

# Groton Daily Independent

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“When you are kind to others, it not only changes you, it changes the world.”

HAROLD KUSHNER

## School 2 hours late

Due to the road conditions, the Groton Area School District will be opening 2 hours late on Wednesday, March 30, 2022. There will be no 8:30 AM preschool. OST will be opening at 7:00 AM.

## UpComing Events

### Friday, April 1

FFA CDE at SDSU, Brookings

School Breakfast: Stuffed Bagels

School Lunch: Fish Sandwich, Puzzle Tots

Senior Menu: Lemon baked fish, rice pilaf, California blend veggies, fruit crisp, whole wheat bread.

### Saturday, April 2

ACT testing in Groton, 8 a.m. to Noon

### Sunday, April 3

2 p.m. and 5 p.m., POPS Concert

3:30 p.m.: GHS FCA Meeting: “The Chosen” Watch Party at Kim Weber’s house, 501 E 16th Ave

Emmanuel: 9 a.m. Worship with communion, 10:15 a.m. Sunday school, 10:15 a.m. 1st Communion Class, 7 p.m., Choir

St. John’s: 8 a.m. Bible Study, Worship with communion at 9 a.m. at St. John’s and 11 a.m. at Zion, 10 a.m. Sunday School

### Monday, April 4

Emmanuel: 6:30 a.m.. Bible Study

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Cheese sticks, marinara sauce, corn.

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, boiled potato, squash, fruit, whole wheat bread.

### Tuesday, April 5

7 p.m.: City Council Meeting

St. John’s: 1 p.m.: Ladies Aid LWML

School Breakfast: French toast sticks.

School Lunch: Tangereine chicken, rice.

Senior Menu: Hamburger with bun, oven roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, fruit, ice cream sundae.

## Truss Pros Help Wanted

Truss Pros in Britton is looking to hire a CDL driver to deliver trusses in the tri-state area. Home every night. Competitive wage! Full benefit package!

To apply call 605-277-4937 or go to [www.uslbn.com/careers](http://www.uslbn.com/careers) and search for jobs in Britton, SD.

## OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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

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## 2022 Groton Area Elementary

**Kindergarten Roundup (Screening) for children turning**

**5 on or before September 1, 2022**

**Friday, April 1, 2022**

**If your child is currently attending Junior Kindergarten at Groton Area Elementary school, please DISREGARD this notice. Your teacher will be sending information if necessary.**

**Packets are being sent home this week with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for KG and JK this coming 2022-2023 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet. We do not have all children in our census. Thank you!!!**



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**2021-22 Groton Area Girls Basketball Team:** (front row) Emily Clark, Kennedy Hansen, Alyssa Thaler, Allyssa Locke, Laila Roberts, Brooklyn Hansen, (middle row) Cali Tollifson, Kayla Lehr, Elizabeth Flihs, Jerica Locke, Brooke Gengerke, Talli Wright, Coach Matt Locke, (back row) Coaches Joie Berg and Becky Erickson, Rylee Dunker, Ashley Johnson, Faith Traphagen, Gracie Traphagen, Sydney Leicht, Aspen Johnson, Hollie Frost, Jaedyn Penning, Coach Trent Traphagen. Not pictured: Mia Crank and Emma Kutter. (Photo by Deb Gengerke)



**2021-22 Girls Basketball Letter winners:** (front row) Elizabeth Flihs, Laila Roberts, Alyssa Thaler, Allyssa Locke, Jerica Locke, (back row) Kennedy Hansen, Jaedyn Penning, Faith Traphagen, Aspen Johnson, Gracie Traphagen, Sydney Leicht, Brooklyn Hansen, Brooke Gengerke. (Photo by Deb Gengerke)

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The Girls Basketball Banquet was held Friday evening at the Olive Grove Golf Course. Individual award winners are: (front row) Jerica Locke, Defensive MVP; Sydney Leight, Coaches' Award; Aspen Johnson, Coaches' Award; Gracie Traphagen, NEC Second Team All-Conference and Offensive MVP; (back row) Brooke Gengerke, Hustle and Heart; Allyssa Locke, Academic All-State, Tiger Award, and B103 Senior Game; Alyssa Thaler, Academic All-State and B103 Senior Game. (Photo by Deb Gengerke)

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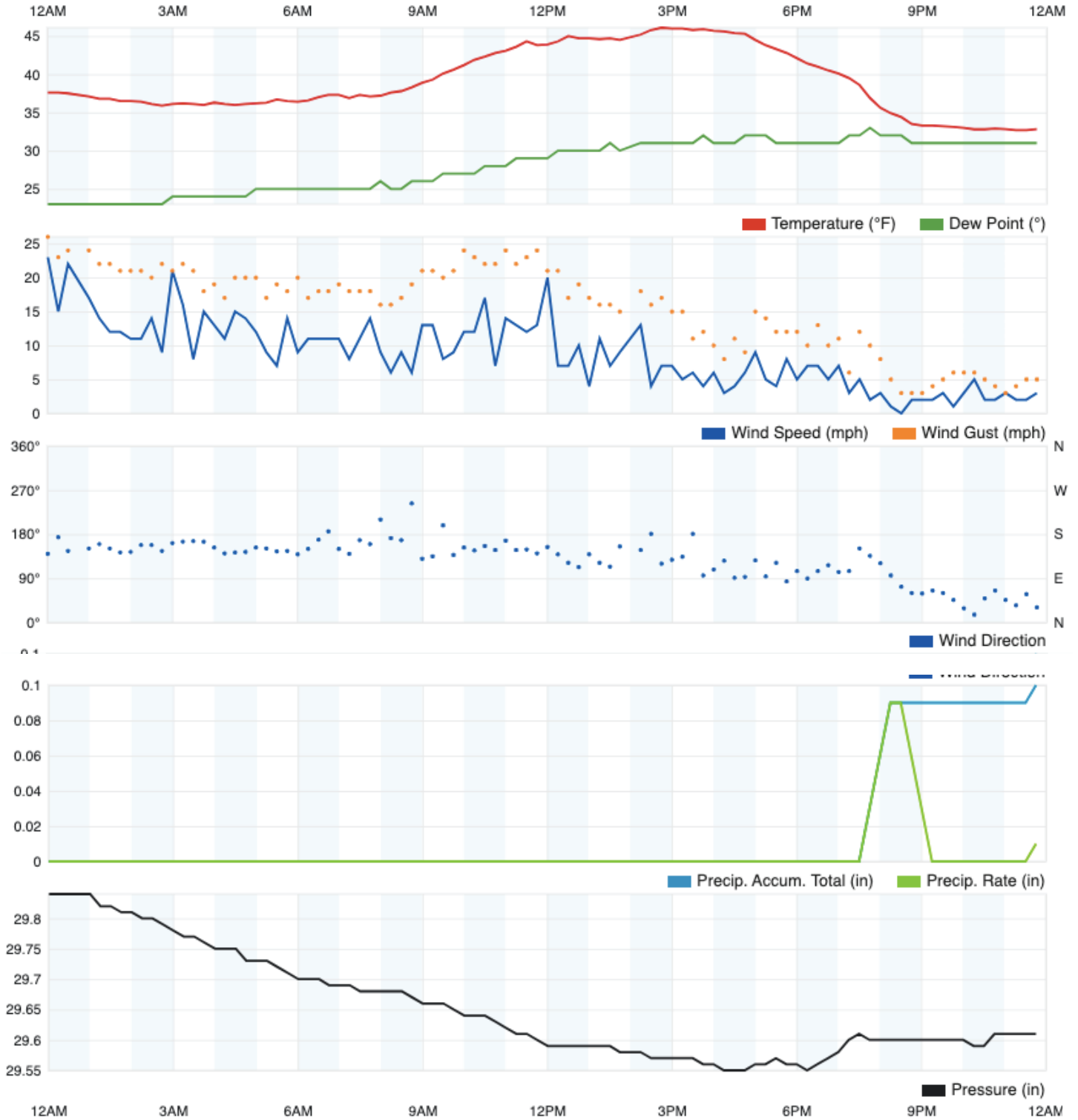


**A nice blanket of snow has and is falling this morning About two inches has fallen.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday
				
Breezy. Mostly Cloudy then Chance Showers	Showers then Rain/Snow and Blustery	Snow Likely and Breezy	Partly Cloudy and Blustery then Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 51 °F	Low: 29 °F	High: 38 °F	Low: 22 °F	High: 44 °F

NWS Aberdeen, SD



## Today's Weather Headlines



*Snow diminishing this morning, & ending this afternoon*

Additional snow of around 1" south central SD, the Sisseton Hills, and north central SD  
Snow may be mixed with **light drizzle or freezing drizzle**



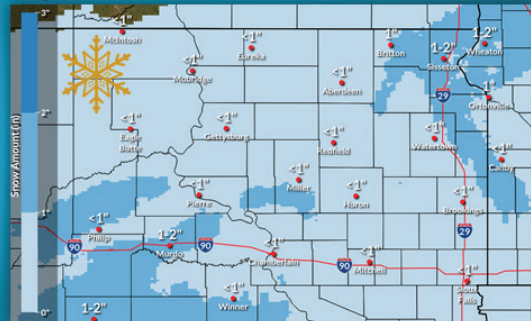
*Breezy Winds*

Wind Gusts 35 to 45 mph  
through the entire day



*COLD*

Highs 35 to 42°  
10 degrees below average for this time of year



Your weather headlines for today include decreasing snow that will come to an end this morning over north central South Dakota, and across the rest of the region this afternoon. Snow may mix with light drizzle or freezing drizzle. Breezy winds out of the north will continue to gust 35 to 45 mph through the day.

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## Today in Weather History

March 30, 1967: Prolonged strong southerly winds of 20 to 30 mph, with gusts to 55 mph, caused areas of blowing dust in eastern South Dakota, reducing visibilities to near zero. A metal roof on lumber shed in Vermillion was blown off. The strong winds also piled ice along the shore of Lake Poinsett to heights of 20ft, causing damage to some cabins along the lakeshore.

March 30, 2009: A major winter storm moved across the Northern Rockies and into the Northern Plains producing from 2 to 22 inches of snowfall along with widespread blizzard conditions. Most area schools and events were canceled. Travel was challenging and not advised. Interstate 29 from Watertown to the North Dakota line and Interstate 90 across Jones and Lyman counties were both closed during the storm. There were several vehicle accidents with no serious injuries reported. However, this storm took a toll on area ranchers as the calving season was underway. Storm total snowfall amounts included; 6 inches in Blunt, Timber Lake, Gettysburg, and Wilmot; 7 inches in Doland and Pierre; 8 inches in Clark, Clear Lake, Leola, Hosmer, Gettysburg, southeast of McIntosh, and Kennebec; 9 inches south of Bristol, Waubay, and near Chelsea; 10 inches in Eagle Butte and Mobridge; 11 inches in Pollock and Turton. Locations with a foot or more of snowfall included; 12 inches in Aberdeen, Britton, Andover, Sisseton, and Faulkton; 13 inches at Lake Sharpe, Roy Lake, and eight miles southwest of Keldron; 14 inches in Miller, Redfield, and Webster; 15 inches near Highmore and near Columbia; 16 inches southwest of Stratford; 17 inches 14 miles northeast of Isabel; 20 inches in McLaughlin, Ree Heights, and 4 miles northeast of Victor with almost 22 inches northwest of Stephan.

March 30, 2010: Scattered light rain showers falling into a very dry air mass were responsible for several heat bursts that occurred across central South Dakota from Pierre to Onida during the evening hours of March 30th. Between 853 pm and 1053 pm CDT, observations from the Pierre airport (KPIR) showed a marked increase in temperature (+10F), a decrease in dew point temperature (-4F), the pressure falls, and gusty surface winds (a peak wind gust of 48 mph). On a farm outside of Pierre, winds were estimated up to 70 mph as some shingles were blown off the roof along with damage to several outbuildings. The Onida airport recorded a peak wind gust of 66 mph in the early evening.

1805: New York's City's Battery Park was strewn with 24-inch snow rollers, from a ferocious storm between the March 26th and March 28th. Snow rollers are natural snowballs that are formed when winds blow over a snow-covered surface.

1823 - A great Northeast storm with hurricane force winds raged from Pennsylvania to Maine. The storm was most severe over New Jersey with high tides, uprooted trees, and heavy snow inland. (David Ludlum)

1848: On six reported occasions, the water flow over the American Falls has been entirely blocked by ice and ceased to fall. But only once has this happened on the much larger Horseshoe Falls.

1899 - A storm which buried Ruby, CO, under 141 inches of snow came to an end. Ruby was an old abandoned mining town on the Elk Mountain Range in the Crested Butte area. (The Weather Channel)

1977 - Hartford, CT, hit 87 degrees to establish a record for the month of March. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm spread heavy snow across the Ohio Valley and Lower Great Lakes Region. Cleveland OH received sixteen inches of snow in 24 hours, their second highest total of record. Winds gusting to 50 mph created 8 to 12 foot waves on Lake Huron. The storm also ushered unseasonably cold air into the south central and southeastern U.S., with nearly one hundred record lows reported in three days. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter-like storm developed in the Central Rockies. Snowfall totals in Utah ranged up to 15 inches at the Brian Head Ski Resort, and winds in Arizona gusted to 59 mph at Show Low. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing along and ahead of a slow moving cold front produced large hail and damaging winds at more than fifty locations across the southeast quarter of the nation, and spawned a tornado which injured eleven persons at Northhampton NC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Low pressure produced heavy snow in central Maine and northern New Hampshire, with up to eight inches reported in Maine. A slow moving Pacific storm system produced 18 to 36 inches of snow in the southwestern mountains of Colorado in three days. Heavier snowfall totals included 31 inches at Wolf Creek Pass and 27 inches at the Monarch Ski Area. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



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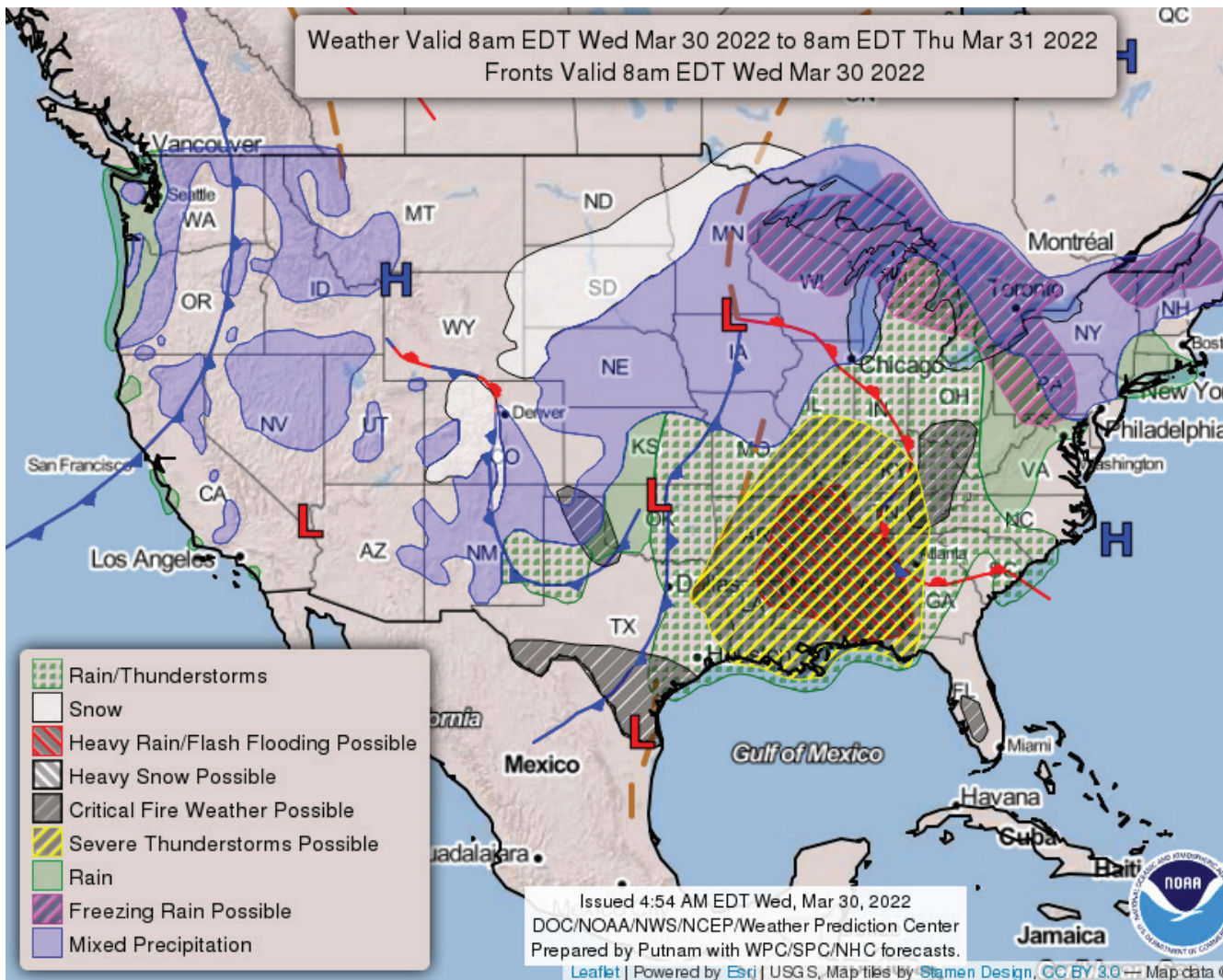
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 46 °F at 2:39 PM**  
**Low Temp: 33 °F at 11:25 PM**  
**Wind: 26 mph at 12:05 AM**  
**Precip: 0.10+**

Day length: 12 hours, 45 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 81 in 1943  
Record Low: -14 in 1969  
Average High: 49°F  
Average Low: 25°F  
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.85  
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.12  
Average Precip to date: 2.02  
Precip Year to Date: 1.09  
Sunset Tonight: 7:59:17 PM  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:12:22 AM



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## WHO'S WATCHING OVER YOU?

C.I. Scofield is recognized as one of the world's most influential theologians, ministers, and writers. For many years the Scofield Reference Bible shaped the thoughts of Christians and their interpretation of the Word of God. But Scofield did not begin his career as a student of Scripture. He intended to be a lawyer.

