 28th district that should favor Republicans.

But, with Democrats doing better than expected in redistricting nationwide, DeSantis, a possible 2024 presidential contender, pushed for a more aggressive approach that could net the GOP three seats.

But the state's Supreme Court a decade ago was overwhelmingly Democratic. Now it's dominated by Republican appointees.

The question in Florida, said David Vicuna of the anti-gerrymandering group Common Cause, is "will courts put aside whatever are their own personal party preferences and adhere to the law?"

Similar questions swirl around the nation's highest court and its 6-3 conservative majority.

Under the 1965 Voting Rights Act, mapmakers are required to draw districts with a plurality or majority of African Americans or other minority groups if they're in a relatively compact area with a white population that votes starkly differently from them.

For decades, the GOP went along with this approach because it led to states, particularly in the South, having a handful of districts packed with Democratic-leaning African American voters, leaving the remaining seats whiter and more Republican. But a series of adverse legal decisions over recent decades and increased Democratic aggressiveness have turned the tables.

"Now we see kind of a flipping of this, where Democrats and voting rights plaintiffs are saying, 'You have to create more majority-minority districts,' and Republicans are saying, 'Then we're taking race too much into account,'" said Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California-Irvine.

The issues came to a head in Alabama, where civil rights groups and Democrats joined forces to argue that the state's GOP-drawn maps were unconstitutional because they packed most Black voters into only one of seven congressional districts. A three-judge panel agreed, potentially opening the door to similar new plurality-Black districts in states with similar demographics like Louisiana and South Carolina.

But the Supreme Court on Monday stayed that order in a 5-4 decision, saying it would hear full arguments in its fall term and issue a ruling after that, presumably next year. Justice Elena Kagan, writing for two other dissenting liberal justices, warned that the court was already reinterpreting the Voting Rights

Act by stopping the lower court's order.

Civil rights attorneys, while hopeful they can persuade the court's six-justice conservative majority to maintain the standards they've used for decades, acknowledge that the Voting Rights Act has been hollowed out over the years.

In 2013, the court ruled the federal government could no longer use the VRA to require certain states with a history of discrimination to run voting and map changes by the Justice Department first to ensure they're not discriminatory. Two of the states that were under that mandate, Georgia and North Carolina, recently approved GOP-drawn maps that reduced the share of Black voters in two African American Democratic congressmen's seats, G.K. Butterfield and Sanford Bishop. Butterfield, of North Carolina, retired before the map was struck down by the Democratic majority on the North Carolina Supreme Court.

In Florida, DeSantis' proposal would not only dismantle Lawson's seat, it would also shrink the Black voter share of a majority-Black district in South Florida represented by Rep. Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick.

"So now we're going to go from four minority access seats down to two? In 2022?" Democratic state Rep. Ramon Alexander, who is Black, said in an interview. "It is the most egregious thing possible."

Goodell says league won't tolerate racism or discrimination

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

INGLEWOOD, Calif. (AP) — Under a baking California sun, Roger Goodell knew the heat was coming.

At his annual Super Bowl news conference Wednesday, the NFL commissioner was grilled on two hot topics that have put the league under heavy scrutiny: racism and discrimination in hiring. There were other issues that don't shine a positive light on pro football, including threats to the integrity of the sport, and misconduct by players and team executives.

A week after former Miami Dolphins coach Brian Flores, who is Black, filed a lawsuit alleging both racism in the league and being offered money by team owner Stephen Ross to tank games, Goodell vowed action on several fronts.

"We won't tolerate racism. We won't tolerate discrimination," Goodell said. "I found all of the allegations, whether they were based on racism or discrimination or the integrity of our game, all of those to me were very disturbing. They are very serious matters to us on all levels, and we need to make sure we get to the bottom of all of them."

That begins with the NFL's poor record for hiring minorities as head coaches. While the league has made progress with other jobs, from general managers to coordinators, the most visible representative of a franchise is the coach. There are five minority head coaches on the 32 teams, two Black, one biracial, one Hispanic and one Lebanese. Approximately 70% of NFL players are Black.

Asked if the process is flawed, from how interviews are conducted to who might be conducting them, Goodell said the league already is looking into that — whether it involves changes in the Rooney Rule that requires interviews of minority candidates for coaching and executive jobs, or a new rule entirely.

"I think that's the core of the message that we've been talking about here is, OK, we're not having this success we want with head coaches," he noted. "How do we evolve that rule or do we have to have a new rule? Do we need to figure out some other way of being able to achieve that outcome? And I think we're not going to rest until we find that and we get those kind of outcomes that I think are mandatory for us. That just has to be the way we're going to move forward to happen inclusively."

DeMaurice Smith, executive director of the NFLPA, said the Rooney Rule has turned into a "suggestion."

"How important is a rule where it has no consequences? How strong is a rule where it has no transparency? How good is a rule if no one is held accountable to it?" Smith said shortly after Goodell left the stage. "But here's the kicker, for a long time, people talked about how good the Rooney Rule was, we just needed to tweak it."

The league, with help from an independent firm, has been putting together a set of guidelines for several months that will be available to the teams in the spring. It will, they hope, lead to "an optimization of the hiring process," according to Jonathan Beane, the chief diversity and inclusion officer.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 45 of 70

Flores' charge of being offered \$100,000 for each loss in 2019 to get the Dolphins to the top of the draft is being investigated by the league.

"And when we know what those facts are and the impact it has on our game, we'll deal with it very seriously," Goodell said.

What could have been a bright, cloudless afternoon gathering, with SoFi Stadium in the background and the Super Bowl back in the Los Angeles area for the first time in 29 years instead was filled with penetrating queries on a variety of subjects.

—Goodell defended the league using an oral report from an outside investigator into the work culture at the Washington Football Club, now the Commanders. He did not answer whether results of a new investigation into team owner Dan Snyder's conduct will be released in a written report.

He also said the league did not make a deal with Snyder to have his approval for the release of any new information. The NFL announced Wednesday it was overseeing the investigation after Washington said the team had hired an outside investigator to look into allegations by former team employee Tiffani Johnston. She told Congress that Snyder groped her thigh at a team dinner and pushed her toward his limousine with his hand on her lower back years ago.

—New Orleans running back Alvin Kamara now is out of jail after he was arrested over the weekend on a felony charge alleging he beat and injured a person at a Las Vegas nightclub following the Pro Bowl. Goodell said the NFL's security team was contacted by police in Las Vegas just before the game. Police wanted to meet with Kamara after the game and the security team made sure that happened.

—Goodell and other league officials have met with media mogul Byron Allen about his interest in buying the Denver Broncos and bringing diversity to ownership. The NFL has no majority Black owners and only two minority owners with Shad Khan in Jacksonville and Kim Pegula, who owns the Bills along with her husband, Terry.

Goodell added there are other minority candidates interested in buying teams.

—The NFL will play a regular-season game in Munich next season, part of a four-year deal to stage games in Germany.

The league has expanded its horizon in Europe after years of only playing games that count in England. The 2022 game will be part of a four-game series played abroad that also will include games in London. There also will be an additional game in Munich and two in Frankfurt over the next four seasons.

Participating teams will be revealed when the schedule is released in the spring.

Goodell also says the league will return to Mexico City next season. There was no game there in 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

EXPLAINER: The drug behind Russia's Olympic skating case

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — The first big doping case at the Beijing Olympics involves one of its biggest stars. And it seems far from straightforward, not least because she is just 15 years old and has protections as a minor in the anti-doping rule book.

The country at the center of it? Russia. Again.

Here's a look at the drug that Kamila Valieva of the Russia Olympic Committee — the name under which Russia is competing because of previous doping violations — is suspected of taking, and how the situation might play out in coming days.

WHAT IS THE DRUG?

The medication trimetazidine is a metabolic agent that helps prevent angina attacks and treats the symptoms of vertigo, according to the European Union's medicines agency. It can increase blood flow efficiency and improve endurance — both crucial to any high-end athletic performance.

It is on the prohibited list managed by the World Anti-Doping Agency in the category of "hormone and metabolic modulators."

PREVIOUS DOPING CASES

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 46 of 70

The most famous case of trimetazidine in sports doping involved Chinese star swimmer Sun Yang. The three-time Olympic champion served a three-month ban in 2014 in a ruling that was initially not published by China's anti-doping agency.

Because it was Sun's first doping offense, he was punished more severely for his second, and more high-profile, offense of refusing to cooperate with a sample collections team at his home in China.

Russian bobsledder Nadezhda Sergeeva tested positive for trimetazidine at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics. She was disqualified from the two-woman bob event and served an eight-month ban.

WHO WILL HANDLE THE CASE?

The athlete-testing program for the Olympics is run by the International Testing Agency, based in the IOC's home city Lausanne, Switzerland.

Typical Olympic doping cases are handled and announced by the ITA, which imposes a provisional suspension that removes an athlete from competition.

Athletes and their teams can challenge those decisions at the Court of Arbitration for Sport which is in Beijing to handle urgent cases. It has a games-time panel of judges to specialize in doping cases.

Beyond the Olympics, an athlete's governing body — in this case, the International Skating Union (ISU) — should manage a disciplinary case that typically leads to a ban.

Valieva's cases could be more complicated if, as reported, the sample in question was taken before the official Olympic period began at an ISU event.

At the Tokyo Olympics, Nigerian sprinter Blessing Okagbare was pulled from competing ahead of the 100-meters semifinal when a pre-Games test returned as positive. Her suspension was imposed by track and field's Athletics Integrity Unit.

Valieva's case also should involve the International Olympic Committee because she and the ROC team already competed and won the figure skating team event.

Stripping titles and re-allocating medals should be the responsibility of a disciplinary committee chaired by Denis Oswald, a long-time IOC member and Swiss lawyer.

AGE IS A FACTOR

Another complicating factor is Valieva's age, which can give her extra protection.

The World Anti-Doping Code classes minors as a "person who has not reached the age of eighteen years."

While public disclosure of cases is mandatory for adult athletes, for minors the question of identifying them "shall be proportionate to the facts and circumstances of the case."

The circumstances of Valieva's case should also focus on the advice and decisions of her team officials and coaches.

NBC defends Shiffrin coverage, suggests sexism by critics

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — NBC offered a full-throated defense of how it covered skier Mikaela Shiffrin's shocking Olympics flameout, to the point of suggesting there's sexism involved in criticism that it was cruel in its portrayal of her emotional response.

NBC's cameras focused on Shiffrin for much of the time as she sat forlornly on the course, head bowed, for more than 20 minutes. The network aired a raw interview where she fought off tears and said she's second-guessing everything she's done for 15 years.

For the second straight Olympics, the emotional health of athletes performing on the biggest stage has become a focus of discussion. The experiences of gymnast Simone Biles and tennis player Naomi Osaka last summer were fresh in the mind of NBC's critics, and the online blowback was fierce.

As one response on Twitter put it: "Show some empathy." NBC, said another, was "shaming" Shiffrin — "torturing" her. "The relentless hype machine," one critic wrote, "has claimed another victim."

No — NBC was doing its job, said Molly Solomon, executive producer of NBC's Olympics coverage.

"We have an obligation in that moment, as the broadcaster of the Olympic games, to cover the moment," Solomon said in an interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday evening. "There's no script when

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 47 of 70

there's a wipeout on the slopes or a fall in figure skating. We're watching real people with real emotions in real time and we did everything we were supposed to do."

Shiffrin's performance was huge news, she said — the biggest story of the Games so far.

"I've thought a lot about this, and if Joe Burrow or Matthew Stafford sit on the sidelines 22 minutes after the Super Bowl on Sunday, you can bet the cameras are going to stay on them," Solomon said.

"Here we are in 2022 and we have a double standard in coverage of women's sports," she said. "Women's sports should be analyzed through the same lens as the men. The most famous skier in the world did not finish her two best events. So we are going to show her sitting on the hill and analyze what went wrong. You bet we are."

As much as fans enjoy reveling in triumph, disappointment in sport — or any endeavor — is often the more compelling story. "More people relate to heartbreak than anything else," ESPN's Tony Kornheiser said on "Pardon the Interruption" on Wednesday.

It was evident in an interview Shiffrin gave to NBC after she spun out in her first Olympics race how much it was weighing on her. She apologized to viewers: "I'm sorry that that was the performance that I did today," she said.

Speaking with NBC's Todd Lewis following Wednesday's race, Shiffrin's eyes filled with tears.

She was second-guessing, she said, "the last 15 years, everything that I thought I knew about my own skiing and slalom and racing methods."

At the same time, critics were second-guessing NBC's role in the pressure placed on Shiffrin, who was anointed as one of the presumed stars before the Games even started. In a segment broadcast before her second race, former ski racer and now NBC analyst Lindsey Vonn said that "this is a must-medal situation for Mikaela. The stakes could not be higher."

After the race, Vonn tweeted that she was "gutted for Mikaela Shiffrin but this does not take away from her storied career and what she can and will accomplish going forward."

Biles, the star gymnast who put the spotlight on mental health in athletics in Tokyo last year when she withdrew from several events, tweeted heart emojis directed toward Shiffrin on Wednesday.

She also retweeted a comment by writer Charlotte Clymer, who said that "shaming people just because they didn't perform well at the Olympics feels like the opposite of why we supposedly have the Olympics in the first place."

NBC pointed out that Shiffrin was a world-class athlete enriched by endorsement deals with her face emblazoned on billboards.

If NBC was playing an expectations game, it wasn't alone.

"Let's all remember, Mikaela Shiffrin is a professional athlete who has won 73 times and (has) three Olympic gold medals," Solomon said. "She one of the greatest alpine skiers of all time. She's 26 years old and incredibly accomplished. So, for all of us, of course she's going to be one of the centerpieces of the Games. I would think that she would want that."

COVID-19 truck blockade in Canada shuts down Ford plant

By ROB GILLIES and TOM KRISHER Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — A blockade of the bridge between Canada and Detroit by protesters demanding an end to Canada's COVID-19 restrictions forced the shutdown Wednesday of a Ford plant and began to have broader implications for the North American auto industry.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, meanwhile, stood firm against an easing of Canada's COVID-19 restrictions in the face of mounting pressure during recent weeks by protests against the restrictions and against Trudeau himself.

The protest by people mostly in pickup trucks entered its third day at the Ambassador Bridge between Detroit and Windsor, Ontario. Traffic was prevented from entering Canada, while U.S.-bound traffic was still moving.

The bridge carries 25% of all trade between the two countries, and Canadian authorities expressed

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 48 of 70

increasing worry about the economic effects.

Ford said late Wednesday that parts shortages forced it to shut down its engine plant in Windsor and to run an assembly plant in Oakville, Ontario, on a reduced schedule.

"This interruption on the Detroit-Windsor bridge hurts customers, auto workers, suppliers, communities and companies on both sides of the border," Ford said in a statement. "We hope this situation is resolved quickly because it could have widespread impact on all automakers in the U.S. and Canada."

Shortages due to the blockade also forced General Motors to cancel the second shift of the day at its midsize-SUV factory near Lansing, Michigan. Spokesman Dan Flores said it was expected to restart Thursday and no additional impact was expected for the time being.

Later Wednesday, Toyota spokesman Scott Vazin said the company will not be able to manufacture anything at three Canadian plants for the rest of this week due to parts shortages. A statement attributed the problem to supply chain, weather and pandemic-related challenges, but the shutdowns came just days after the blockade began Monday.

"Our teams are working diligently to minimize the impact on production," the company said, adding that it doesn't expect any layoffs at this time.

Stellantis, formerly Fiat Chrysler, reported normal operations, though the company had to cut shifts short the previous day at its Windsor minivan plant.

"We are watching this very closely," White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said earlier of the bridge blockade.

"The blockade poses a risk to supply chains for the auto industry because the bridge is a key conduit for motor vehicles, components and parts, and delays risk disrupting auto production."

A growing number of Canadian provinces have moved to lift some of their precautions as the omicron surge levels off, but Trudeau defended the measures the federal government is responsible for, including the one that has angered many truck drivers: a rule that took effect Jan. 15 requiring truckers entering Canada to be fully vaccinated.

"The reality is that vaccine mandates, and the fact that Canadians stepped up to get vaccinated to almost 90%, ensured that this pandemic didn't hit as hard here in Canada as elsewhere in the world," Trudeau said in Parliament.

About 90% of truckers in Canada are vaccinated, and trucker associations and many big-rig operators have denounced the protests. The U.S. has the same vaccination rule for truckers entering the country, so it would make little difference if Trudeau lifted the restriction.

Protesters have also been blocking the border crossing at Coutts, Alberta, for a week and a half, with about 50 trucks remaining there Wednesday. And more than 400 trucks have paralyzed downtown Ottawa, Canada's capital, in a protest that began late last month.

While protesters have been calling for Trudeau's removal, most of the restrictive measures around the country have been put in place by provincial governments. Those include requirements that people show proof-of-vaccination "passports" to enter restaurants, gyms, movie theaters and sporting events.

Alberta, Saskatchewan, Quebec, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia announced plans this week to roll back some or all of their precautions. Alberta, Canada's most conservative province, dropped its vaccine passport immediately and plans to get rid of mask requirements at the end of the month.

Alberta opposition leader Rachel Notley accused the province's premier, Jason Kenney, of allowing an "illegal blockade to dictate public health measures."

Despite Alberta's plans to scrap its measures, the protest there continued.

"We've got guys here — they've lost everything due to these mandates, and they're not giving up, and they're willing to stand their ground and keep going until this is done," said protester John Vanreeuwijk, a feedlot operator from Coaldale, Alberta.

"Until Trudeau moves," he said, "we don't move."

As for the Ambassador Bridge blockade, Windsor Mayor Drew Dilkens said police had not removed people for fear of inflaming the situation. But he added: "We're not going to let this happen for a prolonged pe-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 49 of 70

riod of time.”

The demonstration involved 50 to 74 vehicles and about 100 protesters, police said. Some of the protesters say they are willing to die for their cause, according to the mayor.

“I’ll be brutally honest: You are trying to have a rational conversation, and not everyone on the ground is a rational actor,” Dilkens said. “Police are doing what is right by taking a moderate approach, trying to sensibly work through this situation where everyone can walk away, nobody gets hurt, and the bridge can open.”

To avoid the blockade and get into Canada, truckers in the Detroit area had to drive 70 miles north to Port Huron, Michigan, and cross the Blue Water Bridge, where there was a 4½-hour delay leaving the U.S.

At a news conference in Ottawa that excluded mainstream news organizations, Benjamin Dichter, one of the protest organizers, said: “I think the government and the media are drastically underestimating the resolve and patience of truckers.”

“Drop the mandates. Drop the passports,” he said.

The “freedom truck convoy” has been promoted by Fox News personalities and attracted support from many U.S. Republicans, including former President Donald Trump, who called Trudeau a “far left lunatic” who has “destroyed Canada with insane Covid mandates.”

Pandemic restrictions have been far stricter in Canada than in the U.S., but Canadians have largely supported them. Canada’s COVID-19 death rate is one-third that of the U.S.

Interim Conservative leader Candice Bergen said in Parliament that countries around the world are removing restrictions and noted that Canadian provinces are, too. She accused Trudeau of wanting to live in a “permanent pandemic.”

Ontario, Canada’s largest province with almost 40% of the country’s population, is sticking to what it calls a “very cautious” stance toward the pandemic, and the deputy premier said it has no plans to drop vaccine passports or mask requirements.

Family: Bob Saget died after accidental blow to the head

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Bob Saget’s death last month stemmed from an accidental blow to the head, his family said in a statement Wednesday.

The comedian and “Full House” star was found dead Jan. 9 in a Florida hotel room. He’d performed in the area the night before as part of a stand-up tour.

“The authorities have determined that Bob passed from head trauma,” the Saget family said. “They have concluded that he accidentally hit the back of his head on something, thought nothing of it and went to sleep. No drugs or alcohol were involved.”

The medical examiner’s office in Orange County, Florida, did not immediately return a message seeking details about their investigation Wednesday night.

Saget, 65, was found on the hotel bed and there were no signs of foul play, authorities said last month. A hotel security officer had entered the room after Saget failed to check out, and called 911 when he found him unresponsive.

Deputies and paramedics came to the room at the Ritz Carlton in Orlando and he was pronounced dead.

Saget was best known for his role as beloved single dad Danny Tanner on the sitcom “Full House” and as the wisecracking host of “America’s Funniest Home Videos.”

Saget was on the road as part of his “I Don’t Do Negative Comedy Tour.” After warm audience receptions to his gigs Friday in Orlando and Saturday in the Ponte Vedra Beach resort area, he celebrated online.

“I’m back in comedy like I was when I was 26. I guess I’m finding my new voice and loving every moment of it,” he’d posted Saturday on Instagram.

Saget’s death prompted an outpouring of affection from fans and colleagues, who recalled him as both funny and extraordinarily kind.

In the statement, the family said it has been overwhelmed with “the incredible outpouring of love from Bob’s fans” and were comforted by it.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 50 of 70

"As we continue to mourn together, we ask everyone to remember the love and laughter that Bob brought to this world, and the lessons he taught us all: to be kind to everyone, to let the people you love know you love them, and to face difficult times with hugs and laughter," his family said.

Saget was married to Kelly Rizzo Saget and had three daughters from a previous marriage.