On one occasion he confessed to a friend, "I was once a drunken lawyer visiting some friends in Saint Louis when I was converted. No one had ever told me anything about the keeping power of Jesus Christ. But I was standing before a picture of Daniel in the den of lions one day, and great hope and faith came into my heart."

"I said, 'Why, there are lions all around me - my old habits and sins - but the God that shut the mouths of the lions for Daniel can shut them for me.'"

And the remainder of his life proves that fact!

The Psalmist wrote, "The Lord will keep you from all harm - He will watch over your life."

The Lord wants to watch over us as though we were the only person in the world. He knows all about us: our strengths and weaknesses, our assets and liabilities, what tempts and threatens us, what troubles and tries us. And, even though He has the same "responsibility" for each of His children, He can pay attention to each one of us as though we were the only one that mattered.

"The Lord will keep you," said the Psalmist. He did not say "might" or "may" or "should" or "could" or "would" keep you if you...Indeed not. He said, "He will keep you!"

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for the assurance that Your protection does not depend upon us, but upon Your grace! Your personal attention is comforting to us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The Lord will keep you from all harm - He will watch over your life. Psalm 121:7

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## 2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)  
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,  
04/07/2022 Groton CDE  
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  
01/29/2023 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

### Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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- Colored ..... \$74.55/year
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## Groton Daily Independent

[www.397news.com](http://www.397news.com)

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This option will grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

- 1 Month ..... \$15.98
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## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

07-22-36-45-47, Mega Ball: 12, Megaplier: 2

(seven, twenty-two, thirty-six, forty-five, forty-seven; Mega Ball: twelve; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$60 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$206 million

### Alleged checkbook thief caught after writing herself a check

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Authorities say a South Dakota woman accused of stealing a checkbook was caught after writing out a check to herself and cashing it.

Sioux Falls police say a man went to the bank to close out the account after the checkbook was taken from an unlocked vehicle over the weekend. He discovered that someone forged his wife's signature on a \$1,600 check.

The check was made out to the 49-year-old suspect.

After reviewing surveillance video, officers were able to track down the woman. She was arrested for possession of stolen property, forgery and identity theft, KELO-TV reported.

The \$1,600 has been recovered.

### SD House committee points to 'in office' clause to clear AG

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press



**Jennifer Boever, whose husband was killed in 2020 by a car driven by South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg, reacts Monday, March 28, 2022, in Pierre, S.D., as a House committee recommends no impeachment charges for Ravensborg.** (AP Photo/

Stephen Groves)

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Republicans on a South Dakota House committee want to clear the state's attorney general of impeachment charges for his actions surrounding a 2020 fatal car crash, arguing that anything wrong he did was not part of his work "in office."

But those pushing to remove Attorney General Jason Ravensborg from office are not giving up before the full House convenes in two weeks.

A House committee concluded its monthslong inquiry late Monday by voting 6-2 on party lines to recommend that Ravensborg, a Republican, face no impeachment charges. Its 21-page majority report repeatedly cites a clause in the state constitution that says officials can be impeached for actions "in office" and argues most of Ravensborg's actions surrounding the crash were not done in his official capacity as attorney general or were not done with "an evil or corrupt motive."

The report clears Ravensborg of anything that would merit impeachment in the September 2020 crash that killed Joseph Boever, who was walking near a rural highway. The attorney general last year pleaded no contest to a pair of misdemeanors and was required

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to pay fines.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem quickly slammed the committee's decision and called on House lawmakers to "do the right thing" when they meet on April 12. It would take two House members to introduce articles of impeachment and a majority of the Republican-controlled House to impeach.

Democrats may also try to convince their Republican colleagues to adopt their minority report recommending impeachment.

"It's up to the individual member to make their own decision," House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican, said.

The committee moved to release parts of the crash investigation that have not been redacted late Monday, but it's not clear when it will be available online. The Legislative Research Council on Tuesday declined requests for the files.

Boever's family decried the committee's decision as failing to hold the attorney general accountable for his death, but the debate in the House will likely hinge on a legal argument over the state's constitution.

South Dakota lawmakers are treading uncommon ground. The Legislature had never investigated impeachment for an elected official, the committee found, and only once, in 1917, launched an impeachment inquiry into a circuit judge.

"The majority concluded a far narrower interpretation of impeachment power than it should have," said Republican Rep. Will Mortenson, who brought articles of impeachment last year.

"It is uncontroverted that the attorney general drove out of his lane, ran off the road and killed an innocent South Dakotan," he added. "And his first call was to the dispatcher where he said this is the attorney general and I was in the middle of the road, which is patently untrue. And so the crimes and the actions surrounding the crimes have been my focus."

But it's not clear whether Mortenson and the governor will be able to persuade lawmakers to impeach. Democrats have shown they are ready to do so, but they hold just eight seats in the 70-member chamber.

In the minority report supported by the two Democrats, they argue that elected officials are always "in office," pointing to how Ravensborg used his official letterhead to issue a statement shortly after the crash. They also argue he committed "malfeasance" by giving "false or misleading" statements to law enforcement during the crash investigation.

"The story changed multiple times," Democratic Rep. Jamie Smith said.

Ravnsborg first reported the crash as a collision with an animal and said he did not realize he struck a man until he returned to the scene the next day. He also did not admit to using his cellphone while driving earlier that night until investigators pressed him. The investigators told the impeachment committee they did not believe Ravensborg, but prosecutors said they were unable to prove that he realized he killed a man the night of the crash.

In a sign that it might be difficult to get enough House votes to impeach, the committee Republicans who voted against impeachment represent a broad swath of a caucus that has rarely been on the same page this year. The report also reveals GOP resentment toward Noem, spending four pages documenting her "interference in the criminal proceedings and the impeachment process."

The attorney general's office on Tuesday said it will launch an investigation into whether state campaign finance disclosure laws were broken by a Noem-aligned organization that sponsored billboards to push state lawmakers to impeach Ravensborg this month. Noem has denied any involvement, and the organization said it has not broken any laws.

Even House Republican leader Rep. Kent Peterson, who supported articles of impeachment last year, voted for the report that cleared Ravensborg. Peterson on Tuesday did not respond to requests for comment.

Other Republican committee members referenced the report when asked to explain the committee's decision.

"Attorney Ravensborg at best underplayed or omitted, and at worst, misrepresented whether he was on his phone during the drive," the report said, but added that those law enforcement interviews were not given "in office" as attorney general.

Mortenson hoped there would be a groundswell for Ravensborg's impeachment, with pressure from vot-

ers on lawmakers.

Nick Nemeč, Boever's cousin, called for voters to contact legislators, but expressed little confidence that Ravensborg will be removed.

"(Boever) has not gotten justice yet," Nemeč said. "I'm quickly losing hope that he will get justice.."

## **South Dakota AG investigating billboards pushing impeachment**

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota attorney general's office on Tuesday said it will launch an investigation into whether state campaign finance disclosure laws were broken by a political organization that sponsored billboards to push state lawmakers to impeach Attorney General Jason Ravensborg.

The attorney general's chief of staff, Tim Bormann, said the office has received two formal complaints about the billboards, and it was still determining how the investigation would be handled given the potential conflict of interest over the billboards.

"A decision has not been made yet on whether those will be handled internally or if they will be handled by an outside entity," Bormann said.

An organization launched to further Gov. Kristi Noem's agenda sponsored the billboards in Sioux Falls this month. The signs demanded Ravensborg be impeached and named four members of the House committee which has been investigating whether Ravensborg's conduct related to a 2020 crash that killed pedestrian Joe Boever.

Ravensborg's office first confirmed the investigation to the Argus Leader on Tuesday. The House committee late Monday recommended that Ravensborg face no impeachment charges, but the full House chamber will convene on April 12 to consider that recommendation.

The nonprofit organization that sponsored the billboards, the Dakota Institute for Legislative Solutions, said in a statement that it "has fully complied with all applicable state laws and regulations in regards to our grassroots-issue advocacy operations. Any allegation or suggestion otherwise is outrageous and defamatory."

The organization spent over \$24,000 for the billboards, but has not disclosed its top donors. Noem and her campaign have denied any involvement in the billboards.

## **SD boy who saved sister posthumously awarded Carnegie Medal**

HUDSON, S.D. (AP) — A 10-year-old South Dakota boy who died while saving his younger sister in the Big Sioux River will posthumously receive the Carnegie Medal, North America's highest honor for civilian heroism.

Ricky Lee Sneve was on a fishing trip with his stepfather and siblings on the Big Sioux in Hudson last June. Ricky's 5-year-old sister fell into the water and Ricky dove in after her and was able to push her to the river bank. Authorities say Ricky was caught in an undertow in deeper water, the Argus Leader reported.

Three boys and Ricky's stepfather jumped into the river to help him, but two of the boys began struggling. Chad Sneve and the oldest boy helped the two others to shore. But, by then Ricky had been carried about 50 feet and became submerged.

Divers later recovered Ricky's body about 75 feet down river.

The Carnegie Medal is given throughout the U.S. and Canada to those who enter extreme danger while saving or attempting to save the lives of others. With this announcement, more than 10,000 medals have been awarded since the Pittsburgh-based Fund's inception in 1904.

Commission Chair Mark Laskow said each of the recipients or their survivors will also receive an unspecified financial grant. The organization said nearly \$44 million has been given in one-time grants, scholarship aid, death benefits and continuing assistance.

## China tries to limit economic blow of Shanghai shutdown



**Visitors, some wearing masks, walk through a park on Wednesday, March 30, 2022, in Beijing. China's case numbers in its latest infection surge are low compared with other major countries. But the ruling Communist Party is enforcing a "zero tolerance" strategy aimed at isolating every infected person.** (AP)

Photo/Ng Han Guan)

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — As millions of people in Shanghai line up for coronavirus tests, authorities are promising tax refunds for shopkeepers in the closed-down metropolis and to keep the world's busiest port functioning to limit disruption to industry and trade.

This week's shutdown of most activity in China's most populous city to contain virus outbreaks jolted global financial markets that already were on edge about Russia's war on Ukraine, higher U.S. interest rates and a Chinese economic slowdown.

On Wednesday, the government reported 8,825 new infections nationwide, including 7,196 in people with no symptoms. That included 5,987 cases in Shanghai, only 329 of which had symptoms.

China's case numbers in its latest infection surge are low compared with other major countries. But the ruling Communist Party is enforcing a "zero tolerance" strategy aimed at isolating every infected person.

Some 9.1 million of Shanghai's 26 million people had undergone virus testing by Wednesday, according to health officials. They said "preventive disinfection" of apartment compounds, office buildings and shopping malls would be carried out.

Shanghai recorded more than 20,000 cases by Monday in its latest outbreak, according to state media. The party is trying to fine-tune its strategy to rein in job losses and other costs to the world's second-largest economy.

The Shanghai government announced tax refunds, cuts in rent and low-cost loans for small businesses. A government statement Tuesday promised to "stabilize jobs" and "optimize the business environment."

The Shanghai port stayed open and managers made extra efforts to ensure vessels "can call normally," state TV reported. The port serves the Yangtze River Delta, one of the world's busiest manufacturing regions, with thousands of makers of smartphone and auto components, appliances and other goods.

Operations at Shanghai airports and train stations were normal, according to the online news outlet The Paper. Bus service into and out of the city was suspended earlier. Visitors are required to show a negative virus test.

Abroad, the biggest potential impact on China's Asian neighbors and the rest of the world is likely to come from developments that chill demand in the world's most populous consumer market, economists said.

China is the biggest export market for all of its neighbors, including Japan and South Korea.

Economic growth already was forecast to decline from last year's 8.1% due to a government campaign to cut corporate debt and other challenges unrelated to the pandemic. The ruling party's official target is 5.5%, but forecasters say even that looks hard to reach and will require stimulus spending.

"China is the biggest single consumer of practically everything. It matters outside China," said Rob Carnell, chief Asia economist for ING. "If China's consumption is getting knocked down by COVID, it is going to be something that filters down the supply chain and affects countries in the region."

Officials are trying to defend China's role in global manufacturing supply lines by making sure goods get to customers, said Louis Kuijs, chief Asia-Pacific economist for S&P Global Ratings. He noted that after previous shutdowns, factories caught up with orders by working overtime.

"The impact on supply chains is not as big as many outside observers fear," Kuijs said. "These restric-



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tions tend to have a larger impact on spending and the demand side in China.”

The impact on Shanghai should be “relatively muted” if the city contains its outbreak as the southern business center of Shenzhen did earlier, said Carnell.

Shenzhen, a tech and finance center of 17.5 million people, imposed a similar citywide shutdown in mid-March and reopened a week later.

Employees of financial industries can work from home, while automakers and other big manufacturers can have workers live at factories in a “closed loop system” that isolates them from contact with the outside.

General Motors Co. and Volkswagen AG said their factories in Shanghai were operating normally. GM said in an email it was carrying out “contingency plans on a global basis” with suppliers to reduce COVID-related uncertainties.

Elsewhere, a total of 2,957 new cases were reported in Jilin province in the northeast, including 1,032 with no symptoms. Access to the cities of Changchun and Jilin in that province has been suspended.

BMW Group said its factories in Changchun suspended production March 24 following an outbreak.

In Shanghai, thousands of stock traders and other finance employees were sleeping in their offices to avoid contact with outsiders, the newspaper Daily Economic News reported. It said the Shanghai Stock Exchange was functioning normally with a reduced staff in a “closed office.”

The Chinese stock market’s benchmark Shanghai Composite index was up 1.3% at midday Wednesday. Most other Asian markets also advanced.

Nearby, the riverfront Bund, Shanghai’s most famous neighborhood, was quiet and empty of its usual crowds of pedestrians.

Most restaurants were only allowed to serve diners who ordered via mobile phone and waited outside to collect meals. Visitors to shopping malls were required to wear masks and register using a smartphone app.

A bigger threat to industry and trade looms if anti-disease restrictions disrupt activity at the Shanghai port. It handles the equivalent of 140,000 cargo containers a day.

“If the port is closed, there would be even more dislocation, but it’s not like everything is fine now,” said Carnell. “It’s just yet another thing we wouldn’t need.”

Last year, a one-month slowdown at another major port, Yantian in Shenzhen, caused a backlog of thousands of shipping containers and sent shockwaves through global supply chains.

The shudders in financial markets might be an exaggerated “knee jerk reaction” that doesn’t reflect the “true reality of the situation,” but investors already were uneasy about China and the global economy, said Michael Every of Rabobank.

“We have a whole mountain of problems to worry about, and this is just one foothill among many,” said Every. “If that’s all it is, a COVID lockdown, it’s not difficult to look in recent history books and see how it plays out. But this interfaces with a lot of other issues.”



**FILE - Refugees, mostly women and children, wait in a crowd for transportation after fleeing from the Ukraine and arriving at the border crossing in Medyka, Poland, on March 7, 2022. The U.N. refugee agency says more than 4 million refugees have now fled Ukraine following Russia’s invasion, a new milestone in the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II.** (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

## 4 million refugees have now fled Ukraine, UN agency says

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The U.N. refugee agency said Wednesday more than 4 million refugees have now fled Ukraine since Russia launched its war in the larg-

est refugee crisis in Europe since World War II.

The new figure was posted on an UNHCR website. More than 2.3 million have arrived in Poland, but many have traveled onward to other countries or back into Ukraine.

Aid workers say the numbers have eased in recent days as many people await developments in the war. An estimated 6.5 million people have also been displaced from their homes within the country.

More than 608,000 have entered Romania, over 387,000 have gone to Moldova, and about 364,000 have entered Hungary since the war began on Feb. 24, based on counts provided by governments.

From the onset of the war, UNHCR had projected that about 4 million people might flee Ukraine —though it has repeatedly said that it has been reassessing its forecasts.

"Refugees from Ukraine are now 4 million, five weeks after the start of the Russian attack," U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi tweeted as he crossed the border into Ukraine.

Grandi said he would be in the western city of Lviv and discuss ways to increase its support "to people affected and displaced by this senseless war."

UNHCR teams and their partners have been working to deliver protection, emergency shelter, cash assistance, core relief items and other critical services for those who have fled.

## Israeli forces arrest 5 in connection with deadly shooting

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israeli forces operating in the West Bank on Wednesday arrested five Palestinians allegedly involved in a deadly shooting attack in central Israel, where a Palestinian gunman on a motorcycle used an assault rifle to kill five people.

Police identified the shooter as Diaa Hamarsheh, 27, from the Israeli-occupied West Bank village of Yabad. Police shot and killed him late Tuesday, putting an end to the shooting rampage.

In a statement, the military said the suspects were being questioned. The Palestinian Prisoner's Club, a group that represents current and former Palestinian prisoners, said those arrested were Hamarsheh's relatives.

The incident Tuesday was the third attack of its kind ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The previous two attacks, carried out by Palestinian citizens of Israel who were inspired by the Islamic State extremist group, have raised concerns of a new round of violence ahead of a sensitive period where three major Muslim, Jewish and Christian holidays converge.

Israel ramped up its security presence both in Israeli cities as well as around the West Bank in a bid

**A member of Israeli Zaka Rescue and Recovery team cleans blood from the site where a gunman opened fire in Bnei Brak, Israel, Tuesday, March 29, 2022. A gunman on a motorcycle opened fire in central Israel late Tuesday, in the second fatal mass shooting rampage this week. The shooter was killed by police.** (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)

to snuff out any further violence. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was set to hold a meeting of his Security Cabinet later Wednesday, after convening his top security officials shortly after Tuesday's attack.

"We are dealing with a new wave of terror," Bennett said in a statement. "As in other waves, we will prevail."

Israel in recent weeks has been taking steps aimed at calming tensions and avoiding a repeat of last year, when clashes between Israeli police and Palestinian demonstrators in Jerusalem boiled over into an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas. It planned to ease a series of restrictions against Palestinians in

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the West Bank and Gaza and held talks with Jordanian King Abdullah II, who also made a rare visit to the West Bank this week, to try to ensure calm during what was expected to be a tense period.

But the new wave of violence is greatly complicating those efforts.

Israeli authorities have not yet determined whether the attacks were organized by militant groups or whether the attackers acted individually.