Jan. 6 committee subpoenas ex-Trump adviser Peter Navarro

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the U.S. Capitol insurrection subpoenaed former White House trade adviser Peter Navarro on Wednesday, seeking to question an ally of former President Donald Trump who promoted false claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election.

The committee is demanding information and testimony from Navarro, who they say was involved in efforts to delay Congress' certification of the 2020 election and ultimately change the election results, Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, the committee's Democratic chairman, said in a statement.

"Mr. Navarro appears to have information directly relevant to the Select Committee's investigation into the causes of the January 6th attack on the Capitol," Thompson continued. "He hasn't been shy about his role in efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election and has even discussed the former President's support for those plans."

In a statement Wednesday, Navarro called the committee a "partisan witch hunt" and reiterated his claim of executive privilege.

The committee "should negotiate any waiver of the privilege with the president and his attorneys directly, not through me," Navarro said.

The nine-member panel said it has obtained information from public interviews, reporting and even Navarro's own book that indicates he worked with longtime Trump ally Steve Bannon and others to develop and implement a plan to delay the certification of Joe Biden's electoral win on Jan. 6, 2021. Navarro was one of the White House staffers who promoted Trump's baseless claims of mass voter fraud. He released a report in December 2020 that he claimed contained evidence of the alleged misconduct.

The 72-year-old former economics professor was seen as a man with ideas considered well outside the mainstream before he joined the Trump campaign in 2016. The former president asked him to come on board after one of Navarro's books on China happened to catch the eye of Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner during an internet search.

Once Trump took office, Navarro was appointed to head a new White House National Trade Council. But he was quickly sidelined by chief of staff John Kelly and closely managed by former staff secretary Rob Porter.

Navarro is the latest person to receive a subpoena from the committee as part of the large-scale investigation it began 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 investigating the Capitol attack is not the only group of lawmakers seeking Navarro's compliance. A House subcommittee set up to investigate the Trump administration's response to COVID-19 also subpoenaed him in November. He denied their request, citing a "direct order" from the former president to claim executive privilege.

The Jan. 6 select committee, comprised of seven Democrats and two Republicans, has subpoenaed close to 100 people so far and interviewed nearly 500.

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.

Under pressure to ease up, Biden weighs new virus response

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing growing pressure to ease up on pandemic restrictions, the White House

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 51 of 70

insisted Wednesday it is making plans for a less-disruptive phase of the national virus response. But impatient states, including Democratic New York, made clear they aren't waiting for Washington as public frustration grows.

Gov. Kathy Hochul announced that New York will end its COVID-19 mandate requiring face coverings in most indoor public settings — but will keep it for schools. Illinois announced the same.

Earlier this week, New Jersey, Connecticut and Delaware all disclosed plans to join states that have lifted or never had mask requirements for their schools, and Massachusetts will follow suit at the end of the month. All but Massachusetts have governors who are Democrats, like President Joe Biden.

Biden, who has long promised to follow to “follow the science” in confronting the pandemic, is hemmed in, waiting for fresh guidance from federal health officials, who so far still recommend that nearly all Americans wear masks in most indoor settings.

Defending Biden, press secretary Jen Psaki acknowledged that while people are tired of masks and “we understand where the emotions of the country are,” the administration is following the advice of medical experts who rely on scientific evidence.

“That doesn't move at the speed of politics; it moves at the speed of data,” she said.

Clearly feeling the pressure, the White House for the first time acknowledged movement in its planning, saying conversations have been under way privately to develop plans for guiding the country away from the emergency phase of the pandemic.

Federal COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said officials are consulting with state and local leaders and public health officials on potential next steps. But as governors and local officials press for clearer federal guidelines for easing or ending restrictions, states, cities and school boards are adopting an awkward patchwork of policies that differ widely from one place to the next.

“We are working on that guidance,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said in a White House teleconference Wednesday. “As we've been encouraged by the current trends, we are not there yet.”

The White House offered no timetable for the review or an indication of what it will recommend. And some critics say that's not good enough.

“The tragic thing is that these are governors that would probably have followed the White House's guidance,” said Dr. Leana Wen, a former Baltimore health commissioner. “They wanted CDC input and asked for it, but without a clear timeline, at some point they had to decide that they couldn't wait any more. The fault is not theirs, but the CDC's and by extension, President Biden's, which, with each passing day, is making itself less and less relevant.”

Asked whether Biden appears to be out of touch with the country, Psaki defended his caution. “As a federal government we have the responsibility to rely on data on science, on the medical experts,” she said.

Pressed on whether Americans should follow less-restrictive state or local rules or the stricter federal guidance, she repeated the White House's daily counsel: “We would advise any American to follow the CDC guidelines.”

New York's Hochul and others aren't waiting. They are ending or easing many broad mandates, though her state will keep masking rules in schools and health facilities.

“Given the declining cases, given the declining hospitalizations, that is why we feel comfortable to lift this, in effect tomorrow,” Hochul said Wednesday.

Even allies of the administration have argued that Biden should at least lay out a roadmap for moving back toward normalcy.

He has been hesitant, aides say, in part because of the sting of his fleeting “declaration of independence” from the virus last summer, which proved premature in the face of the delta and then omicron strains. Now, though, cases and hospitalizations from COVID-19 have dropped markedly since they peaked earlier this year amid the spread of the highly transmissible omicron variant, and the vast majority of Americans are protected against the virus by effective vaccines and boosters.

Still, more than 2,000 people infected with the virus die in the U.S. each day, and there is concern within

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 52 of 70

the administration about letting up while deaths remain high.

And Psaki noted that many Americans support continued mask-wearing. Some in the White House point to the consternation that was voiced in December after the CDC shortened the isolation time for Americans who test positive.

While Biden and other administration officials emphasize that the threat from the virus is far diminished from a year ago, before the wide roll-out of vaccines and booster shots and the approval of rapid at-home tests and highly effective therapeutics, administration officials acknowledge that most federal guidelines have been slow to keep up.

The CDC continues to recommend indoor mask wearing in places of "substantial or high transmission" of the virus, which as of Wednesday was all of the U.S. but 14 rural counties.

State and local leaders, nevertheless, have announced plans to ease virus restrictions in the coming weeks as omicron cases fall, citing the protections offered by vaccines as well as the increased availability of at-home testing kits and therapeutics for those who do catch the virus. Many of the restrictions eased last year, only to be reinstated as omicron swept the country.

After more than a year of a top-down federally driven response, the emerging shift marks a return to the historical norm, where states have typically had the first say in how they handle public health emergencies. The CDC can advise them and issue general guidance for the nation, but in most situations it cannot order them what to do.

While the Biden administration has pushed back strongly against efforts by GOP governors to prohibit mask-wearing requirements, it is indicating that it will take a more flexible approach to jurisdictions that make their own choices.

Policies lifting mask requirements "are going to have to be made at the local level" depending on case rates, Walensky said.

Despite the encouraging reports in the Americas, Western Europe and some other regions, the head of the World Health Organization insisted Wednesday that "COVID isn't finished with us."

As his agency reported that new infections fell but virus deaths rose worldwide over the past week, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus launched a new \$23 billion campaign to fund WHO's efforts to lead a broad rollout of COVID-19 tests, treatments and vaccines around the world.

How (and where) to watch the 2022 Oscar nominees online

By LEANNE ITALIE AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Looking to watch top Oscar nominees before the 94th Academy Awards air on March 27? There are many ways to get that done, including a trip to a theater in some cases. Here's a few other ways, though it's worth looking around as many have myriad paths to digitally buy, rent and stream:

STREAMING
ON NETFLIX

"The Power of the Dog" — The leading nominee with a dozen Oscar nods, including those for Kirsten Dunst, Benedict Cumberbatch, Jesse Plemons and Kodi Smit-McPhee. It also received a best picture nod and a best director nomination for Jane Campion. Cumberbatch is a rough-hewn Montana rancher with a menacing arrogance in a Gothic story brought alive on the Western plain.

"Don't Look Up" — Adam McKay's apocalyptic comedy nabbed four Oscar nominations, including best picture, original score and original screenplay. The climate change satire that stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence gives Earth six months before a massive comet destroys the planet.

"tick, tick ... BOOM!" — Andrew Garfield earned an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of Jonathan Larson, who upended the theater world as the creator of "Rent." The adaption of an autobiographical musical by Larson, who died suddenly and young in 1996, was Lin-Manuel Miranda's feature directorial debut and also earned a nod for film editing.

"The Lost Daughter" — Starring Olivia Colman, Jessie Buckley and Dakota Johnson, it received three Oscar nominations, including nods for Colman and Buckley. The adaptation of an Elena Ferrante novel

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 53 of 70

of the same name is a psychological drama that has Colman and Buckley in the same role as young and older versions of the sad and frustrated translator Leda Caruso, set on holiday in Greece.

"The Mitchells vs. the Machines" — The oddball Mitchell family must quell an uprising by the world's electronic devices while on a road trip to drop off daughter Katie (voiced by Abbi Jacobson) for her first year of film school. Thank goodness for two friendly robots. The best animated feature nominee is directed by Mike Rianda, who made "Gravity Falls." Also available at a cost on Apple TV+, Disney+, Vudu, Redbox and more.

On HBO MAX

"Dune" — It's no longer streaming on HBO Max but worth watching for its return. Meanwhile, digital rentals and purchases are plentiful, including on Amazon Prime Video and through Apple TV+, iTunes and Google Play. The sweeping desert sci-fi saga based on Frank Herbert's classic 1965 novel received 10 Oscar nominations, including best picture and cinematography. It stars Timothée Chalamet and Zendaya. Denis Villeneuve directed.

"King Richard" — Directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green, the story of Richard Williams — father, coach and driving force behind tennis greats Venus and Serena Williams — has Will Smith in the leading role. The film earned six Oscar nominations, including one for Smith, Aunjanue Ellis, best picture and original song for "Be Alive" by DIXSON and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. It's an intimate, authorized view of the family and their rise from Compton, California, to the top of the tennis world. The film is no longer streaming for HBO Max subscribers but may someday come back. Available at a cost on Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV, Google Play, Redbox, YouTube and more.

"Nightmare Alley" — This Guillermo del Toro remake of the 1947 neo-noir classic earned four Oscar nods, including best picture and cinematography. The cast is star packed: Bradley Cooper, Cate Blanchett, Toni Collette, Willem Dafoe, Richard Jenkins, Rooney Mara, Ron Perlman, Mary Steenburgen and David Strathairn. It's the story of the brief rise of a handsome hustler, from low level carney to highly paid showman. It's also streaming for Hulu subscribers.

"The Eyes of Tammy Faye" — The rise-and-fall story of televangelist power couple Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker secured Chastain her third Oscar nomination. The film received two nods, including makeup and hairstyling — notable for the brash Tammy. Andrew Garfield plays Bakker.

On HULU

"Spencer" — Kristen Stewart's unhinged Princess Diana earned her a best actress Oscar nomination after snubs from the British academy and the Screen Actors Guild. Director Pablo Larraín takes a tragic surreal approach in this biopic. Though reviews were mixed, some critics consider it an evocative and artful look at one of the most famous women to ever live. It's set over a Christmas weekend with the royal family that preceded her divorce from Prince Charles.

"Flee" — With the exception of live-action archival footage, this grand jury prize winner at Sundance is entirely animated. It's the story of Amin, a pseudonym for a refugee boy who filmmaker Jonas Poher Rasmussen befriended in his sleepy Danish town when he himself was 15. Amin didn't talk about his past in Afghanistan or his family when they were kids. It took Amin some 20 years to open up to his friend.

"Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)" — Thanks to Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival has received its due, and an Oscar nomination for best documentary feature. Held in Mount Morris Park (now Marcus Garvey Park), the film includes performances at the New York festival by Stevie Wonder, Nina Simone, Sly & the Family Stone, Gladys Knight & the Pips, Mahalia Jackson, B.B. King, The 5th Dimension and more.

ON AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

"Belfast" — Based on the childhood of Kenneth Branagh, this black-and-white film received seven Oscar nominations, including best picture, a directing nod for Branagh, best supporting actress for Judi Dench and supporting actor for her screen husband, Ciarán Hinds. Absent was a notch for star Jamie Dornan. The film was one of the first shot in Britain after lockdown in 2021. It stars Dornan as a Belfast dad struggling to keep his family safe as the troubles began in 1969. It's no longer streaming for subscribers but may return. Available at a cost on Amazon Prime, Apple TV+, YouTube, Redbox, Vudu and more.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 54 of 70

"Being the Ricardos" — This behind the scenes look at the work and marriage of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz received three acting nominations: Javier Bardem as Desi, Nicole Kidman as Lucy and J.K. Simmons in a supporting role. Aaron Sorkin has created a loving and sharp dramatization of a particularly fraught week during the making of the TV classic "I Love Lucy."

"Coming 2 America" — This sequel to the Eddie Murphy hit earned one Oscar nomination, for hair and makeup. With Murphy back as Prince Akeem — and three other characters — the comedy directed by Craig Brewer has things looking up a bit for women in Zamunda, post #MeToo. Yes, it's still a patriarchy and yes, there are still obedient royal bathers. Also starring Jermaine Fowler, Tracy Morgan, Arsenio Hall, Leslie Jones, KiKi Layne and more.

ON APPLE TV+

"CODA" — Apple received its first best-picture nomination with this drama, which also made history as supporting actor nominee Troy Kotsur became only the second deaf actor ever nominated. (His "CODA" co-star Marlee Matlin was the first.) It was also nominated for best adapted screenplay. The film follows the Rossi family of Gloucester, Massachusetts. Ruby, a high school senior, is the only hearing member of her family and often their only connection to the hearing world.

"The Tragedy of Macbeth" — Joel Coen directed, with Denzel Washington starring as a gray-haired Macbeth who knows in his aching bones that the witches' prophecy has given him his last chance to be what he wants, no, deserves! King of Scotland. Washington's turn at Shakespeare in this black-and-white version earned him a lead actor Oscar nod. The movie also received nominations for cinematography and production design. Frances McDormand co-stars.

ON DISNEY+

"Encanto" — There's something about this Disney animated feature. Rather, there's something about the music that has tickled many. The soundtrack became the first from a film since 2019 to reach No. 1 on the Billboard chart. Its most popular song, "We Don't Talk About Bruno," became the highest-charting song from a Disney animated film in more than 26 years, ranking higher than even "Let It Go." The music magic was made by Lin-Manuel Miranda. The story is magical as well. It features a charmed family called the Madrigals in the Colombia mountains hamlet of Encanto. Miranda earned a nomination for original song ("Dos Oruguitas") and its other noms are for original score (Germaine Franco) and best animated feature film.

"Luca" — The Disney and Pixar coming-of-age story about a boy and his summer on the Italian Riviera is among the contenders for best animated feature. Luca is voiced by Jacob Tremblay. He befriends another boy, Alberto, voiced by Jack Dylan Grazer. There's lots of seaside fun, but the two share a menacing secret. Directed by Enrico Casarosa.

"Raya and the Last Dragon" — Another film in the competition for best animated feature. Take a trip to Kumandra, where an evil force destroyed the harmony between humans and dragons 500 years ago. The dragons sacrificed themselves to save humanity. Now, that evil has returned and warrior Raya goes in search of a legendary last dragon to restore order once again.

ONLY IN THEATERS

Among the Oscar nominees are some notables playing solely in theaters, for now.

They include the 1970s-set "Licorice Pizza" with three nominations: best picture, director (Paul Thomas Anderson) and original screenplay. Set in sunny Southern California, it's a charmingly loose love letter to the San Fernando Valley of Anderson's youth.

"Drive My Car," from Japanese director Ryusuke Hamaguchi. It's a three-hour drama with four major Oscar nominations, including best picture, best director and best adapted screenplay. It was adapted from a Haruki Murakami short story. The film follows a widowed actor played by Hidetoshi Nishijima. He seeks a chauffeur and winds up with a taciturn 20-year-old girl, played by Toko Miura. A touching friendship develops against a backdrop of loss and sorrow.

Steven Spielberg's reimagining of "West Side Story" is still playing in theaters, but it will be available to Disney+ subscribers starting March 2. His version of the 1961 classic received seven Oscar nominations,

including best picture, and director for him. Ariana DeBose was nominated for her Anita. Spielberg, Tony Kushner and Steven Sondheim dug deep to reconsider the iconic Romeo and Juliet tale that has the Sharks and the Jets front and center in New York City.

Experts hail big step forward in fusion technology in UK

LONDON (AP) — European scientists have taken a significant step closer to mastering a technology that could allow them to one day harness nuclear fusion, providing a clean and almost limitless source of energy, British officials said Wednesday.

Researchers at the Joint European Torus experiment near Oxford managed to produce a record amount of heat energy over a five-second period, which was the duration of the experiment, the U.K. Atomic Energy Authority said.

The 59 megajoules of sustained fusion energy produced were more than double the previous record achieved in 1997.

The agency said the result was “the clearest demonstration worldwide of the potential for fusion energy to deliver safe and sustainable low-carbon energy.”

“If we can maintain fusion for five seconds, we can do it for five minutes and then five hours as we scale up our operations in future machines,” said Tony Donne, program manager for EUROfusion. “This is a big moment for every one of us and the entire fusion community.”

Ian Chapman, CEO of the U.K. Atomic Energy Authority, said the results were a “huge step closer to conquering one of the biggest scientific and engineering challenges of them all.”

The facility, also known as JET, is home to the world’s largest and most powerful operational tokamak — a donut-shaped device that is considered one promising method for performing controlled fusion.

Scientists who were not involved in the project believed it was a significant result, but still a very long way from achieving commercial fusion power.

Researchers around the world have long been working on nuclear fusion technology, trying different approaches. The ultimate goal is to generate power the way the sun generates heat, by pressing hydrogen atoms so close to each other that they combine into helium, which releases torrents of energy.

Carolyn Kuranz at the University of Michigan called the development “very exciting” and a step toward achieving “ignition,” or when the fuel can continue to “burn” on its own and produce more energy than what’s needed to spark the initial reaction.

She said the results appeared “very promising” for ITER, a much larger experimental fusion facility in southern France that uses the same technology and is backed by many European countries, the United States, China, Japan, India, South Korea and Russia. It is expected to begin operation in 2026.

Riccardo Betti, a fusion expert at the University of Rochester, said the achievement lay mainly in sustaining the reaction at high performance levels for five seconds, significantly longer than previously achieved in a tokamak.

The amount of power gained was still well below the amount needed to perform the experiment, he added.

Ian Fells, an emeritus professor of energy conversion at the University of Newcastle, described the new record as a landmark in fusion research.

“Now it is up to the engineers to translate this into carbon-free electricity and mitigate the problem of climate change,” he said. “Ten to 20 years could see commercialization.”

Stephanie Diem of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, said the technology used by JET to achieve the result, using magnets to control ultra-hot plasma, show that harnessing fusion — a process that occurs naturally in the stars — is physically feasible.

“The next milestone on the horizon for magnetic fusion is to demonstrate scientific breakeven, where the amount of energy produced from fusion reactions exceeds that going into the device,” she said.

Rival teams are racing to perfect other methods for controlling fusion and have also recently reported significant progress.

Scientists hope that fusion reactors might one day provide a source of emissions-free energy without

any of the risks of conventional nuclear power.

Love and logins: Who gets custody of passwords in a breakup?

By LEANNE ITALIE AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Emily Taffel didn't pull the password plug when she divorced her first husband, and she didn't cut off the boyfriend who followed. Now remarried with four stepchildren, she continues as a model of civility when it comes to exes and logins.

The 41-year-old in Coral Springs, Florida, and her first husband didn't have kids, much money or own a house when they divorced. What they did have were subscriptions to Netflix and Hulu.

"We each paid for one of them and share. That was literally our divorce agreement," Taffel said. "It was written right in there. We're still doing it."

When boyfriend Sam came along but the romance ended three years later, they maintained close ties and joint custody of additional services, sharing logins and the cost to this day among themselves and Taffel's ex-husband. Taffel and her current husband have added more and shared down the line over a decade after her first marriage ended.

"I know it seems crazy," she said. "The ex-boyfriend and the ex-husband aren't friends, but through me everybody is very amicable."

In this era of cybersecurity concerns and calls for multifactor lockdown of all things digital, that approach points to a thorny issue when love goes wrong: What to do about the logins?

Nearly 8 in 10 Americans who are in a relationship share passwords across nearly every digital platform, ranging from social media to email and cell phone to mobile wallets, said Harold Li, vice president of the encryption service ExpressVPN.

"In the digital era, sharing passwords is a sign of trust and affection akin to the gift of a letterman jacket or an exchange of school locker combinations," he said. "However, while it may seem like a romantic gesture at the moment, it poses serious risks to your personal privacy, which even the closest of relationships need."

And when relationships end, whether romantic or of the friendship variety, he recommends a thorough "digital divorce."

Sisi Cronin, 33, in Napa, California, is still logged in to her college boyfriend's Netflix account, with her own profile. While they don't live near each other, they remain friendly after going their separate ways when she was 23.

"One time about three years ago he sent me a kind of funny message saying, hey, Netflix has decided to limit how many people can be on, would you mind getting your own? And I just wrote back saying I'd rather not. We haven't talked about it since," she said. "When you've got all these different subscription platforms it's ideal to not be paying for all of them yourself, right?"

Nick Leighton of the etiquette podcast "Were You Raised by Wolves" equates the changing of shared passwords after a breakup to returning the sweater left behind by the ex.