Tuesday's shootings occurred at two locations in Bnei Brak, an ultra-Orthodox city just east of Tel Aviv. Police said a preliminary investigation found the gunman was armed with an assault rifle and opened fire on passersby before he was shot by officers at the scene.

Authorities said five people were killed. Police said one of the victims was a police officer who arrived at the scene and engaged the shooter. Two other victims were foreign citizens from Ukraine, police said. It wasn't immediately clear whether the Ukrainians had arrived before or after the war with Russia began.

In the West Bank, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the attack, saying the killing of Israeli or Palestinian civilians "only leads to further deterioration of the situation and instability, which we all strive to achieve, especially as we are approaching the holy month of Ramadan and Christian and Jewish holidays."

He said the violence "confirms that permanent, comprehensive and just peace is the shortest way to provide security and stability for the Palestinian and Israeli peoples."

No Palestinian groups immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. The Islamist militant group Hamas praised the "heroic operation," but stopped short of claiming responsibility.

On Sunday, a pair of gunmen killed two young police officers during a shooting in the central city of Hadera, and last week, a lone assailant killed four people in a car ramming and stabbing attack in the southern city of Beersheba.

Earlier on Tuesday, Israeli security services raided the homes of at least 12 Arab citizens and arrested two suspected of having ties to the Islamic State group in a crackdown sparked by recent deadly attacks.



**FILE - President Donald Trump holds up papers as he speaks about the coronavirus in the James Brady Press Briefing Room of the White House on April 20, 2020, in Washington. Revelations of a roughly eight-hour gap in official records of then-President Donald Trump's phone calls on the day of last year's insurrection at the U.S. Capitol are raising fresh questions about the diligence — or lack thereof — of the White House's record-keeping.** (AP Photo/Alex Brandon, File)

Law enforcement officials said 31 homes and sites were searched overnight in northern Israel, an area that was home to the gunmen who carried out the Hadera attack.

The Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for the two previous attacks.

All of the attacks have come just ahead of Ramadan, which begins later this week and as Israel hosted a high-profile meeting this week between the foreign ministers of four Arab nations and the United States.

All four Arab nations — Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates — along with the United States, condemned the killings.

## EXPLAINER: What the law says about presidential records

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Revelations of a roughly eight-hour gap in official records of then-President Donald Trump's phone calls on the day of last year's insurrection at the U.S. Capitol are raising fresh questions about the diligence — or lack thereof — of his record keeping.

The committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, riot

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has identified a gap in records that stretches a little after 11 a.m. to about 7 p.m. that day and involves White House calls, according to two people familiar with the matter.

Trump didn't comment Tuesday, but attention surrounding the gap comes alongside a separate potential legal and political headache for the Republican ex-president — the recovery earlier this year of 15 boxes, including records containing classified information from Trump's White House tenure, from his Mar-a-Lago vacation home in Florida.

A look at how the law regards presidential records:

## WHAT IS THE PRESIDENTIAL RECORDS ACT?

The 1978 law requires the preservation of White House documents as property of the U.S. government.

The law was passed in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, when a collection of secret tapes that President Richard Nixon had considered destroying played a defining role. The tapes revealed that Nixon tried to cover up the bungled burglary of Democratic National Committee headquarters. He chose to resign rather than face impeachment and removal from office.

## HOW MIGHT THAT APPLY HERE?

In theory, the law would require the preservation of emails, text messages and phone records — no matter the device used for the communication, said presidential historian Lindsay Chervinsky.

The problem is, there's no real mechanism to enforce the law, which by definition depends on the goodwill of presidents and their staff to police their own record keeping.

"It does require a certain element of good faith and sort of an honor system, and when that crumbles, you can see the limitations," Chervinsky said.

Even so, the Jan. 6 committee is investigating the gap as it works to piece together Trump's communications before and during the insurrection, when pro-Trump rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol to prevent Congress from certifying Democrat Joe Biden's 2020 presidential election victory.

House investigators are looking at whether Trump was communicating during that time through other means, possibly through personal cellphones or some other type of communication — such as a phone passed to him by an aide.

## HAS TRUMP FACED PRIOR ATTENTION OVER HIS RECORD KEEPING?

In a word, yes. After it was revealed that Trump had taken boxes of classified materials with him to Mar-a-Lago, House lawmakers opened an investigation and the National Archives and Records Administration reportedly asked the Justice Department to look into the matter.

Asked about the issue, Attorney General Merrick Garland has said only that the Justice Department will do what it always does — evaluate the facts and the law "and take it from there."

## Poland to end Russian oil imports; Germany warns on gas

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Poland announced steps Wednesday to end all Russian oil imports by the end of 2022, as Germany issued a warning over natural gas supplies and called on consumers to conserve energy in a sign of escalating economic tensions in Europe over Russia's war in Ukraine.

Poland has already largely reduced its dependence on Russian oil, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said. Morawiecki told a news conference that Poland was launching the most radical plan among European nations to wean off Russian energy sources.

Poland said Tuesday it was banning imports of Russian coal. Morawiecki said he expects coal imports will be ended in May.

Morawiecki says Poland will take steps to become "independent" of Russian supplies and is calling on other European Union countries to "walk away" from Russia fossil fuels. Poland argues that money from oil and gas exports are fueling Russia's war machine and that that should stop.

Morawiecki called on the European Commission to impose tax on all hydrocarbons imported from Russia to make trade "just."

Poland has been taking strides to cut reliance on Russian gas. A liquid gas terminal was built in Swinou-

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**FILE -A pumpjack of Wintershall DEA extracting crude oil at an old oil field in Emlichheim, Germany, Friday, March 18, 2022. The German government said Wednesday it was triggering the early warning level for gas supplies amid concerns that Russia could cut off supplies unless it is paid in rubles.** (AP Photo/Martin Meissner,file)

triggered the early warning level.”

Habeck, who is also Germany’s energy minister and vice chancellor, said this was the first of three warning levels and entailed the establishment of a crisis team in his ministry that will step up monitoring of the gas supply situation.

Germany’s energy industry association BDEW welcomed the government’s move.

“Even though there’s no shortage yet it’s necessary for all those involved to have a clear road map in case of a supply interruption,” its chairperson Kerstin Andreae said. “This means that we need to make concrete preparations now for the emergency stages, because if there is a supply interruption then things have to happen fast.”

The European Union has so far stopped short of endorsing a blanket ban on energy imports from Russia. In addition to the fact that they are dependent on Russian fossil fuels to make their economies function, many member countries and EU officials are worried that an embargo could be counterproductive since Russia could sell its production particularly of oil to third countries, likely at a higher price.

Still, Germany, like other countries in the bloc, has taken steps in recent weeks to reduce its dependence on fossil fuel supplies from Russia because of the war in Ukraine.

“On average we in Germany imported 55% of our gas from Russia in recent years, and this has now already gone down to 40%,” Habeck said. Berlin has signed deals with several supplies of liquefied natural gas, or LNG, which is shipped to neighboring European countries and then pumped to Germany.

Habeck said Germany’s gas storages are currently filled to about 25% capacity.

“The question how long the gas will last basically depends on several factors (such as) consumption and weather,” he said. “If there’s a lot of heating, then the storage facilities will be emptied.”

He added that Germany is prepared for a sudden stop in Russian gas supplies, but warned that this would have “considerable impacts” and urged consumers to play their part in preventing a shortage by scaling back demand.

“We are in a situation where, I have to say this clearly, every kilowatt hour of energy saved helps,” said Habeck. “And that’s why I would like to combine the triggering of the warning level with an appeal to

jscie and is being expanded now, receiving deliveries from Qatar, the U.S., Norway and other exporters. A new, Baltic pipeline bringing gas from Norway is to open at the end of this year.

In Germany, the government issued an early warning over natural gas supplies and called on consumers to save energy amid concerns that Russia could cut off deliveries unless it is paid in rubles.

Western nations have rejected the Russian demand for ruble payments, arguing it would undermine the sanctions imposed against Moscow over the war in Ukraine.

Economy Minister Robert Habeck said the move was a precautionary measure as, so far, Russia is still fulfilling its contracts. But he appealed to companies and households in Germany to start reducing their gas consumption.

“There have been several comments from the Russian side that if this (payments in rubles) doesn’t happen, then the supplies will be stopped,” he told reporters in Berlin, adding that Moscow is expected to unveil new rules for gas payments on Thursday. “In order to be prepared for this situation I have today

companies and private consumers to help Germany, help Ukraine, by saving gas or energy as a whole.”  
The second warning level would require companies in the gas industry take necessary measures to regulate supply. The third warning level entails full state intervention into the gas market to ensure that those who most need gas — such as hospital and private households — receive it, said Habeck.  
“We’re not there and we don’t want to go there,” he added.

## Russian pledge to scale back in Ukraine draws skepticism

By NEBI QENA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia’s pledge to scale back some military operations in Ukraine drew skepticism, a bitter reality check in a rare moment of optimism five weeks into what has devolved into a bloody war of attrition.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said there was no reason to believe Russia’s announcement that it would reduce military activity near Kyiv, the capital, as well as in the northern city of Chernihiv, given what’s happening on the ground.

“We can call those signals that we hear at the negotiations positive,” he said in his nightly video address to the Ukrainian people. “But those signals don’t silence the explosions of Russian shells.”

Still, Tuesday’s talks sketched out what could end up being a framework for ending the war that has imposed an increasingly punishing toll, with thousands dead and more than 4 million Ukrainians fleeing the country. The talks had been expected to resume on Wednesday, but with what Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called “meaningful” progress made, the two sides decided to return home for consultations.

At the conference in Istanbul, Ukraine’s delegation laid a framework under which the country would declare itself neutral and its security would be guaranteed by an array of other nations.

Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin said Moscow would in the meantime “fundamentally ... cut back military activity in the direction of Kyiv and Chernihiv” to “increase mutual trust and create conditions for further negotiations.”

He did not spell out what that would mean in practical terms.

Russian delegation head Vladimir Medinsky said negotiators would take Ukraine’s proposals to Russian President Vladimir Putin and then Moscow would provide a response, but he did not say when.

Cavusoglu said he expected a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers at an unspecified time. Another between the presidents of the two countries is also “on the agenda,” he said. Russian state news agency Tass reported that Moscow’s delegates arrived back in Russia late Tuesday.

In the wake of the flurry of proposals and some muted optimism, Zelenskyy warned the world and his own people not to get ahead of themselves. He said Ukrainian troops had forced Russia’s hand, adding that “we shouldn’t let down our guard” because the invading army can still carry out attacks.

“Ukrainians are not naïve people,” he said. “Ukrainians have already learned during the 34 days of the invasion and during the past eight years of war in the Donbas that you can trust only concrete results.”

The U.S. and others also expressed doubts about Russia’s intentions.



**A man walks with his dog near an apartment building damaged by shelling from fighting on the outskirts of Mariupol, Ukraine, in territory under control of the separatist government of the Donetsk People’s Republic, on Tuesday, March 29, 2022.** (AP Photo/Alexei Alexandrov)

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While Moscow portrayed it as a goodwill gesture, its ground troops have become bogged down and taken heavy losses in their attempts to seize Kyiv and other cities. Last week and again on Tuesday, the Kremlin seemed to lower its war aims, saying its "main goal" is gaining control of the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas region in eastern Ukraine.

"We judge the Russian military machine by its actions, not just its words," British Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab told Sky News on Wednesday. "There's obviously some skepticism that it will regroup to attack again rather than seriously engaging in diplomacy."

He added that "of course the door to diplomacy will always be left ajar, but I don't think you can trust what is coming out of the mouth of Putin's war machine."

Britain's Ministry of Defense said Wednesday that Russia stating a focus on Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region "is likely a tacit admission that it is struggling to sustain more than one significant axis of advance."

"Russian units suffering heavy losses have been forced to return to Belarus and Russia to reorganize and supply," the ministry said in a statement. "Such activity is placing further pressure on Russia's already strained logistics and demonstrates the difficulties Russia is having reorganizing its units in forward areas within Ukraine."

It noted that the shift is unlikely to mean relief for civilians in cities suffering relentless Russian bombardments, saying that it expects Moscow will "continue to compensate for its reduced ground maneuver capability through mass artillery and missile strikes."

U.S. President Joe Biden, asked whether the Russian announcement was a sign of progress in the talks or an attempt by Moscow to buy time to continue its assault, said: "We'll see. I don't read anything into it until I see what their actions are."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested Russian indications of a pullback could be an attempt by Moscow to "deceive people and deflect attention."

It wouldn't be the first time. In the tense buildup to the invasion, the Russian military announced some units were loading equipment onto rail cars and preparing to return to their home bases after completing exercises. At the time, Putin was signaling interest in diplomacy. But 10 days later, Russia launched its invasion.

Western officials say Moscow is now reinforcing troops in the Donbas in a bid to encircle Ukraine's forces. And Russia's deadly siege in the south continues, with civilians trapped in the ruins of Mariupol and other devastated cities. The latest satellite imagery from commercial provider Maxar Technologies showed hundreds of people waiting outside a grocery store amid reports of food and water shortages.

"There is what Russia says and there is what Russia does, and we're focused on the latter," Blinken said in Morocco. "And what Russia is doing is the continued brutalization of Ukraine."

Even as negotiators gathered, Putin's forces blasted a gaping hole in a nine-story government administration building in a strike on the southern port city of Mykolaiv, killing at least 12 people, emergency authorities said. The search for more bodies in the rubble continued.

"It's terrible. They waited for people to go to work" before striking the building, said regional governor Vitaliy Kim. "I overslept. I'm lucky."

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. has detected small numbers of Russian ground forces moving away from the Kyiv area, but it appeared to be a repositioning of forces, "not a real withdrawal."

He said it was too soon to say how extensive the Russian movements may be or where the troops will be repositioned.

The meeting in Istanbul was the first time negotiators from Russia and Ukraine talked face-to-face in two weeks. Earlier talks were held in person in Belarus or by video.

Among other things, the Kremlin has demanded all along that Ukraine drop any hope of joining NATO.

Ukraine's delegation offered a detailed framework for a peace deal under which a neutral Ukraine's security would be guaranteed by a group of third countries, including the U.S., Britain, France, Turkey, China and Poland, in an arrangement similar to NATO's "an attack on one is an attack on all" principle.

Ukraine said it would also be willing to hold talks over a 15-year period on the future of the Crimean Peninsula, seized by Russia in 2014.

Vladimir Medinsky, head of the Russian delegation, said on Russian TV that the Ukrainian proposals are a "step to meet us halfway, a clearly positive fact."

He cautioned that the parties are still far from reaching an agreement, but said: "We know now how to move further toward compromise. We aren't just marking time in talks."

## Palestinian gunman kills 5 in 3rd attack in Israel in a week

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press



**A member of Israeli Zaka Rescue and Recovery team cleans blood and human remains from the site where a gunman opened fire in Bnei Brak, Israel, Tuesday, March 29, 2022. A gunman on a motorcycle opened fire in central Israel late Tuesday, in the second fatal mass shooting rampage this week. The shooter was killed by police.**

(AP Photo/Oded Balilty)

JERUSALEM (AP) — A gunman on a motorcycle opened fire in a city in central Israel late Tuesday, methodically gunning down victims as he killed at least five people in the third such street attack in a week. The shooter was killed by police.

Israeli media said the attacker was a Palestinian from the West Bank, the third Arab assailant to launch an attack ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The previous two attacks, carried out by Arab citizens of Israel inspired by the Islamic State extremist group, have raised concerns of further violence.

Israel "stands before a wave of murderous Arab terrorism," declared Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. He pledged to combat it "with perseverance, stubbornness and an iron fist." He held an emergency meeting of top security officials and planned a meeting of his Security Cabinet on Wednesday.

Israeli authorities have not yet determined whether the attacks were organized or whether the attackers acted individually. The Israeli military announced it would be deploying additional troops to the West Bank, and the police chief raised the national readiness level to its highest.

Amateur video footage aired on Israeli television appeared to show the gunman in a black shirt armed with an assault rifle stopping a moving vehicle and

shooting the driver. Another showed him chasing a cyclist, with the gun appearing to jam as he tried to fire.

Tuesday's shootings occurred at two locations in Bnei Brak, an ultra-Orthodox city just east of Tel Aviv. Police said a preliminary investigation found the gunman was armed with an assault rifle and opened fire on passersby before he was shot by officers at the scene.

The Magen David Adom paramedic service confirmed that five people were killed. Police said one of the victims was a police officer who arrived at the scene and engaged the shooter.

Israel Defense Minister Benny Gantz wrote on Twitter that the security forces "will work with all means to return security to Israeli streets and the feeling of security to civilians."

Israeli media reported that the suspected gunman was a 27-year-old Palestinian man from the northern West Bank town of Yabad. Police did not immediately provide information about the suspect.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the attack, saying the killing of Israeli or Palestinian civilians "only leads to further deterioration of the situation and instability, which we all strive to achieve, especially as we are approaching the holy month of Ramadan and Christian and Jewish holidays."



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He said the violence "confirms that permanent, comprehensive and just peace is the shortest way to provide security and stability for the Palestinian and Israeli peoples."

No Palestinian groups immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. The Islamist militant group Hamas praised the "heroic operation," but stopped short of claiming responsibility.

Israel in recent weeks has been taking steps aimed at calming tensions and avoiding a repeat of last year, when clashes between Israeli police and Palestinian demonstrators in Jerusalem boiled over into an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas.

But the new wave of violence is greatly complicating those efforts.

On Sunday, a pair of gunmen killed two young police officers during a shooting in the central city of Hadera, and last week, a lone assailant killed four people in a car ramming and stabbing attack in the southern city of Beersheba.

Earlier on Tuesday, Israeli security services raided the homes of at least 12 Arab citizens and arrested two suspected of having ties to the Islamic State group in a crackdown sparked by recent deadly attacks.

Hours before the raid, Bennett said the recent assaults inside Israel marked a "new situation" that required stepped-up security measures.

Law enforcement officials said 31 homes and sites were searched overnight in northern Israel, an area that was home to the gunmen who carried out the Hadera attack.

The Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for the two previous attacks.

All of the attacks have come just ahead of Ramadan, which begins later this week and as Israel hosted a high-profile meeting this week between the foreign ministers of four Arab nations and the United States.

All four Arab nations — Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates — along with the United States, condemned the killings.