"Be mindful of the fact that when a person discovers their login no longer works, it'll be a clear reminder that the relationship is indeed over, which may cause hurt feelings," he said. "In a relationship, asking someone for their password can make some people uncomfortable, so it's often better to wait until they volunteer to share rather than putting them on the spot. It should also be noted that sharing passwords might possibly violate the terms of service."

Things don't always go swimmingly when logins aren't cut off post-breakup.

"Change the password. In the age of perpetual watch histories being widely available, nobody wants to know that their ex just watched 'The Notebook' on Netflix. It stirs up all sorts of emotions," said John Capo, an assistant professor of communications at Lycoming College in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

"Were they thinking about me when they watched it? Who did they watch it with? Why were they awake at midnight, anyway? Remember when we used to watch 'The Notebook?'"

Brian Penny, 40, in Tucson, Arizona, doesn't have the heart to leave an ex out in the cold on his HBO

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 57 of 70

Max and Hulu accounts.

"She's struggling with work and it doesn't cost me anything, but it does show her name because she added herself as a profile," he said. "I do wonder what the next girlfriend will think about seeing another woman's name in my account. I've already reasoned I would say it's a cousin or friend."

Hari Ravichandran, founder and CEO of the digital safety provider Aura, noted the prevalence of password sharing among some, but warned against it.

"It's no secret that password-sharing is a way for consumers to get around the cost of paying for multiple services," he said in a statement. "What consumers aren't considering is that these behaviors make them vulnerable to digital crime when people outside your household — even ones you trust — have your passwords on their devices."

Researchers have found a variety of reasons people maintain streaming ties after a breakup — convenience, finances and post-breakup friendships among them. A downside: When a vindictive ex deliberately wreaks havoc with algorithms to mess up ads and suggested viewing, or creates a profile to rile up a current love interest. One sharer said the parents of an ex stayed logged into one of his sites for two years after they broke up and sent him a gift card out of the blue as thanks.

Chandler Sterling in Los Angeles shows up as a generic "guest" profile on the Netflix and Hulu accounts of a former long-term girlfriend. He also uses his parents' cable TV subscription with his Apple TV for access to pretty much anything, including sports.

"Yes, I'm 34, and yes, I make over six figures at my job, but I won't pay for something if I don't have to," he said. "My ex has never directly confronted me about the guest profile on Hulu. On Netflix, she changed the guest account's profile picture to the guy from the show 'Lucifer,' so I think she's sending me a message about how she feels. ... I have zero guilt for all this cloak and dagger mooching."

Penny said he wasn't sure if or when he would remove his ex.

"Our relationship didn't end well at all," he said. "I think a part of me leaves it alone so she leaves me alone. The peace of mind is worth it."

The Latest: Goodell says league 'won't tolerate racism'

By The Associated Press undefined

INGLEWOOD, Calif. (AP) — The Latest on NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's news conference (all times PST):

12:45 p.m.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell says the league will deal with discrimination in a serious way if he finds that teams violated that principle.

Goodell says "we won't tolerate racism. We won't tolerate discrimination."

Goodell says the league will look to see if any policies need to be modified after another offseason where the number of minority coaches has not increased.

12:45 p.m.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell defended the league using an oral report from an outside investigator into the then-Washington Football Club.

Goodell did not answer the question on whether results of the new investigation into the Washington Commanders owner Dan Snyder will be released in a written report.

The commissioner says the oral report was used to make sure anyone who wanted to protect the identity of anyone who wanted to speak to investigators privately. Goodell says the "vast majority" of people took part in the investigation knowing their names would not be released publicly. He says those willing to go public testified last week at Congress.

Goodell says the NFL accepted all of the investigator's recommendations in the oral report along with a system of checks to ensure that Washington follows through with changes.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 58 of 70

12:45 p.m.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell says he "bares responsibility" for the league's struggles in improving diversity in coaching and other high-ranking positions on teams and in the league.

Goodell says that as a league there is no subject that has been "discussed more frequently" over the past five years other than increasing diversity.

Goodell says the league needs to make sure "we're doing everything we possibly can to be more successful."

12:40 p.m.

Commissioner Roger Goodell says personal conduct applies to everyone in the NFL and that the league has people making bad decisions in other markets.

New Orleans running back Alvin Kamara was arrested after the Pro Bowl in Las Vegas last weekend, and the Las Vegas Raiders also have had a couple of incidents with players this past season.

Goodell says the NFL's security team was contacted by police in Las Vegas just before the Pro Bowl. Police told the security team they wanted to meet with Kamara after the game. Goodell says the security team made sure that happened, doing what police asked of them.

Kamara now is out of jail after he was arrested over the weekend on a felony charge alleging he beat and injured a person at a Las Vegas nightclub.

12:35 p.m.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell says he and other league officials have met with media mogul Byron Allen about his interest in buying the Denver Broncos and bringing diversity to ownership.

The NFL has no majority Black owners and only two minority owners with Shad Khan in Jacksonville and Kim Pegula, who owns the Bills along with her husband.

Goodell says there are other minority candidates interested in buying teams.

12:35 p.m.

Roger Goodell says the integrity of the game obviously is an important key for the NFL as much as making sure the league has the right culture.

The commissioner says the NFL will look into former Miami coach Brian Flores' allegation in his lawsuit alleging racism in the league and that Dolphins owner Stephen Ross offered him \$100,000 per game to lose in 2019 to help the team's draft status. Goodell says any violations will not be tolerated. He refused to speculate and wants to know the facts. But Goodell says they'll deal with any such issues very seriously.

Asked if an owner could be forced to sell a team, Goodell says he believes the league's individual club owners do have the authority to remove an owner from the NFL.

12:30 p.m.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell says the league is "not doing a good enough job" in terms of increasing diversity at high-ranking positions on teams and in the league.

Goodell says the league believes in "diversity as a value" and has made the league stronger. Goodell says the league will look to find other ways to improve the policies and procedures and determine what can be done to make sure teams and the league are "attracting the best talent."

The league has been under fire following a lawsuit alleging racism in hiring from former Miami coach Brian Flores.

12:30 p.m.

Commissioner Roger Goodell says the NFL needs to understand what happened in connection with the alleged sexual harassment by Washington Commanders owner Daniel Snyder.

The NFL announced hours after Washington said the team had hired an outside investigator to look into

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 59 of 70

allegations by former team employee Tiffani Johnston. She told Congress that Snyder groped her thigh at a team dinner and pushed her toward his limousine with his hand on her lower back years ago.

Goodell says the investigation will treat this in the most serious way to preserve the type of culture they want in the NFL. He says he doesn't see anyway that a team can investigate itself and that the league will use an outside expert. He says they will treat this seriously and move forward.

The commissioner also was asked if Snyder tried to block any details from being released from an earlier investigation into Washington. Goodell says he couldn't explain the legal agreement, but that he didn't interfere with anything the NFL did with the investigation and outcome.

12:25 p.m.

The NFL will play a regular-season game in Munich, Germany, next season.

Commissioner Roger Goodell made the announcement during his annual Super Bowl news conference.

The league has expanded its horizon in Europe after years of only playing games that count in England. The 2022 game will be part of a four-game series played abroad that also will include games in London. The league will play an additional game in Munich and two in Frankfurt over the next four seasons.

Participating teams will be revealed when the schedule is released in the spring.

Goodell also says the league will return to Mexico City next season.

12:20 p.m.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell says it's "surreal" to be back in Los Angeles for a Super Bowl for the first time in 29 years after years with no team in the country's second-largest market.

The NFL returned to Los Angeles in 2016 and SoFi Stadium opened last season as the home to the Rams and Chargers. Goodell says he believes Los Angeles will be a "regular Super Bowl stop" because of the state-of-the-art stadium.

The next three Super Bowls will be played in Arizona, Las Vegas and New Orleans with the game in February 2026 the next one available.

12:15 p.m.

Commissioner Roger Goodell says the NFL can't draw any conclusions yet on whether the interview process itself is flawed in trying to increase the number of minority coaches in the league.

Goodell says the NFL shouldn't draw any conclusions without looking at the process first. He says he doesn't think they can take anything off the table. But he says if there is something flawed with the process the league needs to know how to fix that.

The commissioner noted the NFL created a database providing owners with information on a variety of candidates. He says the NFL has looked at the process. He says he isn't taking anything off the table and he believes outside experts can be very helpful to the league.

12:10 p.m.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell says he's frustrated that the league is still facing questions about diversity in hiring of coaches and executives despite efforts to improve.

Goodell says the league "fell short" in terms of increasing the number of minority head coaches this offseason with the league still having only five minority coaches after two were fired and two were hired this offseason.

Goodell says the league will bring in experts to look at the Rooney Rule and other policies to see what the league can do to increase minority hiring.

11:40 a.m.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell is getting ready to hold his annual Super Bowl news conference with the NFL facing questions about diversity in coaching and the treatment of women.

The league is facing a lawsuit from former Miami Dolphins coach Brian Flores who has alleged racist

hiring practices for coaches and general managers and says the league remains "rife with racism" even as it publicly condemns it.

The NFL still has only five minority coaches following the latest hiring season.

The league has also taken over an investigation into alleged sexual harassment by Washington Commanders owner Daniel Snyder, saying the league, not the team, will hire an investigator to lead the probe.

For Black women, hopes and dreams rest on Biden court choice

By JOCELYN NOVECK and DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — When the pressure gets intense, law student Jasmine Marchbanks-Owens likes to wander the hallways of Howard University, examining the faded, framed photos of prominent Black graduates of decades past.

"It's just really inspiring to be able to see people that look like me that attended this university and became attorneys," says the first-year student, whose great-great grandmother was born into slavery. "So, when I get stressed out, I like to walk down here and look at all the names and see all the faces."

Most of the faces are men. But Marchbanks-Owens stops by the photo of one prominent woman, Pauli Murray, a 1944 graduate whose legal theories influenced the landmark school desegregation case *Brown vs. Board of Education*, argued by future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall. In 1971, Murray also wrote then-President Richard Nixon, mostly tongue in cheek, to suggest Nixon make her the first woman on the high court.

Black women, Marchbanks-Owens points out, have been the backbone of historically of social justice movements. But they've barely been visible. And that's why it's so meaningful to her that a Black woman will soon be elevated to the Supreme Court.

"It's just something I never thought I would see," she says. "And it definitely matters."

Marchbanks-Owens, 26, is one of many Black women who've been buoyed by President Joe Biden's pledge to nominate a Black woman to the court. Like them, though, she's also disheartened by talk from the likes of Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas and Roger Wicker of Mississippi, who've sought to diminish the appointment as discriminating against white people.