Ramadan is expected to begin Saturday.

Deadly attacks by IS inside Israel, and attacks by Arab citizens of Israel, are rare.

The group operates mainly in Iraq and Syria, where it has recently stepped up attacks against security forces. It no longer controls any territory but operates through sleeper cells. IS has claimed attacks against Israeli troops in the past and has branches in Afghanistan and other countries.

## Celebrities: Monkeys near Florida airport delight visitors

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

DANIA BEACH, Fla. (AP) — As departing jetliners roared overhead, an aging vervet monkey moped on a mangrove branch one recent afternoon in the woods he inhabits near a South Florida airport, his ego bruised.

Mikey, as he is called by his human observers, has long been the laid-back alpha male of a troop of monkeys ruling this tract of land, tucked off a busy runway at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. But this day he lost when challenged by a feisty youngster called Spike. Mikey fled screaming and was now sullenly staring at humans watching him from 15 feet (4 meters) away.

"Did you have a bad day?" asks Deborah "Missy" Williams, a Lynn University science professor who has been studying the troop and others nearby since 2014. She is also founder of the Dania Beach Vervet Project, which seeks to preserve this unique colony. "We will leave you alone so you can ponder."

The United States has no native monkeys, but the smallish vervets have roamed Dania Beach since the late 1940s after a dozen brought from West Africa fled a now long-closed breeding facility and roadside zoo. Today, 40 descendants are broken into four troops living within 1,500 acres (600 hectares) around the airport. Florida also has a few colonies of escaped macaques and squirrel monkeys.

Florida wildlife officials often kill invasive species to protect native animals. But they tolerate the vervets, if they stay put. The monkeys are local celebrities, their travails detailed by TV and newspapers, and popular visitors with nearby workers, who feed them despite signs saying that's illegal.

"My friends are like, 'You have monkeys at your job?'" laughed airport parking lot attendant Harlen Caldera as she gave them raisins and nuts. Some ate from her hand, while others snatched what food she

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scattered.

Travelers are often surprised to see the monkeys. They squeal in delight and grab their cellphones, hoping for photos. Vervets are gray and black with a greenish tinge, helping them blend into the trees. Males typically grow to 2 feet (0.6 meters) and 15 pounds (6.8 kilograms); females reach 18 inches (0.5 meters) and 10 pounds (4.5 kilograms). They live about 20 years.

Caldera and her coworkers are protective of the monkeys, which have no fear of humans, making sure no one tries to catch or harm them. "You never know what people will do," she said.

The entrance to the 16 acres (6.5 hectares) ruled by Mikey, the matriarch, Snow White, and their troop is at the parking lot's rear, sealed by a locked fence. The mangrove trees are thick and the trail muddy — except where it's covered in shallow water.

Williams began studying monkeys while doing doctoral work at Florida Atlantic University, and stayed on. As she and her guests waded deeper into the monkeys' grounds one recent afternoon, the 16-member troop approached. The colony lives on spiders, ants, lizards, seeds and flowers — when not scrounging people food.

"They quickly learn to adapt to a human diet — they love sugary things and salty things," Williams said, noting they tolerate human food remarkably well.

In Africa, vervets are eaten by leopards, eagles and snakes. But in Florida the dangers are outside the mangroves — mostly cars and trappers, who sell them as pets.

Because of their small population, Williams is concerned inbreeding will harm the monkeys' health. In Africa, vervet males leave their birth troop when they reach sexual maturity at 5 years and join another. They move again every few years. With only four local troops, there isn't enough rotation among the males, making the genetic pool small.

As monkeys are an invasive species, Florida puts tight restrictions on how Williams' group can help them. Trapped monkeys can't be released — they must be euthanized or placed into captivity.

As Williams doesn't believe monkeys should be pets, she doesn't seek veterinary care for seriously injured and ill monkeys, hoping nature will heal them. But her group is building an enclosure for vervets captured for treatment or because they wandered too far.

Ultimately, Williams wants Florida to allow the release of captured vervets. Unlike Burmese pythons, iguanas and other invasive species, she argues, the colony doesn't harm the environment.

"The monkeys' lives matter regardless if they are nonnative or native," she said. "All options should be exhausted to avoid euthanasia." Her models show that without change, the colony will die off within 50 years.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission responded that while the colony can remain, no exception allowing the monkeys' release after capture can be made because their effects on the ecosystem are "not well understood."

"There is also an inherent risk of injury when handling wildlife. Monkeys can act defensively and may bite or scratch. Mammals, including vervet monkeys, may harbor diseases transmissible to humans including rabies," the statement said.

As darkness neared, the troop moved from the mangroves into the airport parking lot. It's dinner time and there are seeds to pluck and workers' treats to get. Some played while others groomed each other.



**Female vervet monkeys Bella, left, Snow White, center, and Olivia groom each other in the Park 'N Fly airport lot adjacent to the mangrove preserve where the vervet monkey colony lives, Tuesday, March 1, 2022, in Dania Beach, Fla. For 70 years, a group of non-native monkeys has made their home next to a South Florida airport, delighting visitors and becoming local celebrities.** (AP

Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

Spike and Mikey again tussled before Williams' admonition separated them. The aging king and his would-be heir then sat feet apart, eyeing each other warily.

Soon sated, the monkeys climbed back into their trees to spend another night in their unexpected realm, paying no heed to the loud metallic birds flying above.

## Into the wild: Animals the latest frontier in COVID fight

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer



**A wildlife team covers a young buck's head with a cloth to help calm it before testing the deer for the coronavirus and taking other biological samples in Grand Portage, Minn. on Wednesday, March 2, 2022. Scientists are concerned that the COVID-19 virus could evolve within animal populations – potentially spawning dangerous viral mutants that could jump back to people, spread among us and reignite what for now seems like a waning crisis.** (AP Photo/Laura Ungar)

GRAND PORTAGE, Minn. (AP) — To administer this COVID test, Todd Kautz had to lay on his belly in the snow and worm his upper body into the narrow den of a hibernating black bear. Training a light on its snout, Kautz carefully slipped a long cotton swab into the bear's nostrils five times.

For postdoctoral researcher Kautz and a team of other wildlife experts, tracking the coronavirus means freezing temperatures, icy roads, trudging through deep snow and getting uncomfortably close to potentially dangerous wildlife.

They're testing bears, moose, deer and wolves on a Native American reservation in the remote north woods about 5 miles from Canada. Like researchers around the world, they are trying to figure out how, how much and where wildlife is spreading the virus.

Scientists are concerned that the virus could evolve within animal populations – potentially spawning dangerous viral mutants that could jump back to people, spread among us and reignite what for now seems to some people like a waning crisis.

The coronavirus pandemic has served as a stark and tragic example of how closely animal health and human health are linked. While the origins of the virus have not been proven, many scientists say it likely jumped from bats to humans, either directly or through another species that was being sold live in Wuhan, China.

And now the virus has been confirmed in wildlife in at least 24 U.S. states, including Minnesota. Recently, an early Canadian study showed someone in nearby Ontario likely contracted a highly mutated strain from a deer.

"If the virus can establish itself in a wild animal reservoir, it will always be out there with the threat to spill back into the human population," said University of Minnesota researcher Matthew Aliota, who is working with the Grand Portage Reservation team.

E.J. Isaac, a fish and wildlife biologist for the reservation that's home to the Grand Portage Ojibwe, said he expects the stakes to get even higher with the start of spring, as bears wake from hibernation and deer and wolves roam to different regions.

"If we consider that there are many species and they're all intermingling to some extent, their patterns and their movements can exponentially increase the amount of transmission that could occur," he said.

### INTO THE WILD

Their research is meant to ward off such unwelcome surprises. But it carries its own set of risks.

Seth Moore, who directs the reservation biology and environment department, recently almost got bit-

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ten by a wolf.

And they sometimes team with a crew from the Texas-based company Heliwild to capture animals from the air. One chilly late-winter afternoon, the men climbed into a small helicopter with no side doors that lifted above the treetops. Flying low, they quickly spotted a deer in a forest clearing. They targeted the animal from the air with a net gun and dropped Moore off.

Wind whipped at his face as he worked in deep snow to quickly swab the deer's nose for COVID, put on a tracking collar and collect blood and other biological samples for different research.

The men capture moose in much the same way, using tranquilizer darts instead of nets. They trap wolves and deer either from the air or on the ground, and trap bears on the ground.

They knew of the young male bear they recently tested because they had already been tracking it. To get to the den, they had to take snowmobiles to the bottom of a hill then hike a narrow, winding path in snow shoes.

When Kautz crawled part-way into the den, a colleague held his feet to pull him out quickly if necessary. The team also gave the animal a drug to keep it sleeping and another later to counteract the effects of the first.

To minimize the risk of exposing animals to COVID, the men are fully vaccinated and boosted and get tested frequently.

The day after testing the bear, Isaac packed their samples to send to Aliota's lab in Saint Paul. The veterinary and biomedical researcher hopes to learn not just which animals are getting infected but also whether certain animals are acting as "bridge species" to bring it to others. Testing may later be expanded to red foxes and racoons.

It's also possible the virus hasn't reached this remote location – yet. Since it's already circulating in the wilderness of Minnesota and nearby states, Aliota said it's only a matter of time.

## LOOKING FOR MUTANTS

Close contact between humans and animals has allowed the virus to overcome built-in barriers to spread between species.

To infect any living thing, the virus must get into its cells, which isn't always easy. Virology expert David O'Connor likens the process to opening a "lock" with the virus' spike protein "key."

"Different species have different-looking locks, and some of those locks are not going to be pickable by the key," the University of Wisconsin-Madison scientist said.

But other locks are similar enough for the virus to enter an animal's cells and make copies of itself. As it does, it can randomly mutate and still have a key that fits in the human lock. That allows it to leap back to humans through close contact with live animals, scientists believe.

Although spillback is rare, it only takes one person to bring a mutated virus into the realm of humans.

Some think the highly mutated omicron variant emerged from an animal rather than an immune-compromised human, as many believe. Virologist Marc Johnson of the University of Missouri is one of them, and now sees animals as "a potential source of pi," the Greek letter that may be used to designate the next dangerous coronavirus variant.

Johnson and his colleagues found strange coronavirus lineages in New York City sewage with mutations rarely seen elsewhere, which he believes came from animals, perhaps rodents.

What scientists are most concerned about is that current or future variants could establish themselves and multiply widely within a reservoir species.

One possibility: white-tailed deer. Scientists found the coronavirus in a third of deer sampled in Iowa between September 2020 and January 2021. Others found COVID-19 antibodies in a third of deer tested in Illinois, Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania. Infected deer generally have no symptoms. Testing in many other wild species has been limited or absent.

"It's possible that the virus is already perhaps circulating in multiple animals," said virology expert Suresh Kuchipudi of Pennsylvania State University, an author of the Iowa deer study. If unmonitored, the virus could leave people "completely blindsided," he said.

## CAN IT BE STOPPED?

Ultimately, experts say the only way to stop viruses from jumping back and forth between animals and humans — extending this pandemic or sparking a new one — is to tackle big problems like habitat destruction and illegal wildlife sales.

“We are encroaching on animal habitats like we have never before in history,” Aliota said. “Spillover events from wild animals into humans are, unfortunately I think, going to increase in both frequency and scope.”

To combat that threat, three international organizations — the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Organization for Animal Health and the World Health Organization — are urging countries to make COVID surveillance in animals a priority.

In Grand Portage, Aliota’s collaborators continue to do their part by testing as many animals as they can catch.

With icy Lake Superior sparkling through the evergreens, Isaac slipped his hand beneath the netting of a deer trap. A colleague straddling the animal lifted its head off the snowy ground so that Isaac could swab its nostrils.

The young buck briefly lurched its head forward, but kept still long enough for Isaac to get what he needed.

“Nicely done,” his colleague said as Isaac put the sample into a vial.

When they were finished, they gently lifted the trap to let the deer go. It bounded into the vast forest without looking back, disappearing into the snowy shadows.

## For climate migrants in Bangladesh, town offers new life

By JULHAS ALAM Associated Press

MONGLA, Bangladesh (AP) — The 29-year-old Monira Khatun was devastated after her husband abandoned her suddenly. She returned to her father only to face another blow: He died soon after, leaving her to shoulder three other family members’ care. Without any work, she was worried about how she would feed them.



**Workers gather in the morning at a boat terminal, waiting to cross the Mongla river, in Mongla, Bangladesh, March 3, 2022. This Bangladeshi town, located near the world’s largest mangrove forest Sundarbans, stands alone to offer new life to thousands of climate migrants. The town was once vulnerable to floods and river erosion. Now it has become more resilient with improved infrastructure and special economic zones to support climate migrants.** (AP Photo/Mahmud Hosain Opu)

“I lost everything. There was darkness all around,” Khatun said. “My parents’ home was gone to the river for erosion, we had no land to cultivate.”

She ended up working at a factory in a special economic zone that employs thousands of climate refugees — like Khatun — in the southwestern town of Mongla, where Bangladesh’s second-largest seaport is located.

These refugees from climate-impacted areas within Bangladesh lost their homes, land and livelihood, but found a new life in the riverside coastal town about 50 kilometers (30 miles) inland from the Bay of Bengal.

Some 150,000 people now live in Mongla — many of whom moved from villages near the Sundarbans forest, the world’s largest mangrove forest which straddles the border of Bangladesh and India and harbors endangered Bengal tigers.

Being forced by climate change to move, within borders or beyond, is a growing reality expected to accelerate in the decades ahead. Over the next 30 years, 143 million people are likely to be uprooted by rising seas, drought, searing temperatures and other

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climate catastrophes, according to an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report published last month by the United Nations. Leaders in Asia, already one of the hardest-hit continents, are scrambling to confront major changes taking place.

Climate scientists like Saleemul Huq, director of the Dhaka-based International Centre for Climate Change and Development, are branding Mongla as a climate-resilient town for the refugees.

"When it comes to adaptation, Mongla is a success story. Changes are coming there as an example of how climate refugees could transform their life through new opportunities, through a new approach of adaptation," said Huq, whose institute conducts environmental research.

"Mongla has offered new opportunities to them. With its seaport and an export processing zone and climate-resilient infrastructure, Mongla town has become a different story," Huq said.

"Now, we expect to replicate the Mongla model to at least two dozen other coastal towns across Bangladesh as safe home for climate refugees," he said. "Currently, we are talking to mayors and officials of almost half a dozen municipalities about the success in Mongla."

Huq said more than a dozen satellite towns, all adjacent to economic hubs such as sea and river ports, have already been identified as potential migrant-friendly locations.

"These are all secondary towns with populations of up to half a million, which can shelter up to another half a million climate migrants each," said Huq. "Thus we can offer alternatives to at least 10 million climate migrants over next one decade."

Climate scientists say low-lying Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and millions are at the risk of being displaced — becoming climate refugees because of sea level rise, river erosion, cyclonic storms and intrusion of saline water. The World Bank in a new report said last year that Bangladesh will have more than 19 million internal climate refugees by 2050, almost half the projected number for the entire South Asia region.

Huq said by an approach of transformative adaptation in about two dozen small coastal towns including Mongla, at least 10 million climate refugees could be resettled, rather than forcing them to move to slums in big cities like Dhaka, the nation's capital.

"The trend is that climate migrants move to places where there are economic activities for them. We can't stop displacement, we can only offer alternatives that they will accept," he said.

The vision of transformative adaptation is to create opportunities for climate migrants to live and work in an environment where the host population accepts them.

He said the incremental adjustments, such as introducing salinity-tolerant rice varieties, have been taking place in Bangladesh for years, helping climate refugees cope with the impacts of climate change where they are living today.

"But we will not be able to do it forever. So we need to go for transformative adaptation, which is to enable them to move somewhere else and be better off," Huq said.

In recent years, the Bangladesh government has spent millions of Bangladeshi taka (tens of thousands of dollars) to protect the Mongla town with climate-resilient infrastructure, drawing at-risk people from the remotest villages.

Investments — mostly foreign — have doubled at the Mongla Export Processing Zone over last four years, creating new jobs in its factories for the climate refugees from the region. The funds, which come from the United States, Japan, South Korea and China, among others, have prevented the refugees from moving to big cities.

Nazma Binte Alamgir, spokesperson for the government regulator Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority, said about 10 more factories are in the pipeline to start production soon in Mongla, adding thousands of jobs.

"This is a good news for the people who are suffering in the region. They will have a chance to survive in a different way," she said.

To become resilient, Mongla raised an 11-kilometer (7-mile) embankment along a newly built marine drive designed to stop flooding, two flood-control gates, a better drainage system, a water reservoir and a water treatment plant, said Sheikh Abdur Rahman, mayor of Mongla since January.

"We need more investment to protect Mongla town from erosion and high tides. People feel safer now, but we need to do more," he said.

Rahman said the government is building new infrastructure in the seaport and dredging the Mongla river to widen its channel, allowing for big ships, while more investment is coming to the export processing zone, or EPZ. He said a new rail line is being constructed to connect the town with a major land port across the border with neighboring India.

"There was only about 2,600 workers in the Mongla EPZ in 2018, but now there are about 9,000 workers employed in different factories," he said. "The changes are visible."

Reshma Begum, 28, is one of them.

Begum used to catch fish in the river that swallowed her home, making her three-member family homeless. Now she lives temporarily on another man's land and works at a factory in the EPZ.

"Now I earn a good amount of money each month to support my family," she said, adding that her husband is a day laborer and contributes to the family's income.

"Maybe we will build a new house in the future by saving some money," she said.

## How China's TikTok, Facebook influencers push propaganda

By AMANDA SEITZ, ERIC TUCKER and MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — To her 1.4 million followers across TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Facebook, Vica Li says she is a "life blogger" and "food lover" who wants to teach her fans about China so they can travel the country with ease.

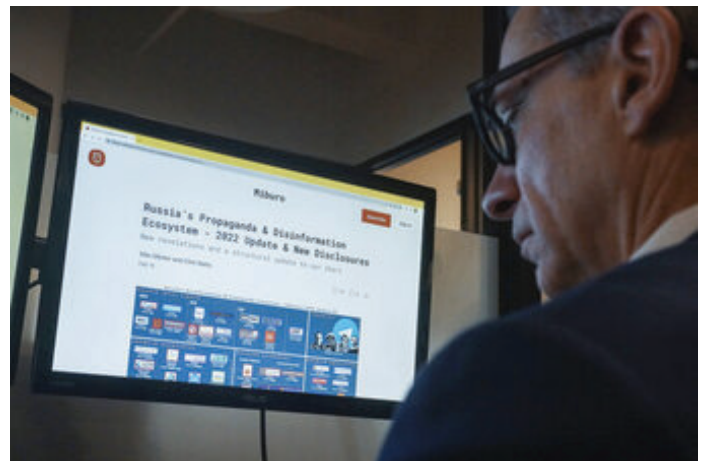
"Through my lens, I will take you around China, take you into Vica's life!" she says in a video posted in January to her YouTube and Facebook accounts, where she also teaches Chinese classes over Zoom.

But that lens may be controlled by CGTN, the Chinese-state run TV network where she has regularly appeared in broadcasts and is listed as a digital reporter on the company's website. And while Vica Li tells her followers that she "created all of these channels on her own," her Facebook account shows that at least nine people manage her page.

That portfolio of accounts is just one tentacle of China's rapidly growing influence on U.S.-owned social media platforms, an Associated Press examination has found.

As China continues to assert its economic might, it is using the global social media ecosystem to expand its already formidable influence. The country has quietly built a network of social media personalities who parrot the government's perspective in posts seen by hundreds of thousands of people, operating in virtual lockstep as they promote China's virtues, deflect international criticism of its human rights abuses and advance Beijing's talking points on world affairs like Russia's war against Ukraine.

Some of China's state-affiliated reporters have posed themselves as trendy Instagram influencers or bloggers. The country has also hired firms to recruit



**Clint Watts, president of Miburo, a research firm that tracks foreign disinformation operations, works at his desktop at company headquarters, on March 15, 2022, in New York. Some of China's state media reporters are identifying as travel bloggers and lifestyle influencers on U.S.-owned social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, racking up millions of followers from around the globe. The Associated Press has identified dozens of these accounts, which are part of a network of profiles that allow China to easily peddle propaganda to unsuspecting social media users.** (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

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influencers to deliver carefully crafted messages that boost its image to social media users.

And it is benefitting from a cadre of Westerners who have devoted YouTube channels and Twitter feeds to echoing pro-China narratives on everything from Beijing's treatment of Uyghur Muslims to Olympian Eileen Gu, an American who competed for China in the most recent Winter Games.

The influencer network allows Beijing to easily proffer propaganda to unsuspecting Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube users around the globe. At least 200 influencers with connections to the Chinese government or its state media are operating in 38 different languages, according to research from Miburo, a firm that tracks foreign disinformation operations.

"You can see how they're trying to infiltrate every one of these countries," said Miburo President Clint Watts, a former FBI agent. "It is just about volume, ultimately. If you just bombard an audience for long enough with the same narratives people will tend to believe them over time."

While Russia's war on Ukraine was being broadly condemned as a brazen assault on democracy, self-described "traveler," "story-teller" and "journalist" Li Jingjing took to YouTube to offer a different narrative.

She posted a video to her account called "Ukraine crisis: The West ignores wars & destructions it brings to Middle East," in which she mocked U.S. journalists covering the war. She's also dedicated other videos to amplifying Russian propaganda about the conflict, including claims of Ukrainian genocide or that the U.S. and NATO provoked Russia's invasion.

Li Jingjing says in her YouTube profile that she is eager to show her roughly 21,000 subscribers "the world through my lens." But what she does not say in her segments on Ukraine, which have tens of thousands of views, is that she is a reporter for CGTN, articulating views that are not just her own but also familiar Chinese government talking points.

Most of China's influencers use pitches similar to Li Jingjing's in hopes of attracting audiences around the world, including the U.S., Egypt and Kenya. The personalities, many of them women, call themselves "travelers," sharing photos and videos that promote China as an idyllic destination.

"They clearly have identified the 'Chinese lady influencer' is the way to go," Watts said of China.

The AP identified dozens of these accounts, which collectively have amassed more than 10 million followers and subscribers. Many of the profiles belong to Chinese state media reporters who have in recent months transformed their Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube accounts — platforms that are largely blocked in China — and begun identifying as "bloggers," "influencers" or non-descript "journalists." Nearly all of them were running Facebook ads, targeted to users outside of China, that encourage people to follow their pages.

The personalities do not proactively disclose their ties to China's government and have largely phased out references in their posts to their employers, which include CGTN, China Radio International and Xinhua News Agency.

Foreign governments have long tried to exploit social media, as well as its ad system, to influence users. During the 2016 U.S. election, for example, a Russian internet agency paid in rubles to run more than 3,000 divisive political ads targeting Americans.

In response, tech companies like Facebook and Twitter promised to better alert American users to foreign propaganda by labeling state-backed media accounts.

But the AP found in its review that most of the Chinese influencer social media accounts are inconsistently labeled as state-funded media. The accounts — like those belonging to Li Jingjing and Vica Li — are often labeled on Facebook or Instagram, but are not flagged on YouTube or TikTok. Vica Li's account is not labeled on Twitter. Last month, Twitter began identifying Li Jingjing's account as Chinese state-media.

Vica Li said in a YouTube video that she is disputing the labels on her Facebook and Instagram accounts. She did not respond to a detailed list of questions from the AP.

Often, followers who are lured in by accounts featuring scenic images of China's landscape might not be aware that they'll also encounter state-endorsed propaganda.

Jessica Zang's picturesque Instagram photos show her smiling beneath a beaming sun, kicking fresh



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powered snow atop a ski resort on the Altai Mountains in China's Xinjiang region during the Beijing Olympics. She describes herself as a video creator and blogger who hopes to present her followers with "beautiful pics and videos about life in China."

Zang, a video blogger for CGTN, rarely mentions her employer to her 1.3 million followers on Facebook. Facebook and Instagram identify her account as "state-controlled media" but she is not labeled as such on TikTok, YouTube or on Twitter, where Zang lists herself as a "social media influencer."

"I think it's likely by choice that she doesn't put any state affiliations, because you put that label on your account, people start asking certain types of questions," Rui Zhong, who researches technology and the China-U.S. relationship for the Washington-based Wilson Center, said of Zang.

Peppered between tourism photos are posts with more obvious propaganda. One video titled "What foreigners in BEIJING think of the CPC and their life in China?" features Zang interviewing foreigners in China who gush about the Chinese Communist Party and insist they're not surveilled by the government the way outsiders might think.

"We really want to let more people ... know what China is really like," Zang tells viewers.

That's an important goal in China, which has launched coordinated efforts to shape its image abroad and whose president, Xi Jinping, has spoken openly of his desire to have China perceived favorably on the global stage.

Ultimately, accounts like Zang's are intended to obscure global criticisms of China, said Jessica Brandt, a Brookings Institution expert on foreign interference and disinformation.

"They want to promote a positive vision of China to drown out their human rights records," Brandt said.

Li Jingjing and Zang did not return messages from the AP seeking comment. CGTN did not respond to repeated interview requests. CGTN America, which is registered as a foreign agent with the Justice Department and has disclosed having commercial arrangements with several international news organizations, including the AP, CNN and Reuters, did not return messages. A lawyer who has represented CGTN America did not respond either.

A spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, Liu Pengyu, said in a statement, "Chinese media and journalists carry out normal activities independently, and should not be assumed to be led or interfered by the Chinese government."

China's interest in the influencer realm became more evident in December after it was revealed that the Chinese Consulate in New York had paid \$300,000 for New Jersey firm Vippi Media to recruit influencers to post messages to Instagram and TikTok followers during the Beijing Olympics, including content that would highlight China's work on climate change.

It's unclear what the public saw from that campaign, and if the social media posts were properly labeled as paid advertisements by the Chinese Consulate, as Instagram and TikTok require. Vippi Media has not provided the Justice Department, which regulates foreign influence campaigns through a 1938 statute known as the Foreign Agents Registration Act, a copy of the posts it paid influencers to disseminate, even though federal law requires the company to do so.

Vipp Jaswal, Vippi Media's CEO, declined to share details about the posts with the AP.

In other cases, the money and motives behind these Facebook posts, YouTube videos and podcasts are so murky that even those who create them say they weren't aware the Chinese government was financing the project.

Chicago radio host John St. Augustine told the AP that a friend who owns New World Radio in Falls Church, Virginia, invited him to host a podcast called "The Bridge" with a team in Beijing. The hosts discussed daily life and music in the U.S. and China, inviting music industry workers as guests.

He says he didn't know CGTN had paid New World Radio \$389,000 to produce the podcast. The station was also paid millions of dollars to broadcast CGTN content 12 hours daily, according to documents filed with the Justice Department on behalf of the radio company.

"How they did all that, I had no clue," St. Augustine said. "I was paid by a company here in the United States."

The station's relationship with CGTN ended in December, said New World Radio co-owner Patricia Lane.

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The Justice Department recently requested public input on how it should update the FARA statute to account for the ephemeral world of social media and its transparency challenges.

"It's not leaflets and hard copy newspapers anymore," FARA unit chief Jennifer Kennedy Gellie said of messaging. It's "tweets and Facebook posts and Instagram images."

A growing chorus of English-speaking influencers has also cultivated an online niche by promoting pro-Chinese messaging in YouTube videos or tweets.

Last April, as CGTN sought to expand its network of influencers, it invited English speakers to join a months-long competition that would end with jobs working as social media influencers in London, Nairobi, Kenya or Washington. Thousands applied, CGTN said in September, describing the event as a "window for young people around the world to understand China."

British video blogger Jason Lightfoot raved about the opportunity in a video on YouTube advertising the event.

"So many crazy experiences that I'll never forget for the rest of my life, and that's all thanks to CGTN," Lightfoot said in a video he said was filmed from China tech company Huawei's campus.

Lightfoot, who did not respond to requests for comment, does not disclose this relationship with CGTN on his YouTube profile, where he has accrued millions of views with headlines like "The Olympics Backfired on USA — Disastrous Regret" and "Western Media Lies about China."

The video topics are often in sync with those of other pro-China bloggers like Cyrus Janssen, a U.S. citizen living in Canada. During the Olympics, Janssen and Lightfoot both shared videos celebrating Gu's three-medal win, using identical images of the Olympian in posts that blasted the U.S.

"USA's boycott failure ... Eileen Gu Wins Gold!" Lightfoot posted on Feb. 10. That same day, Janssen uploaded a video titled "Is Eileen Gu a Traitor to America? American Expat Shares the Truth."

In emails to the AP, Janssen said his videos are intended to educate people about China and said he's never accepted money from the Chinese government. But when pressed for details about some of his partnerships, which include Chinese tech firms, Janssen responded only with questions about an AP's reporter salary. The AP also found videos that show him appearing on CGTN broadcasts.

The Western influencers routinely decry what they see as distorted American media coverage of Beijing and life there. Some posts, for instance, have ridiculed Western concerns over the safety of Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai, who disappeared from view after leveling sexual assault allegations against a former high-ranking member of China's ruling Communist Party. She resurfaced around the Olympics in a controlled interview in which she vigorously denied wrongdoing by Chinese officials and said her initial allegations had created an "enormous misunderstanding."

Her abrupt about-face prompted skeptical reactions in the West, which YouTuber Andy Boreham mocked in a video in which he invoked language reminiscent of the MeToo movement. "I wonder what happened to #BelieveAllWomen," he said.

Boreham is a New Zealander and columnist for Shanghai Daily. Twitter recently labeled his account as Chinese-state affiliated media. His YouTube account remains unlabeled. In a statement, YouTube said it only applies state-affiliated media labels to organizations, not individuals who work for or with state-funded media.

In a YouTube post last year, Lightfoot, who has more than 200,000 subscribers, marveled at video footage of what he said were "clean, modern, peaceful, pleasant" streets of China. The post then cut to video of gritty, trash-strewn streets he said were in Philadelphia.

"When I first saw this video," he says by way of narration, "I actually thought it was from a movie. I thought it was from a zombie movie or some kind of end-of-the-world movie. But it's not. This is real. This is America."

YouTubers Matthew Tye, an American, and Winston Sterzel, who is from South Africa, believe that, in many cases, China's paying for videos to be created.

Their evidence?

The pair was included last year on an email pitch to numerous YouTube influencers from a company that

identified itself as Hong Kong Pear Technology. The email asked the influencers to share a promotional video for China's Hainan province, a tourist beach destination, on their channels.

Tye and Sterzel, who spent years living in China and became vocal critics of its government, assume they were probably included on the pitch by mistake.

But, intrigued, they engaged in a back-and-forth with the company while feigning interest in the offer. The company representative soon followed up with a new request — that they post a propaganda video that claimed COVID-19 did not originate in China, where the first case was detected, but rather from North American white-tailed deer.

"We could offer \$2000 (totally negotiable considering the nature of this type of content) lemme know if u are interested," an employee named Joey wrote, according to emails shared with the AP.

After Tye and Sterzel asked for articles that would back up the false claim, the emails stopped.

In an email to the AP, a Pear Technology employee confirmed he had contacted Tye and Sterzel, but said he did not know much about the client, adding "it might be from the government??"

Tye and Sterzel say the exchange pulls back the curtain on how China pushes propaganda through influencers who profit from it.

"There's a very easy formula to become successful," Sterzel said in an interview. "It's simply to praise the Chinese government, to praise China and talk about how great China is and how bad the West is."

## Calif. group votes to limit reparations to slave descendants

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

California's first-in-the-nation task force on reparations has decided to limit state compensation to the descendants of free and enslaved Black people who were in the U.S. in the 19th century, narrowly rejecting a proposal to include all Black people regardless of lineage.

The vote Tuesday split 5-4, and the hours-long debate was at times testy and emotional. Near the end, the Rev. Amos Brown, president of the San Francisco branch of the NAACP and vice chair of the task force, pleaded with the commission to move ahead with a clear definition of who would be eligible for restitution.

"Please, please, please I beg us tonight, take the first step," he said. "We've got to give emergency treatment to where it is needed."

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed legislation creating the two-year reparations task force in 2020, making California the only state to move ahead with a study and plan, with a mission to study the institution of slavery and its harms and to educate the public about its findings.

Reparations at the federal level has not gone anywhere, but cities and universities are taking up the issue. The mayor of Providence, Rhode Island, announced a city commission in February while the city of Boston is considering a proposal to form its own reparations commission.

The Chicago suburb of Evanston, Illinois, became the first U.S. city to make reparations available to Black residents last year, although there are some who say the program has done nothing to right a wrong.

California's task force members — nearly all of whom can trace their families back to enslaved ancestors in the U.S. — were aware that their deliberations over a pivotal question will shape reparations discussions across the country. The members were appointed by the governor and the leaders of the two legislative chambers.

Those favoring a lineage approach said that a compensation and restitution plan based on genealogy as opposed to race has the best change of surviving a legal challenge. They also opened eligibility to free Black people who migrated to the country before the 20th century, given possible difficulties in documenting family history and the risk at the time of becoming enslaved.

Others on the task force argued that reparations should include all Black people in the U.S. who suffer from systemic racism in housing, education and employment and said they were defining eligibility too soon in the process.

Civil rights attorney and task force member Lisa Holder proposed directing economists working with the task force to use California's estimated 2.6 million Black residents to calculate compensation while they

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continue hearing from the public.

"We need to galvanize the base and that is Black people," she said. "We can't go into this reparations proposal without having all African Americans in California behind us."

But Kamilah Moore, a lawyer and chair of the task force, said expanding eligibility would create its own fissures and was beyond the purpose of the committee.

"That is going to aggrieve the victims of the institution of slavery, which are the direct descendants of the enslaved people in the United States," she said. "It goes against the spirit of the law as written."

The committee is not even a year into its two-year process and there is no compensation plan of any kind on the table. Longtime advocates have spoken of the need for multifaceted remedies for related yet separate harms, such as slavery, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration and redevelopment that resulted in the displacement of Black communities.

Compensation could include free college, assistance buying homes and launching businesses, and grants to churches and community organizations, advocates say.

The eligibility question has dogged the task force since its inaugural meeting in June, when viewers called in pleading with the nine-member group to devise targeted proposals and cash payments to make whole the descendants of enslaved people in the U.S.

Chicago resident Arthur Ward called in to Tuesday's virtual meeting, saying that he was a descendant of enslaved people and has family in California. He supports reparations based only on lineage and expressed frustration with the panel's concerns over Black immigrants who experience racism.

"When it comes to some sort of justice, some kind of recompense, we are supposed to step to the back of the line and allow Carribeans and Africans to be prioritized," Ward said. "Taking this long to decide something that should not even be a question in the first place is an insult."

California Assemblyman Reginald Jones-Sawyer, who voted against limiting eligibility, said there is no question that descendants of slaves are the priority, but he said the task force also needs to stop ongoing harm and prevent future harm from racism. He said he wished the panel would stop "bickering" over money they don't have yet and start discussing how to close a severe wealth gap.

"We're arguing over cash payments, which I firmly don't believe are the be all and end all," he said.

Reparations critics say that California has no obligation to pay up given that the state did not practice slavery and did not enforce Jim Crow laws that segregated Black people from white people in the southern states.

But testimony provided to the committee shows California and local governments were complicit in stripping Black people of their wages and property, preventing them from building wealth to pass down to their children. Their homes were razed for redevelopment, and they were forced to live in predominantly minority neighborhoods and couldn't get bank loans that would allow them to purchase property.

Today, Black residents are 5% of the state's population but over-represented in jails, prison and homeless populations. And Black homeowners continue to face discrimination in the form of home appraisals



**FILE - Yolanda Renee King, granddaughter of The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., raises her fist as she speaks during the March on Washington, on the 57th anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on Aug. 28, 2020. California's first-in-the-nation task force on reparations is at a crossroads with members divided on which Black Americans should be eligible for compensation. The task force could vote on the question of eligibility on Tuesday, March 28, 2022, after putting it off at last month's meeting.** (Jonathan Ernst/Pool Photo via AP, File)

that are significantly lower than if the house were in a white neighborhood or the homeowners are white, according to testimony.

A report is due by June with a reparations proposal due by July 2023 for the Legislature to consider turning into law.