These critics have it backward, Marchbanks-Owens says, arguing Black women have had to work harder every step of the way to succeed in an overwhelmingly white profession. The Black woman Biden ends up appointing, she says, "is going to probably be more qualified than anyone else on the bench because ... we have learned to be the most qualified. To be able to have a role or a seat at the table, you have to be better."

Jasmine Armand agrees. The first-year bankruptcy attorney at a Chicago law firm doesn't want anyone to think: "She got this job because she is Black." Rather, says Armand, "She got this job because she is remarkable and exceptionally qualified for this role — as countless Black women before her have been."

Armand said she's been inspired to think about Malcolm X, and his view that "the least protected person in America is the Black woman. I continue to see how true it is. Oftentimes we're hard-pressed to see who truly advocates and cares for Black women, besides perhaps other Black women. We are worthy of protection, admiration, investment and encouragement. It will be great to see the appointee receive this and also be in the position to give that to others."

Indeed, for Armand, 29, the ascension of a Black woman to the highest court will have a crucial impact in terms of people's access to justice, which "is not just getting people connected to resources," she says. "It's, 'Who is the arbiter of justice?'"

In interviews, women of different ages echoed a common theme: Just seeing a Black woman on the court would have an incalculable effect, especially for young people, like seeing Barack Obama become the first Black president, or watching Kamala Harris rise to the vice presidency. Jemelleh Coes, director of teacher leadership for Mount Holyoke College, thought of the impact on her two young daughters, 9 and 2.

"I am raising them to be as bold as they can be, as thoughtful as they can be, as caring as they can be, as empowering as they can be," said Coes, 36, who lives in Athens, Georgia. "To be able to look at other women in positions of power for them is paramount." She noted how her 9-year-old had been transfixed

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 61 of 70

when watching Stacey Abrams' 2018 campaign for governor. "I see the way that they look at Black women in power," she said. "It's very different from the ways they look at power in general."

California mother Jakki McIntosh, 35, hoped that the appointment would reinforce what she tells her daughters, ages 16, 15 and 11. "A lot of times with my girls, I tell them that you can basically be anything that you want to be, but at the same time, it's like, 'Yeah, we hear you Mom, but we don't necessarily see that.'"

A Black woman on the Supreme Court would push back against the idea that they are somehow less capable, said McIntosh, who lives in Colusa, California and also has a 3-year-old son. "(Often) women are looked at as lesser than, and very unfortunately, Black women seem to be looked at as even less than that," she says.

Jessica Davis, a first-year student at the University of Georgia Law School, remembers wanting as a child to become president. But her teacher thought differently: "I remember my teacher telling me to be more realistic, and to perhaps think about something else, something that was easier and more, as she put it, up my alley."

"Just thinking about seeing a Black woman on the Supreme Court, the same court that upheld slavery with the Dred Scott decision, the same court that said that we could be 'separate but equal' is just amazing."

Back at Howard's law school campus in Washington, D.C., Marchbanks-Owens, too, thought of the nation's legacy of slavery when she heard of Biden's plans to nominate a Black woman and of her great-great grandmother, who she says was born into slavery on a South Carolina plantation.

"When I think about a Black woman on the bench and when I think just about the legacy of enslavement, it's very profound to me," she says.

She also recalls her grandparents watching in amazement when Obama became president, "telling me they never thought they would see something like that in their lifetime. And in my lifetime, I've seen that, I've seen Kamala Harris become vice president, and now I'm going to see someone who looks like me become a justice on the Supreme Court."

In fact, Marchbanks-Owens already knows what she'd say to the new justice.

"I think your story is just incredible," she says she'd tell her. "And I'm happy to be living in a time where something like this is possible for someone who looks like me. ... And I would love to work under you. I would love to learn and be mentored by you."

Ukrainians not panicking as West ramps up invasion rhetoric

By INNA VARENYTSIA, LORI HINNANT and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

AVDIIVKA, Ukraine (AP) — In the trenches of eastern Ukraine, across the tense contact lines with Russia-backed separatists, a soldier's calm verges on numbness after a sniper's bullet recently killed one of the 50 or so men under his command.

It is the sort of thing that has happened from time to time in the eight years Ivan Skuratovskyi's been deployed up and down the 250-mile (400-kilometer) front line — a member of the Ukrainian army in a war he never imagined when he enlisted in 2013. He grieves, but death and conflict have become an inescapable part of his life.

"The war has put pressure on me and broken my soul," said Skuratovskyi, 30. "I'm becoming more cold-hearted, some would say dead-hearted. I have a tough sense of humor. It's a protective reaction to extreme situations."

U.S. officials say that with more than 100,000 Russian troops nearing Ukraine's eastern and northern borders, the threat of a Russian invasion is more serious than others that have come and gone during the years of fighting between the Russia-backed rebels and Ukrainian forces.

The White House national security advisor warned that an all-out invasion could happen any day, and President Joe Biden said "it would be wise" for Americans other than essential diplomats to leave Ukraine and ordered the deployment of 1,700 troops to neighboring Poland.

But even as the rhetoric out of Washington ramps up, a sense of calm prevails in the Eastern European

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 62 of 70

nation among soldiers and citizens alike, from relatives of those in the trenches on up to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who campaigned on a promise of ending the drawn-out conflict and has repeatedly called for diplomacy to carry the day.

"We are defending our country and are on our own territory. Our patience can have an impact on provocations, when we don't respond to provocations but behave with great dignity," Zelenskyy said Tuesday in an appearance with French President Emmanuel Macron.

While waves of Ukrainians fled their homes during 2014 fighting that saw Russia annex the Crimean Peninsula and back separatists in the eastern province of Donbas, so far people are staying put in the areas closest to the Russian troop movements.

The calm expressed by Zelenskyy and others owes in part, perhaps, to the fact that they have little control over the situation before them.

Ukraine is vastly overmatched by Russia not only in troop numbers but in arms and equipment, such as the fighter jets poised nearby and the naval ships maneuvering off the coast. Nothing NATO countries have provided to Ukraine — from anti-tank weapons sent by Britain to the 5,000 helmets that came from Germany — comes close to evening the scales.

American officials have said explicitly that no U.S. troops will fight in Ukraine.

Macron, for his part, spoke Tuesday not of a looming possible invasion but of a tense standoff that could go on for "weeks and months to come."

U.S. officials believe the danger is much more immediate — and haven't been shy about sounding the alarm.

"Our effort is to ensure we're informing the American public and the global community of the seriousness of this threat," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said last week when asked about the difference in tone between Washington and Kyiv. "I can't speak to the motivation or the reasoning for the comments of Ukrainian leadership."

The two governments share the same motivation, averting an invasion, but may see themselves as speaking to different audiences.

The White House believes that spotlighting concerns about possible military action will dissuade the Kremlin from following through on it, according to a senior administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Biden and his advisers have calculated that publicly airing those concerns, as well as intelligence details, helps make the case to European allies for sanctions in the event that Russian President Vladimir Putin orders a further invasion of Ukraine, the official said.

Zelenskyy, meanwhile, is balancing military concerns against fears that alarming rhetoric could wreck Ukraine's economy with hardly a shot fired.

The dueling messaging stems from differing assessments by the two countries as to Russia's intentions, said Daniel Fried, who advised the George W. Bush administration on former Soviet nations and served as ambassador to Poland.

"Zelenskyy looks to be thinking about a longer term," he said. "He seems to be worried about the effect of a prolonged crisis on the Ukrainian economy. And he may feel that Putin is less likely to invade than he is to try to use the threat of invasion to grind down the Ukrainian economy" and scare away foreign investors.

"So he wants to portray a sense of, 'We can get through this,'" Fried said.

Zelenskyy's administration is also keenly aware that Ukrainian public opinion is divided on how to handle the situation, especially when it comes to concessions toward pro-Russia separatists in the east.

Memories are still raw: Yuri Maskirenko, one of those forced to leave Crimea after the Russian occupation, said he thinks Ukraine shouldn't negotiate with Russia over the status of Ukraine's eastern Donbas region or else "people will come out into the streets and this will not lead to anything good."

From his front-line vantage point, Skuratovskyi, who recently reupped with the army for another two years, agrees with a diplomacy-focused approach and said he sees no armed solution to the standoff.

"Weapons won't solve any problem here," Skuratovskyi said.

He talks regularly by video call from his current post in the town of Avdiivka, Donbas province, with his wife, Maryna, on the other side of the country in the seaside city of Mykolaiv, near Moldova. Maryna said her worst moment came in 2014 when an explosion went off while he was on the line with her. Sometimes she has thought he might not make it home alive.

But while she and friends in Mykolaiv talk about the possibility of war, none of them are panicked. She yearns for the conflict to end and to finally be able to make a home with her husband, who has been deployed for nearly his entire adult life.

"Vanya would tell me if something was going to happen," she said, using an affectionate nickname for her husband. "Since he doesn't, I'm calm about the situation."

French cave tells new story about Neanderthals, early humans

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — A hillside dwelling overlooking the picturesque Rhone Valley in southern France proved irresistible for our ancestors, attracting both Neanderthals and modern humans long before the latter were thought to have reached that part of Europe, a new study suggests.

In a paper published Wednesday by the journal *Science Advances*, researchers from Europe and the United States described finding fossilized homo sapiens remains and tools sandwiched between those of Neanderthals in the Mandrin Grotto, named after an 18th-century French folk hero.

"The findings provide archaeological evidence that these hominin cousins may have coexisted in the same region of Europe during the same time period," the team said.

Using new techniques, the authors dated some of the human remains to about 54,000 years ago — almost 10,000 years earlier than previous finds in Europe, with one exception in Greece.

"This significantly deepens the known age of the colonization of Europe by modern humans," said Michael Petraglia, an expert on prehistory at Germany's Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.

Petraglia, who was not involved in the study, said it had major implications for understanding the spread of modern humans and our interactions with the Neanderthals.

The researchers said they spent more than 30 years carefully sifting through layers of dirt inside the cave, which is 140 kilometers (87 miles) north of the French Mediterranean city of Marseille. They discovered hundreds of thousands of artifacts that they were able to attribute to either Neanderthals or modern humans. These included advanced stone tools known as "points" that were used by homo sapiens — our closest ancestors — to cut or scrape and as spear tips.

Similar tools from almost the exact same period have been found some 3,000 kilometers (nearly 1,900 miles) away, in present-day Lebanon, indicating that modern humans with a common culture may have traveled across the Mediterranean Sea, said Ludovic Slimak, one of the lead authors of the new study.

While the researchers found no evidence of cultural exchanges between the Neanderthals and modern humans who alternated in the cave, the rapid succession of occupants is in itself significant, they said. In one case, the cave changed hands in the space of about a year, said Slimak.

Katerina Harvati, a professor of paleoanthropology at the University of Tuebingen, Germany, who was not involved in the study, said the findings upend the idea that most of the European continent was the exclusive domain of Neanderthals until 45,000 years ago.