## **GOP's Senate campaign chief won't back down from party fight**

By STEVE PEOPLES and BRENDAN FARRINGTON Associated Press



**FILE - Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) on Feb. 26, 2022, in Orlando, Fla.** (AP Photo/John Raoux, File)

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Rick Scott likes to think of himself as Gen. Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War.

Barely halfway through his first Senate term, the Florida Republican is already leaning into a fight against his own party's leadership as he navigates a delicate alliance with former President Donald Trump and pushes a handcrafted policy agenda that many Republicans reject.

But Scott, who is also the Senate GOP's midterm chief, insists he has only begun to fight.

The 69-year-old former businessman likens his situation to that of Grant during the battle of Vicksburg, when the general ordered multiple bloody assaults on the Southern stronghold before delivering a victory that helped turn the war in the Union's favor.

"I think of myself more like Grant taking Vicksburg, and I think as a result of that, I'm always going to be perceived as an outsider," Scott said in an interview. "I'm going to keep doing what I believe in whether

everybody agrees with me or not."

For now, what Scott believes is directly at odds with the wishes of Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

Scott is refusing to abandon an 11-point governing plan he released with little input from party leadership, even after McConnell's public rebuke one month ago. In the weeks since, Scott has continued to promote his plan, which would raise taxes on millions of Americans who don't earn enough to pay federal income taxes, in dozens of speeches and media appearances.

Those close to Scott suggest he understands the modern Republican Party better than McConnell and his establishment allies. And as tension lingers, Scott is leaving open the possibility of challenging McConnell for Senate majority leader should Republicans retake the Senate majority this fall, although the prospects of him waging a successful effort are slim. Most who know Scott well believe he's more likely to seek the presidency in 2024.

McConnell's office declined to comment.

The story of Scott's unlikely rise from a little-known Florida businessman with a stiff demeanor to a two-term governor to a senator willing to buck his own party's leadership offers a fresh reminder that the conventional rules governing national politics no longer exist. Few outside Mar-a-Lago believe Scott could knock McConnell from his leadership post and Scott is an afterthought in early 2024 presidential chatter, which is dominated by his successor as governor, Ron DeSantis.

But allies suggest it would be a mistake to dismiss him as a serious political player.

Political consultant Curt Anderson, who has advised Scott for more than a decade, described the senator's interest in McConnell's job as "pretty low," although Trump has privately encouraged Scott to challenge the Senate Republican leader. When asked about a potential presidential run, however, Anderson said only, "We'll see what opportunities lay ahead."

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Not only has Scott won every race he's run, often as the underdog, he is the richest member of Congress with a net worth that exceeded \$232 million before his last election. He has also expanded his donor network considerably over the last year in his role as chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

Lest anyone question Scott's willingness to dip into his personal fortune to further his political ambitions, he spent more than \$63 million of his own money to win Florida's 2018 Senate election.

And his political footprint is growing.

As chairman of the Senate GOP's campaign arm, Scott is responsible for his party's quest to retake the Senate majority. He is tasked with leading the Republican Senate strategy, including how best to dispatch tens of millions of dollars to key races across the country.

That's even as Republican Senate candidates privately worry that Scott's policy agenda is giving Democrats a powerful talking point to use against them this fall. Several GOP campaigns have gone around Scott's committee to share their concerns directly with McConnell's team, although Scott has resisted pressure to back off.

Still, Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel described Scott as "the ultimate team player" who works "hand in glove" with the party's other major campaign committees.

But McDaniel's praise ended when the conversation turned to his governing agenda and the provision that would raise taxes.

"I'm not a policymaker," McDaniel said when asked directly whether she supports Scott's plan. She noted that House Republicans are working on another policy rollout. "I know that our voters are really focused on what are our plans if we govern. But we have to win to do anything."

Republicans in Washington are divided over whether they even need a governing agenda.

The Republican Party declined to adopt a platform at Trump's 2020 presidential nominating convention. And many Republican strategists believe the GOP can win the House and Senate majority this fall without providing specific policy goals given Democratic President Joe Biden's weak political standing and traditional political headwinds against the party in power.

When asked earlier in the year what the GOP's agenda would be if it took control of Congress, McConnell told reporters, "That is a very good question and I'll let you know when we take it back."

McConnell is not used to being challenged. He has been elected Senate Republican leader by acclamation without so much as a token challenger since 2007. He has already publicly declared his intention to retain his leadership role after the midterm elections, and his team does not expect anyone to oppose him.

But as Trump calls for McConnell's ouster from afar, Scott and House Republican leaders are challenging the Senate leader's wisdom.

House Republicans worked on their own "Commitment to America" agenda last week at their annual retreat in Jacksonville, Florida. During the three-day gathering, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy was asked about the decision to introduce an agenda when McConnell has held off.

"I think elections are important. But I think it's more than important than just running against another party to tell the American public what you will do," McCarthy told reporters.

More than most Senate Republicans, Scott has worked to develop relationships with leading House conservatives, including Republican Study Committee Chairman Jim Banks, R-Ind. Scott regularly sends handwritten thank-you notes following private meetings and has an "impressive personal touch" that does not necessarily match his stiff exterior, Banks said.

Banks described Scott's agenda as "a courageous plan" that gives the party "a good framework to follow." Like other leading Republicans, however, he stopped short of endorsing Scott's tax provision.

"I don't know that I support it or don't support it. I don't know the specifics," Banks said. "But even Sen. Scott has admitted that this is his draft, his attempt to put a framework around the GOP agenda. He deserves credit for that."

Scott's plan to "Rescue America" features 11 broad policy goals, most of which are focused on the conservative movement's cultural priorities.

He would require children in public school to stand for the national anthem; block the federal govern-

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ment from asking people to disclose their race, ethnicity, skin color or gender preference; finish Trump's proposed border wall; and ban "biological males" from competing in women's sports.

Critics have latched onto more specific provisions regarding taxes and federal legislation.

Scott calls for a minimum federal tax on tens of millions of Americans who don't make enough money to pay federal income taxes. Another provision would sunset all federal legislation five years after passage, which critics contend would jeopardize Social Security and Medicare, although Scott has said that is not his intention.

Indiana Sen. Mike Braun acknowledged that some in the Senate GOP caucus grumbled about the plan, but he said he remains confident in Scott's political leadership and even defended the 11-point plan.

In a brief interview, Braun insisted Republicans were still in a strong political position heading into the November midterms because Democrats' mistakes have "served up a platter of opportunity."

"I say take advantage of that, but also stake a little ground out that gives independents who elect swing-state senators and the president something other than the party of 'No,'" Braun said.

Beyond dividing his caucus on Capitol Hill, Scott's plan has also divided some of Washington's most powerful conservative institutions.

Grover Norquist, president of the conservative group Americans for Tax Reform, dismissed Scott's plan as "an unserious presentation" that would create "a significant tax increase."

Norquist complained that Scott released his proposal without checking with the broader conservative movement. "This was not run past anybody," he said. "Not happening."

Meanwhile, Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, praised Scott's agenda, including the tax piece. Scott is set to highlight his proposal during a Thursday speech at the foundation, which also plans to release its own set of policy goals.

The fierce resistance to Scott's plan, Roberts said, underscores a broader debate within the GOP.

"This is not an honest conversation about taxation policy," Roberts said. "It's about the establishment self-appointed ruling elites — I mean that generally — inside and outside the Capitol telling a great member of the Senate who's working on behalf of his constituents that he just needs to stop talking about this because it's not the plan they've decided."

And as Republicans fight each other, the Democratic National Committee has used Scott's plan as a weapon against the GOP since the day he released it.

The DNC released a second round of digital ads last week that calls on voters to "stop Senate Republicans' new plan to raise taxes on 50% of Americans." The ads feature black-and-white pictures of Trump, McConnell and Scott.

"Rick Scott literally put it in writing," DNC Chairman Jaime Harrison told The Associated Press. "Every Republican lawmaker must answer for it, and you can bet we're going to remind the American people of it every chance we get."

Meanwhile, those who have watched Scott's political rise up close believe he is only beginning to put his stamp on national politics.

Ex-Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum, who unsuccessfully ran against Scott in the 2010 Republican primary for governor, said he wouldn't underestimate Scott's potential to become the next Senate majority leader or the next president.

"I think he's been ambitious to be president of the United States. He always has been," McCollum said. "His real ambition was to get to Washington, always. That's his real ambition. His real ambition is to be chief executive office of the country."

## Will Smith would face little more than a slap if charged

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Will Smith's slap seen 'round the world at the Oscars was clearly a crime, legal experts say, but the chances of prosecution are slim and even if convicted he'd likely face little more than a slap of his own — on the wrist.

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Smith left millions of witnesses stunned Sunday when he marched onto the stage of the Dolby Theatre and smacked Chris Rock in the face after the comedian made a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, who was sitting with the actor in the front row.

The Los Angeles Police Department has said it was aware of the incident but was not investigating because Rock declined to file a police report.

While police could technically open an investigation based on the Academy Awards broadcast, they wouldn't do so without Rock's participation, said defense lawyer Alan Jackson, a former Los Angeles County prosecutor who oversaw high-profile cases.

"Would they ever in a practical world do that when Chris Rock is saying, 'I won't cooperate with a criminal investigation?' Not in a million years," Jackson said. "LAPD is probably breathing a relative sigh of relief that they don't have to get involved with two high-profile actors duking it out on a world stage."

The Los Angeles city attorney's office, which prosecutes misdemeanor crimes, declined to comment, but said it couldn't bring charges without a police referral.

"If he's going to be charged, I can't speak to what the charge would be," spokesman Rob Wilcox said.

News of celebrities in trouble has been a fixture in LA since Hollywood's early days, and questions frequently arise about whether the rich and powerful receive a different brand of justice.

"The celebrity thing is coming into play, unfortunately," said former LA District Attorney Steve Cooley. "If some Joe Blow committed this act in front a police officer, would he would be able to walk away from it? Probably not."

If Smith is not charged, it could imperil the justice system's credibility, said Jody Armour, a law professor at the University of Southern California.

"How can what appears to be an obvious criminal act committed in the open publicly not result in any criminal consequences?" Armour asked. "Do different standards apply to celebrities and noncelebrities? Apparently, we seem to all recognize that is the case. But what does that recognition say to us about the legitimacy and credibility of our criminal justice system?"

While the famous can use their status to influence decision-makers, their fame can work against them if the prosecutor decides to make an example of a crime by someone well-known.

"I would surprised if the city attorney does not seriously consider it because it was so public," said Alison Triessl, a criminal defense lawyer who has handled many misdemeanor battery cases. "Are they sending the wrong message if they don't prosecute him?"

Triessl said there's no question a crime was committed, and there's no need for the victim to file a report. Charges are routinely brought in domestic violence cases without cooperation from the victim because the crime is against the state for violating its penal code.

"It sends a message that you can commit a crime and you won't be punished," she said. "This was a very wrong message."

Defense attorney Adam Braun said it's unrealistic Smith would face charges in the absence of serious injuries and without support from Rock.

"Although a prosecution is not likely, the wild card here is that the evidence is overwhelming and the



**Will Smith, right, hits presenter Chris Rock on stage while presenting the award for best documentary feature at the Oscars on Sunday, March 27, 2022, at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles.** (AP Photo/Chris Pizzello)



incident was witnessed live by millions," Braun said. "Prosecutors could feel compelled to prosecute Will Smith, regardless of Chris Rock's preference, to avoid creating the impression that a wealthy actor is above the law."

If Smith were charged, he would face a misdemeanor battery count, which carries a penalty of up to six months in jail. Even if prosecuted and convicted, it is unlikely he would face incarceration and there are alternatives to going to court that could lead to a penalty as light as having to attend anger management classes.

Cooley said if he were advising Smith, he'd have him voluntarily enroll in anger classes and then try to convince prosecutors not to bring charges in the interest of justice because he had recognized his problem and was dealing with it.

Cooley said he'd want more information on the case as a prosecutor before making any decisions. He said LAPD was premature in announcing they weren't getting involved.

Stephen Downing, a retired LAPD deputy chief, said a case could be brought. But he said it was reasonable not to waste resources when Rock apparently wasn't injured or ruffled enough to file a complaint.

"Rock carried on as if nothing happened to him," Downing said. "He didn't even put a hand to his cheek. There didn't appear to be an injury. If he had knocked him to the floor and rendered him unconscious, I think action would have been taken."

## EXPLAINER: Why bond yields may be warning of a recession

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer



**FILE - Trader Robert Charmak, right, works on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, Tuesday, Dec. 7, 2021.** (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

NEW YORK (AP) — One of the more reliable warning signals for an economic recession is starting to shine.

The "yield curve" is watched for clues to how the bond market is feeling about the U.S. economy's long-term prospects. On Tuesday, a closely followed part of the yield curve gave investors some cause for concern.

### WHAT IS THE YIELD CURVE?

At the center of the investing world are Treasuries, the IOUs the U.S. government gives to investors who lend it money. The yield curve is a chart showing how much in interest different Treasuries are paying.

On one end are shorter-term Treasuries, which get repaid in a few months or a couple years. There, yields closely follow expectations for what the Federal Reserve will do with overnight interest rates. On the other end of the chart are longer-term Treasuries, which take 10 years or decades to mature. Their yields tend to move more on expectations for economic growth and inflation further into the future.

Usually, longer-term Treasuries offer higher yields than shorter-term ones, resulting in a chart with an upward sloping line. That's in part because investors typically demand higher yields to lock away their money for longer, given the possibility of future rate increases by the Fed and the risk of inflation. But when investors are worried the economy will fall sharply, perhaps because the Fed is pushing short-term rates too high too aggressively, they're willing to accept less for a Treasury maturing many years in the future.

When yields for short-term Treasuries are higher than yields for long-term ones, market watchers call it an "inverted yield curve." And when that chart has a downward sloping line, Wall Street starts getting nervous.

WHY CARE?

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All the talk about charts and yields is tough to digest, but an inversion in the yield curve is considered to be a reliable predictor of a recession.

Wall Street tends to watch the relationship between the two-year and 10-year Treasury yields for clues to whether the bond market is worried about an economic downturn, even though they have at times inverted without a recession following.

Others market observers, including officials at the Federal Reserve, view the relationship between the 3-month and 10-year Treasuries to be the more important one. Every recession in the past 60 years has been preceded by an inversion of the yield curve between the three-month and 10-year Treasuries.

There's usually some lag between the two. One rule of thumb says it takes about a year after the three-month Treasury yield tops the 10-year yield before the onset of recession, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.

## WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?

At 0.56%, the three-month yield is still well below the 10-year yield of 2.41%, so no inversion there.

But on Tuesday, the two-year Treasury yield briefly topped the 10-year yield for the first time since the summer of 2019. Other, less-followed parts of the yield curve were already inverted. Though they don't have as good a record of success predicting recessions as the three-month yield versus the 10-year, they show the trend is swinging toward pessimism.

The last time the two-year yield topped the 10-year yield, it took less than a year before the global economy plunged into recession. At that time, though, the bond market did not see the pandemic coming. It was more worried about global trade tensions and slowing growth.

Now, the two-year yield is surging as investors ratchet up expectations for a more aggressive Fed. The central bank has already pulled its key overnight rate off its record low, the first increase since 2018, in hopes of beating down high inflation. It's also preparing to hike rates several more times, and the Fed has indicated it may do so by double the usual amount at some meetings. That has helped the two-year yield more than triple in 2022 alone.

The 10-year yield has also risen, but not as quickly.

## SO THE YIELD CURVE JUST REFLECTS THE BOND MARKET'S THINKING?

It could also have real effects on the economy. Banks, for example, make money by borrowing money at short-term rates and lending it out at longer-term rates. When that gap is wide, they make more in profit.

An inverted yield curve complicates that, though. If it causes banks to cut off lending — and thus growth opportunities for companies — it could help tighten the brakes on the economy.

## IS IT A PERFECT PREDICTOR?

No, an inverted yield curve has sent false positives before. The three-month and 10-year yields inverted in late 1966, for example, and a recession didn't hit until the end of 1969.

Some market watchers have also suggested the yield curve is now less significant because herculean actions by central banks around the world have distorted yields. Through the pandemic, the Federal Reserve bought trillions of dollars of bonds in order to keep longer-term yields low, after slashing overnight rates to nearly zero. Soon, it will start allowing those bonds to roll off its balance sheet, which should add upward pressure on longer-term yields.

## SHOULD I PANIC?

Fed Chair Jerome Powell would say no. Last week, he said that he pays more attention to the first 18 months of the yield curve than what's going on between the two-year and 10-year yields.

"That has 100% of the explanatory power of the yield curve," he said, and it's not inverted.

"The economy is very, very strong," he said, pointing to its continued growth and the healthy job market.

And even if the two-year and 10-year Treasury yields inverted on Tuesday, it may end up being just a temporary blip rather than a lasting trend.

Many investors, though, are getting more worried about the risk of a recession or the possibility of "stagflation," which would be the painful combination of high unemployment and high inflation.

The bond market, of course, also seems to be more pessimistic. Just look at the yield curve.

## EXPLAINER: What is entrapment's role at kidnap plot trial?

By MICHAEL TARM AP Legal Affairs Writer



**FILE - A confederate flag hangs from a porch on a property in Munith, Mich., Oct. 9, 2020, where law enforcement officials said suspects accused in a plot to kidnap Michigan Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer met to train and make plans. Four members of anti-government groups are on trial on federal charges accusing them of plotting to abduct Whitmer in 2020.** (Nicole

Hester/Ann Arbor News via AP, File)

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — The core question at the trial of four men charged with plotting to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is whether the FBI engaged in entrapment — the prohibited practice of cajoling or tricking subjects into committing crimes.

The FBI deployed undercover agents and informants in a sting that lasted months and ended in October 2020, when Adam Fox, Barry Croft Jr., Daniel Harris and Brandon Caserta were arrested. Prosecutors say the men were motivated by their hatred of government and fury over COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the Democratic governor. One witness said they hoped to prevent Joe Biden from winning the presidential election.

Here's a look at entrapment and how its being addressed at the trial in a Grand Rapids federal court:

### WHAT'S THE ORIGIN OF ENTRAPMENT?

It's a relatively new concept in U.S. law. According to a 2014 decision by Chicago's 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, a judge in 1864 mocked the idea that anyone could be entrapped by law enforcement, quoting Eve in the Bible explaining why she ate from the tree of knowledge: "The serpent beguiled me and I did eat."

"This plea has never since availed to shield crime or give indemnity to the culprit, and it is safe to say that under any code of civilized ethics ... it never will," the judge said.

However, the prohibition of entrapment emerged in the first half of the 20th century as an important check on overzealous criminal investigators.

### WHAT ARE THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF ENTRAPMENT?

Deceiving targets or utilizing agents who pretend to be someone they're not is an accepted investigatory technique and doesn't necessarily suggest entrapment, courts have ruled.

Entrapment occurs when investigators use coercion or persuasion to get targets to commit crimes that they showed no predisposition to commit until undercover agents or informants entered the picture.

In a 1988 landmark case, *Mathews v. United States*, the U.S. Supreme Court described someone without a predisposition as "an unwary innocent" versus "an unwary criminal who readily availed himself of the opportunity to perpetrate the crime." The latter can't claim entrapment.

Prosecutors must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that defendants weren't entrapped.

### WHAT'S THE MAIN PITFALL OF ARGUING ENTRAPMENT?

Defense attorneys are essentially admitting to jurors that their client did the deeds alleged in the indictment. They must surrender claims usually at the core of a defense, including that clients weren't at the scene of the crime or that their arrests were cases of mistaken identity.

To succeed with an entrapment claim, the defense must convince jurors that — given the right amount of deceit and pressure — they, too, might acquiesce to committing a major felony. That's a hard sell.

### HOW DID ENTRAPMENT BECOME CENTRAL TO THIS TRIAL?

Judges usually assess before trial whether there's a minimum level of evidence to justify an entrapment

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defense.

The presiding judge, Robert Jonker, initially said he would wait until evidence was entered at trial, but abruptly changed his mind during opening statements after defense lawyers violated his instructions, repeatedly suggesting the FBI entrapped their clients.

After asking jurors to step out of the room, the judge said he realized waiting to rule was untenable since the defense had structured their whole strategy around an entrapment defense. He told them they could be upfront with jurors about it.

WHAT HAS THE DEFENSE SAID SO FAR?

In openings, they portrayed their clients as big-talking, pot-smoking weekend warriors, susceptible to manipulation by FBI operatives who encouraged them to speak about far-fetched, ominous schemes.

"The point is, everything that moves this case forward ... it's the government moving all of it," Fox's lawyer, Christopher Gibbons, told jurors.

Joshua Blanchard, Croft's attorney, said agents secretly recorded the men when they were "absolutely out-of-your-mind stoned." In one session, he said, they spoke about strapping Whitmer to a kite to transport her.

"They knew it was stoned-crazy talk and not a plan," he said of the FBI.

WHAT ABOUT PROSECUTORS?

They have endeavored to show the men weren't just predisposed to going along with a kidnapping plot but that they were talking about it before they came into contact with federal agents and informants. Prosecutors also said the defendants took steps to carry out the plans, including scouting Whitmer's home.

"These were not people who were all talk," prosecutor Jonathan Roth said in his opening statement. "These were people who wanted to separate themselves from people who were all talk."

Government witnesses included co-defendants who pleaded guilty before trial and who testified that no one pressured them. Fox talked about snatching the governor "every time I saw him," Kaleb Franks, who pleaded guilty in February, told jurors.

DOES AN ENTRAPMENT DEFENSE EVER SUCCEED?

After an arrest, lawyers often declare their clients were entrapped, but the risks of pursuing such a strategy usually dissuade them from arguing it at trial.

An entrapment defense is always a long shot. But that's not to say it never works.

Among the best known successes was in the 1984 federal drugs trial of iconic automaker John DeLorean. The Detroit-born DeLorean was accused of conspiring to sell \$24 million of cocaine to save his money-losing venture building futuristic cars.

He was charged after an informant who had recently been convicted of drug trafficking went to the FBI to say DeLorean had approached him about such a scheme.

Jurors acquitted DeLorean after testimony that it was the informant who first approached DeLorean and then persuaded him that the drug deal could pull his faltering business out of a deepening financial hole.

## Relief for Kyiv? Russia vows to scale back near the capital

By NEBI QENA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia announced Tuesday it will significantly scale back military operations near Ukraine's capital and a northern city, as the outlines of a possible deal to end the grinding war came into view at the latest round of talks.

Ukraine's delegation at the conference, held in Istanbul, laid out a framework under which the country would declare itself neutral and its security would be guaranteed by an array of other nations.

Moscow's public reaction was positive, and the negotiations are expected to resume Wednesday, five weeks into what has devolved into a bloody war of attrition, with thousands dead and almost 4 million Ukrainians fleeing the country.

Amid the talks, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin said Moscow has decided to "fundamentally ... cut back military activity in the direction of Kyiv and Chernihiv" to "increase mutual trust and

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**The regional government headquarters of Mykolaiv, Ukraine, following a Russian attack, on Tuesday, March 29, 2022. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says seven people were killed in a missile strike on the regional government headquarters in the southern city of Mykolayiv.** (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

(AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

announcement was a sign of progress in the talks or an attempt by Moscow to buy time to continue its assault, said: "We'll see. I don't read anything into it until I see what their actions are."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested Russian indications of a pullback could be an attempt by Moscow to "deceive people and deflect attention."

It wouldn't be the first time. In the tense buildup to the invasion, the Russian military announced that some units were loading equipment onto rail cars and preparing to return to their home bases after completing exercises. At the time, Putin was signaling interest in diplomacy. But 10 days later, Russia launched its invasion.

Western officials say Moscow is now reinforcing troops in the Donbas in a bid to encircle Ukraine's forces. And Russia's deadly siege in the south continues, with civilians trapped in the ruins of Mariupol and other bombarded cities. The latest satellite imagery from commercial provider Maxar Technologies showed hundreds of people waiting outside a grocery store amid reports of food and water shortages.

"There is what Russia says and there is what Russia does, and we're focused on the latter," Blinken said in Morocco. "And what Russia is doing is the continued brutalization of Ukraine."

Even as negotiators gathered, Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces blasted a gaping hole in a nine-story government administration building in a strike on the southern port city of Mykolaiv, killing at least 12 people, emergency authorities said. The search for more bodies in the rubble continued.

"It's terrible. They waited for people to go to work" before striking the building, said regional governor Vitaliy Kim. "I overslept. I'm lucky."

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. has detected small numbers of Russian ground forces moving away from the Kyiv area, but it appeared to be a repositioning of forces, "not a real withdrawal."

He said it was too soon to say how extensive the Russian movements may be or where the troops will be repositioned.

"It does not mean the threat to Kyiv is over," Kirby said. "They can still inflict massive brutality on the country, including on Kyiv." He said Russian airstrikes against Kyiv continued.

create conditions for further negotiations."

He did not immediately spell out what that would mean in practical terms.

The announcement was met with skepticism from the U.S. and others.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Russia cannot be trusted. Although the signals from the talks are "positive," they "can't silence explosions of Russian shells," he said in a video address.

Zelenskyy said it was Ukrainian troops who forced Russia's hand, adding that "we shouldn't let down our guard" because the invading army still "has a great potential to continue attacks against our country."

Ukraine will continue negotiations, he said, but officials do not trust the word of the country that continues "fighting to destroy us."

While Moscow portrayed it as a goodwill gesture, its ground troops have become bogged down and taken heavy losses in their bid to seize Kyiv and other cities. Last week and again on Tuesday, the Kremlin seemed to lower its war aims, saying its "main goal" now is gaining control of the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas region in eastern Ukraine.

U.S. President Joe Biden, asked whether the Russian

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Rob Lee, a military expert at the U.S.-based Foreign Policy Research Institute, tweeted of the Russian announcement: "This sounds like more of an acknowledgment of the situation around Kyiv where Russia's advance has been stalled for weeks and Ukrainian forces have had recent successes. Russia doesn't have the forces to encircle the city."

The meeting in Istanbul was the first time negotiators from Russia and Ukraine talked face-to-face in two weeks. Earlier talks were held in person in Belarus or by video.

Among other things, the Kremlin has demanded all along that Ukraine drop any hope of joining NATO.

Ukraine's delegation offered a detailed framework for a peace deal under which a neutral Ukraine's security would be guaranteed by a group of third countries, including the U.S., Britain, France, Turkey, China and Poland, in an arrangement similar to NATO's "an attack on one is an attack on all" principle.

Ukraine said it would also be willing to hold talks over a 15-year period on the future of the Crimean Peninsula, seized by Russia in 2014.

Vladimir Medinsky, head of the Russian delegation, said on Russian TV that the Ukrainian proposals are a "step to meet us halfway, a clearly positive fact."

He cautioned that the parties are still far from reaching an agreement, but said: "We know now how to move further toward compromise. We aren't just marking time in talks."

In other developments:

— In what appeared to be a coordinated action to tackle Russian espionage, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Ireland and North Macedonia expelled scores of Russian diplomats.

— The head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency arrived in Ukraine to try to ensure the safety of the country's nuclear facilities. Russian forces have taken control of the decommissioned Chernobyl plant, site in 1986 of the world's worst nuclear accident, and of the active Zaporizhzhia plant, where a building was damaged in fighting.

— Russia has destroyed more than 60 religious buildings across the country in just over a month of war, with most of the damage concentrated near Kyiv and in the east, Ukraine's military said.

— In the room at the Istanbul talks was Roman Abramovich, a longtime Putin ally who has been sanctioned by Britain and the European Union. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the Chelsea soccer team owner has been serving as an unofficial mediator approved by both countries. But the mystery surrounding his role has been deepened by news reports that he may have been poisoned during an earlier round of talks.

Over the past several days, Ukrainian forces have mounted counterattacks and reclaimed ground on the outskirts of Kyiv and other areas.

Ukrainian soldiers gathered in a trench for photos with Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, who said that Ukraine had retaken control of a vast majority of Irpin, a key suburb northwest of the capital that has seen heavy fighting.

"We defend our motherland because we have very high morale," said Syrskyi, the commander in charge of the defense of Kyiv. "And because we want to win."

Ukrainian forces also took back Trostyanets, south of Sumy in the northeast, after weeks of occupation that left a landscape of Russian bodies, burned and twisted tanks and charred buildings.

Putin's ground forces have been thwarted not just by stronger-than-expected Ukrainian resistance, but by what Western officials say are Russian tactical missteps, poor morale, shortages of food, fuel and cold weather gear, and other problems.

Repeating what the military said last week, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Tuesday that "liberating Donbas" is now Moscow's chief objective.

While that presents a possible face-saving exit strategy for Putin, it has also raised Ukrainian fears the Kremlin aims to split the country and force it to surrender a swath of its territory.

## EXPLAINER: Alopecia 'strips people of their identity'

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press



**Will Smith, izquierda, y Jada Pinkett Smith llegan a los Oscar el 27 de marzo de 2022 en el Teatro Dolby en Los Angeles.** (Foto Jordan Strauss/Invision/AP)

Alopecia is an autoimmune disorder that affects millions of people around the world. But to many women — and to Black women, in particular — it is much more. It's about beauty and race, about culture and about the uncertainty that the disorder creates around people's perception of themselves.

So during the 94th Academy Awards ceremony on Sunday night, when comedian Chris Rock threw a pointed joke at Jada Pinkett Smith about her hair loss that some felt was insensitive, the event exposed many layers of feeling for those who wrestle with the disorder.

It also threw a spotlight on the disorder, which is little discussed but fairly common and affects a wide range of people, including children.

Actor Will Smith, who stunned millions when he walked onstage and slapped Rock over the joke about Pinkett Smith, has since apologized to the comedian, the academy and viewers.

Here are some of the things about alopecia that are reverberating:

### WHAT'S IT LIKE TO HAVE ALOPECIA?

Rock's joke was tough to hear for New York interior designer Sheila Bridges.

She spoke to Rock for his 2009 documentary "Good Hair" about the importance of hair in Black culture. She talked about the shame and humiliation of losing hers to the disease, how her hairstyle is intertwined with her racial identity and how the loss of her hair affected her sense of femininity and social currency.

The Oscars slap left Bridges with conflicting emotions: She condemned Smith's assault on Rock, sympathized with Pinkett Smith and was deeply disappointed in Rock.

"It is not easy as a woman to navigate life without any hair and a society that is obsessed with hair," Bridges said.

She doesn't wear wigs because she doesn't want to, and also hopes to normalize and de-stigmatize the appearance of bald women.

But even a decade after she decided to go bald in public, Bridges said it's still difficult for some to accept: "I rarely make it through the week without someone saying something that's very, very insensitive."

While it's unclear if Rock was aware of Pinkett Smith's diagnosis, hair in general can already be a fraught landscape for Black women, who have been expected for generations to alter their natural hair texture to fit a white standard of beauty. Even wealthy and famous Black actresses have said it can be tough to find Hollywood stylists who know how to do their hair.

Black women are 80% more likely to change their natural hair to meet social norms at work, according to a 2019 study by the Dove personal care division of the Unilever USA company.

Black students are also far more likely than other students to be suspended for dress code or hair violations, according to the research that helped convince the U.S. House to vote to prohibit discrimination based on natural hairstyles earlier this month.

"The only good thing that can come out of all this is that alopecia is front and center," Bridges said about the Oscars slap.

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## WHY HAS HAIR BEEN IMPORTANT TO BLACK REPRESENTATION?

For many Black Americans, grooming and styling choices are intertwined with a desire to buck what is considered normal or acceptable by wider society. From Afros and cornrows to wigs and hair extensions, Black hair can be more than just style statements.

Black women and girls watching the Supreme Court nomination and confirmation hearings for Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson said in interviews with AP that they were moved to see someone who wears her hair in "sisterlocks" ascend to such a prominent position. It's a style that uses natural hair woven into micro locs and is known for its versatility.

Seeing someone like Jackson embrace her natural hair, instead of conforming to societal beauty standards, served as a reminder to those women and girls to not shrink themselves in order to succeed, they said.

For Black women in the public eye, losing the pride and representation symbolized by their hairstyles can add another layer to the professional and self-esteem challenges of hair loss.

## WHAT CAUSES ALOPECIA?

Alopecia areata, the autoimmune disorder Pinkett Smith has, can make hair fall out of the scalp in patches. It can also affect other parts of the body, like eyebrows and nose hair.

Alopecia can come on quickly, is unpredictable and can be incredibly tough to deal with mentally, said Brett King, a hair loss expert at Yale Medicine.

"Imagine if you woke up today missing half of an eyebrow," he said. "That unpredictability is one of the things that's so mentally treacherous and awful because you have no control of it ... it's a disease that strips people of their identity."

While seldom discussed, it's actually fairly common: the second biggest cause of hair loss, after male or female pattern balding. About 2% of people have it. It's not physically painful, in some cases it spontaneously goes away and it can be treated.

## HOW DOES IT AFFECT WOMEN? WHAT ABOUT KIDS?

Hair is a large part of anyone's appearance, and for women it's bound up with cultural concepts about what makes them look feminine.

"Most women are expected to have good hair," said William Yates, a Black Chicago-based certified hair loss surgeon. "They're well aware that men lose their hair and 'bald gracefully,' so to speak, but a female losing their hair is devastating."

The condition also tends to hit people when they are relatively young. Most are diagnosed before age 40, and about half of them are children when the disorder first appears, said Christopher English, a board-certified dermatologist for Intermountain Healthcare in Salt Lake City.

Having the condition is especially tough for teenagers, for whom appearance anxiety and peer pressure are often already at an all-time high, said Gary Sherwood, communications director at the National Alopecia Areata Foundation. In Elkhart, Indiana, a 12-year-old girl with the disorder took her own life this month after she was bullied at school, her family has said.

Some studies have also pointed to the disease being more prevalent among Black and Latino people, Sherwood and Yates said. The National Institutes of Health states it affects all racial and ethnic groups, men and women.

Rock's joke was "not unusual," Sherwood said. "This has been around as long as there have been humans on Earth ... for centuries people would not talk about it."

He's hoping one good outcome of the Oscars slap will be more education, awareness and empathy.

## **Biden signs bill making lynching a federal hate crime**

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Presidents typically say a few words before they turn legislation into law. But Joe Biden flipped the script Tuesday when it came time to put his signature on the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act.



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**President Joe Biden speaks after signing the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act in the Rose Garden of the White House, Tuesday, March 29, 2022, in Washington. Vice President Kamala Harris, left, and Michelle Duster, great-granddaughter of civil rights pioneer Ida B. Wells look on.** (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

mer of 1955 became a galvanizing moment in the civil rights era. His grieving mother insisted on an open casket to show everyone how her son had been brutalized.

"It's a long time coming," said Parker, who was onstage with Biden when the president signed the bill. Parker, two years older than Till, was with his cousin at their relatives' home in Mississippi and witnessed Till's kidnapping.

In his remarks, Biden acknowledged the struggle to get a law on the books, and spoke about how lynchings were used to terrorize and intimidate Blacks in the United States. More than 4,400 Blacks died by lynching between 1877 and 1950, mostly in the South, he said.

"Lynching was pure terror, to enforce the lie that not everyone, not everyone belongs in America, not everyone is created equal," he said.

Biden, who has many Black men and women in key positions throughout his administration, stressed that forms of racial terror continue in the United States, demonstrating the need for an anti-lynching statute.

"Racial hate isn't an old problem — it's a persistent problem," Biden said. "Hate never goes away. It only hides."

The new law makes it possible to prosecute a crime as a lynching when a conspiracy to commit a hate crime leads to death or serious bodily injury, according to the bill's champion, Rep. Bobby Rush, D-Ill. The law lays out a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison and fines.

The House approved the bill 422-3 on March 7, with eight members not voting, after it cleared the Senate by unanimous consent. Rush had introduced a bill in January 2019 but it stalled in the Senate after the House passed by a vote of 410-4.

The NAACP began lobbying for anti-lynching legislation in the 1920s. A federal hate crime law was passed and signed into law in the 1990s, decades after the civil rights movement.

"Today we are gathered to do unfinished business," Harris said, "to acknowledge the horror and this part of our history, to state unequivocally that lynching is and has always been a hate crime and to make clear that the federal government may now prosecute these crimes as such."

He signed the bill at a desk in the White House Rose Garden. Then he spoke.