However homo sapiens' first venture into the region wasn't particularly successful, she noted.

"Mandrin modern humans seem to have only survived for a very brief period of time and were replaced again by Neanderthals for several millennia," she said.

Slimak, an archaeologist at the University of Toulouse, said the findings at Mandrin suggest the Rhone River may have been a key link between the Mediterranean coast and continental Europe.

"We are dealing with one of the most important natural migration corridors of all the ancient world," he said.

He and his colleagues expect to publish several further significant findings based on the mountain of data collected from the cave. Slimak said a steady supply of sand carried in by the local Mistral winds has

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 64 of 70

helped preserve a rich trove of treasures that rivals other famous archaeological sites.

"Mandrin is like a kind of Neanderthalian Pompeii," he said.

Shaun White's last Olympics hurrah comes in halfpipe final

By NOAH TRISTER AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — NBC can breathe a sigh of relief as Shaun White has reached the final of the halfpipe.

The snowboarding star's finale is set for Thursday night in prime time, although it almost happened earlier. He fell on his first attempt in qualifying but rebounded on his next run to avoid elimination.

With Mikaela Shiffrin struggling on the ski slopes — and sounding uncertain about competing in the super-G — White could end up as the only major headliner Thursday night. He'll suffice, though, especially after the three-time gold medalist announced recently that this would be his last competition.

If Shiffrin competes, the super-G will also be compelling as she tries to rebound after lasting about 15 seconds combined in her first two races.

Here are some things to watch (all times Eastern):

LAST HURRAH

The 35-year-old White first won Olympic gold 16 years ago. He is not considered a favorite this time, and he said last weekend this would be the end of his career.

He's dealt with an ankle injury and COVID-19 this season, although it's certainly possible for an athlete his age to win gold in snowboarding. Lindsey Jacobellis and Benjamin Karl, both 36, have won for the U.S. and Austria in snowboardcross and parallel giant slalom.

The men's halfpipe final is scheduled to start at 8:30 p.m. NBC plans to provide live coverage.

ALPINE SKIING

Shiffrin failed to finish her first run in each of her first two races — the giant slalom and slalom. If she competes in the super-G, she would be considered a contender. She finished third in the world championship last year in that event, but the first two disappointments at the Beijing Games clearly took a toll on her.

"It's not the end of the world and it's so stupid to care this much, but I feel I have to question a lot now," she said.

The super-G combines the speed of the downhill with the more precise turns of the giant slalom. NBC is carrying it live in prime time. It starts at 10 p.m.

SINGLE ELIMINATION

The U.S. women's hockey team faces the Czech Republic in the quarterfinals, airing live on USA Network at 10:55 p.m. and NBC at 11:35.

The American men open group play against China. That's live at 8 a.m. on USA Network.

BACK FOR MORE

Therese Johaug of Norway won the first gold medal of the Beijing Games in the skiathlon. She has a chance for another in the 10-kilometer race, which will be aired live early in the morning (2:25 a.m.) on USA Network, as well as in the afternoon on NBC.

Also trying for multiple golds this year is Dutch speedskater Irene Schouten, who won the 3,000 meters already and has the 5,000 coming up. Martina Sablikova of the Czech Republic in 2010 was the last woman to sweep the 3,000 and 5,000.

The 5,000 will be on USA Network between 10:30 a.m. and 2:45 p.m.

ALSO OF NOTE

Germany tries for a third straight title in the team luge relay, which both NBC and USA Network will broadcast. ... USA Network plans to show the mixed team aerials event live in the morning, with NBC airing an encore presentation in prime time.

Olympic medals in team figure skating delayed by legal issue

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 65 of 70

BEIJING (AP) — The winners in the team figure skating competition at the Beijing Olympics still have not received their medals two days later because of what the IOC said Wednesday were “legal issues.”

The ceremony to award the Russian team the gold medals, the United States silver and Japan bronze was pulled from its scheduled slot late Tuesday.

Reporters asked the Kremlin about the issue later Wednesday amid speculation that the gold medals won by six Russian skaters could be at risk.

“Let’s, for the sake of understanding, wait for some explanations either from our sports officials or from the IOC,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

International Olympic Committee spokesman Mark Adams earlier cited “legal consultation” required with the governing body of skating. Details of the case were not specified though could involve suspected athlete ineligibility or a doping rules violation.

“We have athletes that have won medals involved,” Adams said at the daily news briefing.

The team event was contested over three days between Friday and Monday and included two elements in each of men’s, women’s, pairs and ice dance categories.

The standout performance was 15-year-old Russian skater Kamila Valieva becoming the first female skater to land a quad jump at an Olympics. American Vincent Zhou tested positive for COVID-19 after his free skate Sunday.

If any athlete and team were disqualified or had their results nullified, an appeal would likely follow, which could further delay the medals presentation.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport has set up an office in Beijing to hear urgent cases during the Winter Games.

Some skaters in the men’s competition are due to finish their events Thursday and leave China soon after.

“Everyone is doing absolutely everything that the situation can be resolved as soon as possible,” Adams said, though he cautioned “as you know, legal issues can sometimes drag on.”

Canada placed fourth Monday and would be in line to be upgraded onto the podium.

EXPLAINER: How to get up to \$3,600 per child in tax credit

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Millions of Americans who have never filed a tax return will need to do so this year in order to claim what’s coming to them under the enhanced child tax credit.

Previously, only people who earned enough money to owe income taxes could qualify for the full credit.

But as part of the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, President Joe Biden expanded the program, increasing the payments to up to \$3,600 annually for each child aged 5 or under and \$3,000 for those who are ages 6 to 17.

The monthly payments have amounted to \$300 for each child 5 and younger and \$250 for those between 5 and 17.

The government began to send the payments out — an overall \$93 billion — on a monthly basis starting last July. Now, there are an additional six months’ worth of payments waiting to be claimed. And some families haven’t collected any of the benefits they’re due yet. In all, an estimated \$193 billion is yet to be claimed.

The only way to receive that money is to file a tax return.

Some questions and answers about who’s eligible for the credit and how to get it:

WHO GETS THE CHILD TAX CREDIT?

More than 36 million families received the advanced payments in December alone, which marked the last month that advanced monthly payments were sent to households. Families qualify for the full credit if their 2021 adjusted gross income was at or below \$150,000 for married couples filing a joint return, or \$75,000 for single-filer parents.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I QUALIFY AND WHAT IF I DON’T OWE TAXES?

Whether or not a family owes tax money or has filed taxes before, they will need to file a return to get

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 66 of 70

all or the rest of their money.

Eligible families that didn't receive any advance child tax credit payments during 2021 can still claim the full amount of the child tax credit on their federal tax return. Those families that are unsure of whether they've received payments, or potentially received paper checks that went uncashed, can visit the Child Tax Credit Update Portal, to see how much of the credit they should have received.

Additionally, families that received payments should have received a "Letter 6419, 2021 advance CTC" notice, which includes information on the amount of advance payments families have received and tax information for filing purposes.

However, the IRS has said that some people may have received incorrect information on their forms. The portal can help people who want to confirm the correct amount they should have received. Despite any inconsistencies in documentation, the IRS advises that taxpayers should keep the letter, and any other IRS communications about advance payments, with their tax records.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO FILE?

The IRS urges individuals to file their taxes electronically to process forms quicker, and provides links on the agency website to free filing sites like GetYourRefund.org, which helps families earning less than about \$66,000 a year file their taxes for free. The organization partners with IRS-certified Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, and provides free help in English and Spanish. Another option is MyFreeTaxes.com, which provides virtual assistance to people who make \$58,000 or less to file their federal and state taxes for free. That service is offered through the United Way.

The IRS also has a tool to help individuals identify other free file sites that offer tax filing help.

WHAT IF I LIVE OUTSIDE THE 50 STATES?

While the coronavirus relief package included child tax credit benefits for residents of Puerto Rico, they were not eligible to receive the advance monthly payments. Instead, Puerto Rican residents can receive the full amount of child tax credit that they are eligible for by filing a federal income tax return this year. Additionally, residents of American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam or the U.S. Virgin Islands may be eligible for the full child tax credit payments, but they will need to contact their local U.S. territory tax agency.

WHO CAN HELP ME SORT THIS OUT?

The IRS has launched a website, called ChildTaxCredit.gov, which lists criteria that filers must meet in order to receive the full credit. Additionally, the federal agency will begin offering walk-in assistance with IRS volunteers in limited locations for individuals who need help filing their taxes, beginning Feb. 12.

Thirty-five tax assistance centers around the country will be open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the second Saturday of the next four months.

The tax filing deadline is April 18.

New COVID surge batters Afghanistan's crumbling health care

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Only five hospitals in Afghanistan still offer COVID-19 treatment, with 33 others having been forced to close in recent months for lack of doctors, medicines and even heating. This comes as the economically devastated nation is hit by a steep rise in the number of reported coronavirus cases.

At Kabul's only COVID-19 treatment hospital, staff can only heat the building at night because of lack of fuel, even as winter temperatures drop below freezing during the day. Patients are bundled under heavy blankets. Its director, Dr. Mohammed Gul Liwal, said they need everything, from oxygen to medicine supplies.

The facility, called the Afghan Japan Communicable Disease Hospital, has 100 beds. The COVID-19 ward is almost always full as the virus rages. Before late January, the hospital was getting one or two new coronavirus patients a day. In the past two weeks, 10 to 12 new patients have been admitted daily, Liwal said.

"The situation is worsening day by day," said Liwal, speaking inside a chilly conference room. Since the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 67 of 70

Taliban takeover of the country six months ago, hospital employees have received only one month's salary, in December.

Afghanistan's health care system, which survived for nearly two decades almost entirely on international donor funding, has been devastated since the Taliban returned to power in mid-August, amid the chaotic end to the 20-year U.S.-led intervention. Afghanistan's economy crashed after nearly \$10 billion in assets abroad were frozen and financial aid to the government was largely halted.

The health system's collapse has only worsened the humanitarian crisis in the country. Roughly 90% of the population has fallen below the poverty level, and with families barely able to afford food, at least a million children are threatened with starvation.

The omicron variant is hitting Afghanistan hard, Liwal said, but he admits it is just a guess because the country is still waiting for kits that test specifically for the variant. They were supposed to arrive before the end of last month, said Public Health Ministry spokesman Dr. Javid Hazhir. The World Health Organization now says Afghanistan will get the kits by the end of February.

The organization says that between Jan. 30 and Feb. 5, public laboratories in Afghanistan tested 8,496 samples, of which nearly half, were positive for COVID-19. Those numbers translate into a 47.4% positivity rate, the world health body said.

As of Tuesday, WHO recorded 7,442 deaths and close to 167,000 infections since the start of the pandemic almost two years ago. In the absence of large-scale testing, these relatively low figures are believed to be a result of extreme under-reporting.

Meanwhile, the new Taliban administration says it is trying to push vaccines on a skeptical population that often sees them as dangerous.

With 3.2 million vaccine doses in stock, Hazhir said the administration has launched a campaign through mosques, clerics and mobile vaccine clinics to get more people vaccinated. Currently barely 27% of Afghanistan's 38 million people have been vaccinated, most with the single-dose Johnson and Johnson vaccine.

Getting Afghans to follow even a minimum of safety protocols, like mask wearing and social distancing, has been near impossible, Liwal said. For many struggling to feed their families, COVID-19 ranks low on their list of fears, he said. The Public Health Ministry has run awareness campaigns about the value of masks and social distancing, but most people aren't listening.

Even in the Afghan Japan hospital, where signs warn people that mask wearing is mandatory, most people in the dimly lit halls were without masks. In the intensive care unit, where half of the 10 patients in the ward were on ventilators, doctors and attendants wore only surgical masks and gowns for protection as they moved from bed to bed.

The head of the unit, Dr. Naeemullah, said he needs more ventilators and, even more urgently, he needs doctors trained on using ventilators. He is overstretched and rarely paid, but feels duty-bound to serve his patients. Liwal said several doctors have left Afghanistan.

Most of the hospital's 200 employees come to work regularly despite months without pay.

In December, a U.S.-based charity affiliated with Johns Hopkins University provided two months funding, which gave the hospital staff their December salary and a promise of another paycheck in January. The public health ministry is now in negotiations with WHO to take over the cost of running the hospital through June, said Liwal.

Liwal said other Kabul hospitals used to be able to take some patients, but now no longer have the resources. With a lack of funds and staff leaving, 33 facilities offering COVID-19 treatment nationwide have shut down, he said.

The Afghan Japan hospital's only microbiologist, Dr. Faridullah Qazizada, earned less than \$1,000 a month before the Taliban took power. He has received only one month's salary since August, he said. He says his equipment and facilities are barely adequate.

"The whole health system has been destroyed," he said.

Column: Shiffrin's disappointment stirs lessons from Biles

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 68 of 70

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Columnist

BEIJING (AP) — When Mikaela Shiffrin careened off the course, another expected gold medal slipping away before she hardly got started, the announcers from NBC let her have it.

“One of the bigger shockers in Olympic alpine skiing history,” play-by-play man Dan Hicks bellowed.

“Almost a rookie mistake,” analyst Ted Ligety, a two-time gold medalist himself, chimed in harshly.

The cameras homed in on Shiffrin, who clicked out of her skis and plopped down on the artificial snow — head bowed, arms resting on bent knees — as she tried to process another unimaginable outcome in the first run of the slalom.

NBC seemed determined to document every single one of Shiffrin’s tears, to the point of failing to even show the next few skiers that took to the treacherous course known as Ice River.

In a different era, AKA before last summer, this sort of coverage would have been accepted, almost expected.

But times have changed since Simone Biles bared her mental-health issues to the world at the Tokyo Games, and other athletes have followed her lead.

In that emerging context, it wasn’t surprising at all for social media to quickly turn its wrath on the network that had banked so much of its coverage on Shiffrin being one of the biggest stars.

“Some really shameful coverage by NBC of Michaela Schiffrin,” one person tweeted. “Just pure trauma porn for their ratings instead of treating her like a human.”

“NBC NEEDS TO STOP TORTURING MIKAELA SCHIFFRIN!!!” another viewer posted.

All of which raises some interesting dilemmas:

Is it still OK to criticize a much-hyped athlete who fails to meet expectations at a huge event such as the Winter Olympics?

How long should we linger on their disappointment before it looks more like ambulance chasing than legitimate coverage?

These are the sort of questions that journalists have long grappled with, but Biles’ ordeal in Tokyo — where the world’s greatest gymnast dropped out of one event after another, not feeling she was mentally prepared to compete — has added a whole new layer to the discussion.

Athletes from tennis star Naomi Osaka to NFL receiver Calvin Ridley to swimming powerhouse Caeleb Dressel have openly addressed their fragile mental states and the emotional toll it takes to compete at the highest levels.

But journalists, whether we work for a network that pays billions to televise the Olympics or represent an athlete’s hometown newspaper, have a job to do.

We must tell the story openly, honestly, without the glare of stars in our eyes.

In fairness to NBC, the network surely would’ve been accused of coddling one of its most valued Olympics assets if the coverage had quickly cut away after Shiffrin tumbling out of the slalom after just a few seconds — a result even more shocking because she did pretty much the very same thing in her first event of these Games, the giant slalom.

Shiffrin was certainly gracious, honest and revealing in her interview with NBC, just as she was during a long, tedious journey through the mixed zone, where the rest of the world’s media was gathered.

“Pretty much everything makes me second-guess the last 15 years,” Shiffrin told NBC’s Todd Lewis. “Everything I thought I knew about my own skiing and slalom and racing mentality.”

She was the first to concede that these Winter Games have not in any way gone as she had hoped and planned. NBC’s coverage, even if teetered on exploitive, in no way changes that reality.

“It feels like a really big letdown,” the two-time Olympic gold medalist said, her cheeks moist with tears.

No matter how much pressure we in the media put on athletes, most will tell you it’s nowhere near the amount of pressure that they put on themselves.

Shiffrin was feeling that burden before she ever climbed the mountain, knowing that it was essentially gold-or-bust for a skier who had become about as automatic as the tides.

Yet at these Olympics, in her two best events, she’s managed to stay on the course for a total of less

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 69 of 70

than 20 seconds.

"It really feels like a lot of work for nothing," she said, her words oozing with heartbreak.

In retrospect, Shiffrin was not in the best place mentally or physically coming into Beijing.

She's still reeling from the death of her father, Jeff, who passed away two years ago from a severe head injury after an accident at the family's Colorado home.

Not to mention, her training was hampered by a back problem in October and November, which was followed by a bout with COVID-19 in late December.

Still, no one expected this.

Least of all, Shiffrin.

"I've never been in this position before," she said, "and I don't know how to handle it."

Those are lessons she'll have to learn in the days and weeks and lifetime to come.

In the meantime, those of us who document these journeys for the rest of the world must look into ways we can do our jobs with more compassion and empathy, without scrimping on the painful parts of the story.

Shiffrin won't be the last athlete to fall.

We can't catch them, but perhaps we can make the landing a little less painful.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 10, the 41st day of 2022. There are 324 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 10, 1962, the Soviet Union exchanged captured American U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Rudolf Abel, a Soviet spy held by the United States.

On this date:

In 1763, Britain, Spain and France signed the Treaty of Paris, ending the Seven Years' War (also known as the French and Indian War in North America).

In 1840, Britain's Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg (KOH'-borg) and Gotha (GAH'-thuh).

In 1936, Nazi Germany's Reichstag passed a law investing the Gestapo secret police with absolute authority, exempt from any legal review.

In 1959, a major tornado tore through the St. Louis area, killing 21 people and causing heavy damage.

In 1967, the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, dealing with presidential disability and succession, was ratified as Minnesota and Nevada adopted it.

In 1981, eight people were killed when a fire set by a busboy broke out at the Las Vegas Hilton hotel-casino.

In 1989, Ron Brown was elected the first Black chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

In 1992, boxer Mike Tyson was convicted in Indianapolis of raping Desiree Washington, a Miss Black America contestant. (Tyson served three years in prison.) "Roots" author Alex Haley died in Seattle at age 70.

In 1996, world chess champion Garry Kasparov lost the first game of a match in Philadelphia against an IBM computer dubbed "Deep Blue." (Kasparov ended up winning the match, 4 games to 2; he was defeated by Deep Blue in a rematch the following year.)

In 2005, North Korea boasted publicly for the first time that it possessed nuclear weapons.

In 2015, NBC announced it was suspending Brian Williams as "Nightly News" anchor and managing editor for six months without pay for misleading the public about his experiences covering the Iraq War. Jon Stewart announced he would step down as host of "The Daily Show" on Comedy Central later in the year.

In 2020, U.S. health officials confirmed the first case of the novel coronavirus among the hundreds of people who'd been evacuated from China to military bases in the United States; it was among the 13 confirmed cases in the U.S. Britain declared the new coronavirus a "serious and imminent threat to public

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 218 ~ 70 of 70

health" and said people with the virus could now be forcibly quarantined.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama, under fierce election-year fire, abruptly abandoned his stand that religious organizations had to pay for birth control for workers, demanding that insurance companies step in to provide the coverage instead.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump, fresh off patching up ties with China, reassured Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the White House that the U.S. would defend its close ally. Retired Lt. Gen. Harold G. "Hal" Moore, the American hero known for saving most of his men in the 1965 Battle of Ia Drang during the Vietnam War, died in Auburn, Alabama, at age 94. Billionaire businessman Mike Ilitch, who founded the Little Caesars pizza empire before buying the Detroit Red Wings and the Detroit Tigers, died at age 87.

One year ago: At the Senate impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump, Democrats presented security footage, social media videos, police radio calls and Trump's own Twitter posts to argue that he stoked the flames of violence, incited the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol and failed to act quickly to send help or call his supporters off. A new government study found that wearing two masks could be better than one in protecting against coronavirus spread; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said lab researchers found that particles were blocked twice as much when two masks were worn. Larry Flynt, who turned his raunchy Hustler magazine into an empire while fighting numerous First Amendment court battles, died at 78 in Los Angeles.

Today's Birthdays: Opera singer Leontyne Price is 95. Actor Robert Wagner is 92. Singer Roberta Flack is 85. Singer Jimmy Merchant (Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers) is 82. Rock musician Bob Spalding (The Ventures) is 75. Olympic gold-medal swimmer Mark Spitz is 72. Walt Disney Co. executive Robert Iger is 71. Rock musician and composer Cory Lerios (Pablo Cruise) is 71. World Golf Hall of Famer Greg Norman is 67. Actor Kathleen Beller is 66. Country singer Lionel Cartwright is 62. Movie director Alexander Payne is 61. ABC News correspondent George Stephanopoulos is 61. Political commentator Glenn Beck is 58. Actor Laura Dern is 55. Writer-producer-director Vince Gilligan (TV: "Breaking Bad") is 55. Country singer Dude Mowrey is 50. Actor Jason Olive is 50. Actor Elizabeth Banks is 48. Actor Julia Pace Mitchell is 44. Reggaeton singer Don Omar is 44. Actor Uzo Aduba is 41. Actor Stephanie Beatriz is 41. Actor Max Brown is 41. Actor Barry Sloane is 41. Rock singer Eric Dill is 40. Actor Trevante Rhodes is 32. Actor Emma Roberts is 31. Actor Makenzie Vega is 28. Actor Chloe Grace Moretz is 25. Actor Yara Shahidi is 22.