"All right. It's law," said the president, who was surrounded by Vice President Kamala Harris, members of Congress and top Justice Department officials. He was also joined by a descendant of Ida B. Wells, a Black journalist who reported on lynchings, and Rev. Wheeler Parker, a cousin of Till.

Biden said it's "a little unusual to do the bill signing, not say anything and then speak. But that's how we set it up."

He thanked the audience of civil rights leaders, Congressional Black Caucus members and other guests who kept pushing for the law for "never giving up, never ever giving up."

Congress first considered anti-lynching legislation more than 120 years ago. Until March of this year, it had failed to pass such legislation nearly 200 times, beginning with a bill introduced in 1900 by North Carolina Rep. George Henry White, the only Black member of Congress at the time.

Harris was a prime sponsor of the bill when she was in the Senate.

The Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act is named for the Black teenager whose killing in Mississippi in the summer of 1955 became a galvanizing moment in the civil rights era.

"Lynching is not a relic of the past," she added. "Racial acts of terror still occur in our nation, and when they do, we must all have the courage to name them and hold the perpetrators to account."

Till, 14, had traveled from his Chicago home to visit relatives in Mississippi in 1955 when it was alleged that he whistled at a white woman. He was kidnapped, beaten and shot in the head. A large metal fan was tied to his neck with barbed wire and his body was thrown into a river. His mother, Mamie Till, insisted on an open casket at the funeral to show the brutality he had suffered.

Two white men, Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam, were accused, but acquitted by an all-white-male jury. Bryant and Milam later told a reporter that they kidnapped and killed Till.

During a video interview after the bill signing, Parker credited current events for helping the anti-lynching bill move through Congress and to Biden's desk. Parker specifically mentioned the police killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, which sparked months of protests in the United States and other countries after videotape of the officer's actions circulated.

He drew a connection between Floyd and Till, saying, "That's what caused Rosa Parks to not give her seat up and that sparked the civil rights movement, because she thought about Emmett Till."

## 8-hour gap in Trump's Jan. 6 White House phone records

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, COLLEEN LONG and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol has identified an almost 8-hour gap in official White House records of then-President Donald Trump's phone calls as the violence unfolded and his supporters stormed the building, according to two people familiar with the probe.

The gap extends from a little after 11 a.m. to about 7 p.m. on Jan. 6, 2021, and involves White House phone calls, according to one of the people. Both spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly about the ongoing investigation.

The committee is investigating the gap in the official White House log, which includes the switchboard and a daily record of the president's activities. But it does not mean the panel is in the dark about what Trump was doing during that time.

The House panel has made broad requests for separate cell phone records and has talked to more than 800 witnesses, including many of the aides who spent the day with Trump. The committee also has thousands of texts from the cell phone of Mark Meadows, who was then Trump's chief of staff.

The committee's effort to piece together Trump's day as his supporters broke into the Capitol underscores the challenge that his habitual avoidance of records laws poses — not only to historians of his tumultuous four years but to the House panel, which intends to capture the full story of the former president's attempt to overturn the election results in hearings and reports later this year.

The committee has trained a particular focus on what the president was doing in the White House as hundreds of his supporters beat police, broke into the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Demo-



**FILE - President Donald Trump speaks during a rally protesting the electoral college certification of Joe Biden as President in Washington on Jan. 6, 2021. The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol has identified a roughly eight-hour gap in official records of then-President Donald Trump's phone calls as the violence unfolded and his supporters stormed the building, according to a person familiar with the probe.** (AP Photo/Evan Vucci,

File)

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crat Joe Biden's 2020 presidential election victory. The missing records raise questions of whether Trump purposefully circumvented official channels to avoid records.

Trump was known to use other people's cell phones to make calls, as well as his own. He often bypassed the White House switchboard, placing calls directly, according to a former aide who requested anonymity to discuss the private calls. It is not unusual for presidential calls to be channeled through other people.

It is unclear whether the committee has obtained records of cell phone calls made that day. The panel issued a broad records preservation order in August to almost three dozen telecommunications and social media companies, demanding that the companies save communications for several hundred people in case Congress decided to issue subpoenas for them. Individuals included in that request included Trump, members of his family and several of his Republican allies in Congress.

The committee also is continuing to receive records from the National Archives and other sources, which could produce additional information and help produce a full picture of the president's communications.

While hundreds of people have cooperated with the probe, in some cases the panel has been hampered by Trump's assertions of executive privilege over material and interviews. Courts have overruled his efforts to block some documents, but many witnesses who are still close to the former president — and several who were in the White House that day — have declined to answer the committee's questions.

Biden, who has authority as the sitting president over his predecessor's White House privilege claims, said Tuesday he would reject Trump's claims concerning the testimony of his daughter, Ivanka Trump, and her husband, Jared Kushner.

Kushner, who was one of Trump's top White House aides, is scheduled for an interview with the panel on Thursday. The committee has requested an interview with Ivanka Trump as well, but has not said whether she will comply.

During the roughly eight hours on Jan. 6, Trump addressed a huge crowd of supporters at the nearby Ellipse, repeated falsehoods about his election defeat and told them to walk to the Capitol, make their voices heard and "fight like hell." He then returned to the White House and watched as the mob broke into the Capitol. More than 700 people have been arrested in the violence.

Several of Trump's calls that day are already publicly known. He spoke to Vice President Mike Pence between 11 a.m. and 11:30, according to a person familiar with that conversation, as he had been lobbying Pence publicly and privately to object while presiding over the certification. He also spoke with several GOP members of the House and Senate as his allies in Congress were preparing to challenge the official vote count.

He had a tense conversation with House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy, who asked him to call off the mob, according to Republican Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler of Washington state, who shared McCarthy's account shortly after the insurrection. Trump responded that the rioters must be "more upset about the election than you are," according to Herrera Beutler.

Trump also talked to Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan and Sen. Tommy Tuberville of Alabama, among other lawmakers. Tuberville has said he spoke to the president while the Senate was being evacuated. Utah Sen. Mike Lee has said that Trump accidentally called him when he was trying to reach Tuberville.

The White House log does show calls Trump made before that time period, as he was preparing to speak at the rally. That log shows calls with his former aide Steve Bannon, conservative commentator William Bennett and Sean Hannity of Fox News, according to one of the people familiar with the records.

The gap in the phone records was previously reported by the AP. The exact length of time of the gap was first reported jointly by The Washington Post and CBS News.

Trump had no immediate comment Tuesday, but he has previously disparaged the investigation and sued to stop records production.

## March Madness: What to watch for in a stacked Final Four

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Basketball Writer



**Duke head coach Mike Krzyzewski celebrates while cutting down the net after Duke defeated Arkansas in a college basketball game in the Elite 8 round of the NCAA men's tournament in San Francisco, Saturday, March 26, 2022.** (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

North Carolina. Hubert Davis took the reins from Roy Williams and continued the Tar Heels down the championship path. He could follow Bill Guthridge by winning a national title in his first season after following a legend.

### STAR PLAYERS

Paolo Banchero, Duke. Offense, defense, clutch plays — the 6-foot-10 freshman can do it all. No wonder he's projected as a possible top-3 pick in the NBA draft.

Ochai Agbaji, Kansas. The first-team All-American may be the best athlete in the Final Four — and that's saying something in this bracket.

Armando Bacot, North Carolina. Will block your shot, then dunk in your face. Dominating at both ends.

Collin Gillespie, Villanova. Heady, steady, clutch and experienced. The perfect floor leader for one of the game's most efficient teams.

### KEY PLAYERS

Mark Williams, Duke. Scoring over the 7-1 sophomore in the lane is an accomplishment. Getting dunked on by him is almost inevitable.

Christian Braun, Kansas. The sharpshooter is perfect for Self's high pick-and-roll offense. Surprisingly good finisher at the rim.

Caleb Love, North Carolina. The athletic freshman can score in bunches and loves big moments. He had 30 points, including two late 3-pointers in 37 seconds in the Tar Heels' Sweet 16 win over the Bruins.

Caleb Daniels, Villanova. The New Orleans native is headed home and will need to be a difference maker with Moore out. He has the tools.

### THE GAMES

Villanova vs. Kansas, 6:09 p.m. ET Saturday (TBS). The Jayhawks have the depth advantage, particularly with Moore's injury. The Wildcats are uber efficient, powerfully built and never back down. Nothing will be easy about this big-time match-up.

March Madness has taken a power turn as it turns to the Final Four. No more plucky underdogs, much as we enjoyed the run by Saint Peter's. No more double-digit seeds looking for upsets.

This year's Final Four is Duke and Carolina, Kansas and Villanova, four powerhouses looking to add another national championship to their formidable resumes.

Blue bloods in the Big Easy. It could be an all-time weekend of games and we've got a rundown of what to look for:

### TEAMS

Kansas. The lone No. 1 seed left in the bracket may be Bill Self's best chance to add an elusive second national championship to the one he and the Jayhawks won in 2008.

Duke. You may have heard: Coach K in his final NCAA Tournament. A walk-off national title would be the perfect ending to a Hall of Fame career that includes the most wins in NCAA history.

Villanova. Another year, another Wildcats trip to the Final Four. Losing Justin Moore to a torn Achilles tendon is tough, but never count out a Jay Wright team.

Roy Williams and continued the Tar Heels down the championship path. He could follow Bill Guthridge by winning a national title in his first season after following a legend.

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Duke vs. North Carolina, 8:49 p.m. ET Saturday (TBS). The Tobacco Road rivals have met 257 times. This will be their first in the NCAA Tournament and Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski's final game against the Tar Heels. Not sure it gets any better than this.

## ODDS

Odds to win the national title, according to FanDuel Sportsbook: Duke plus-160, Kansas plus-180, Villanova plus-450, North Carolina plus-500.

Final Four game odds: Kansas minus-4.5 vs. Villanova; Duke minus-4 vs. North Carolina.

Over/under: Kansas-Villanova 151 points, Duke-North Carolina 132.5.

## NUMBERS

3 — Hall of Fame coaches in the Final Four: Krzyzewski, Self and Wright.

17 — Combined national championships. Each team has won at least three, a first for the Final Four.

21 — Final Fours for North Carolina, an NCAA record.

61 — Combined Final Four appearances for Duke, North Carolina, Kansas and Villanova.

83 — Villanova's free-throw shooting percentage, on pace to break Harvard's NCAA record of 82.2% set in 1994.

## EXPLAINER: Why bond yields may be warning of a recession

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — One of the more reliable warning signals for an economic recession is starting to shine. The "yield curve" is watched for clues to how the bond market is feeling about the U.S. economy's long-term prospects. On Tuesday, a closely followed part of the yield curve gave investors some cause for concern.

### WHAT IS THE YIELD CURVE?

At the center of the investing world are Treasuries, the IOUs the U.S. government gives to investors who lend it money. The yield curve is a chart showing how much in interest different Treasuries are paying.

On one end are shorter-term Treasuries, which get repaid in a few months or a couple years. There, yields closely follow expectations for what the Federal Reserve will do with overnight interest rates. On the other end of the chart are longer-term Treasuries, which take 10 years or decades to mature. Their yields tend to move more on expectations for economic growth and inflation further into the future.

Usually, longer-term Treasuries offer higher yields than shorter-term ones, resulting in a chart with an upward sloping line. That's in part because investors typically demand higher yields to lock away their money for longer, given the possibility of future rate increases by the Fed and the risk of inflation. But when investors are worried the economy will fall sharply, perhaps because the Fed is pushing short-term rates too high too aggressively, they're willing to accept less for a Treasury maturing many years in the future.

When yields for short-term Treasuries are higher than yields for long-term ones, market watchers call it an "inverted yield curve." And when that chart has a downward sloping line, Wall Street starts getting nervous.

### WHY CARE?

All the talk about charts and yields is tough to digest, but an inversion in the yield curve is considered to be a reliable predictor of a recession.

Wall Street tends to watch the relationship between the two-year and 10-year Treasury yields for clues to whether the bond market is worried about an economic downturn, even though they have at times inverted without a recession following.

Others market observers, including officials at the Federal Reserve, view the relationship between the 3-month and 10-year Treasuries to be the more important one. Every recession in the past 60 years has been preceded by an inversion of the yield curve between the three-month and 10-year Treasuries.

There's usually some lag between the two. One rule of thumb says it takes about a year after the three-month Treasury yield tops the 10-year yield before the onset of recession, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.

### WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?

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At 0.56%, the three-month yield is still well below the 10-year yield of 2.41%, so no inversion there.

But on Tuesday, the two-year Treasury yield briefly topped the 10-year yield for the first time since the summer of 2019. Other, less-followed parts of the yield curve were already inverted. Though they don't have as good a record of success predicting recessions as the three-month yield versus the 10-year, they show the trend is swinging toward pessimism.

The last time the two-year yield topped the 10-year yield, it took less than a year before the global economy plunged into recession. At that time, though, the bond market did not see the pandemic coming. It was more worried about global trade tensions and slowing growth.

Now, the two-year yield is surging as investors ratchet up expectations for a more aggressive Fed. The central bank has already pulled its key overnight rate off its record low, the first increase since 2018, in hopes of beating down high inflation. It's also preparing to hike rates several more times, and the Fed has indicated it may do so by double the usual amount at some meetings. That has helped the two-year yield more than triple in 2022 alone.

The 10-year yield has also risen, but not as quickly.

SO THE YIELD CURVE JUST REFLECTS THE BOND MARKET'S THINKING?

It could also have real effects on the economy. Banks, for example, make money by borrowing money at short-term rates and lending it out at longer-term rates. When that gap is wide, they make more in profit.

An inverted yield curve complicates that, though. If it causes banks to cut off lending — and thus growth opportunities for companies — it could help tighten the brakes on the economy.

IS IT A PERFECT PREDICTOR?

No, an inverted yield curve has sent false positives before. The three-month and 10-year yields inverted in late 1966, for example, and a recession didn't hit until the end of 1969.

Some market watchers have also suggested the yield curve is now less significant because herculean actions by central banks around the world have distorted yields. Through the pandemic, the Federal Reserve bought trillions of dollars of bonds in order to keep longer-term yields low, after slashing overnight rates to nearly zero. Soon, it will start allowing those bonds to roll off its balance sheet, which should add upward pressure on longer-term yields.

SHOULD I PANIC?

Fed Chair Jerome Powell would say no. Last week, he said that he pays more attention to the first 18 months of the yield curve than what's going on between the two-year and 10-year yields.

"That has 100% of the explanatory power of the yield curve," he said, and it's not inverted.

"The economy is very, very strong," he said, pointing to its continued growth and the healthy job market.

And even if the two-year and 10-year Treasury yields inverted on Tuesday, it may end up being just a temporary blip rather than a lasting trend.

Many investors, though, are getting more worried about the risk of a recession or the possibility of "stagflation," which would be the painful combination of high unemployment and high inflation.

The bond market, of course, also seems to be more pessimistic. Just look at the yield curve.

## US opens second COVID boosters to 50 and up, others at risk

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

Americans 50 and older can get a second COVID-19 booster if it's been at least four months since their last vaccination, a chance at extra protection for the most vulnerable in case the coronavirus rebounds.

The Food and Drug Administration on Tuesday authorized an extra dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine for that age group and for certain younger people with severely weakened immune systems.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention later recommended the extra shot as an option but stopped short of urging that those eligible rush out and get it right away. That decision expands the additional booster to millions more Americans.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, CDC's director, said it was especially important for older Americans — those 65 and older — and the 50-somethings with chronic illnesses such as heart disease or diabetes to consider

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another shot.

"They are the most likely to benefit from receiving an additional booster dose at this time," Walensky said.

There's evidence protection can wane particularly in higher-risk groups, and for them another booster "will help save lives," FDA vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks said.

For all the attention on who should get a fourth dose of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, only about half of Americans eligible for a third shot have gotten one — and the government urged them to get up to date. Two shots plus a booster still offer strong protection against severe illness and death, even during the winter surge of the super-contagious omicron variant.

The move toward additional boosters comes at a time of great uncertainty, with limited evidence to tell how much benefit an extra dose right now could offer. COVID-19 cases have dropped to low levels in the U.S., but all vaccines are less powerful against newer mutants than earlier versions of the virus — and health officials are warily watching an omicron sibling that's causing worrisome jumps in infections in other countries.

Pfizer had asked the FDA to clear a fourth shot for people 65 and older, while Moderna requested another dose for all adults "to provide flexibility" for the government to decide who really needs one.

FDA's Marks said regulators set the age at 50 because that's when chronic conditions that increase the risks from COVID-19 become more common.

Until now, the FDA had allowed a fourth vaccine dose only for the immune-compromised as young as 12. Vaccines have a harder time revving up severely weak immune systems, and Marks said their protection also tends to wane sooner. Tuesday's decision allows them another booster, too — a fifth dose. Only the Pfizer vaccine can be used in those as young as 12; Moderna's is for adults.

What about people who got Johnson & Johnson's single-dose shot? They already were eligible for one booster of any kind. Of the 1.3 million who got a second J&J shot, the CDC said now they may choose a third dose — either Moderna or Pfizer. For the more than 4 million who got Moderna or Pfizer as their second shot, the CDC says an additional booster is only necessary if they meet the newest criteria — a severely weakened immune system or are 50 or older.

That's because a CDC study that tracked which boosters J&J recipients initially chose concluded a Moderna or Pfizer second shot was superior to a second J&J dose.

If the new recommendations sound confusing, outside experts say it makes sense to consider extra protection for the most vulnerable.

"There might be a reason to top off the tanks a little bit" for older people and those with other health conditions, said University of Pennsylvania immunologist E. John Wherry, who wasn't involved in the government's decision.

But while he encourages older friends and relatives to follow the advice, the 50-year-old Wherry — who is healthy, vaccinated and boosted — doesn't plan on getting a fourth shot right away. With protection against severe illness still strong, "I'm going to wait until it seems like there's a need."

While protection against milder infections naturally wanes over time, the immune system builds multiple layers of defense and the type that prevents severe illness and death is holding up.

During the U.S. omicron wave, two doses were nearly 80% effective against needing a ventilator or death — and a booster pushed that protection to 94%, the CDC recently reported. Vaccine effectiveness was lowest — 74% — in immune-compromised people, the vast majority of whom hadn't gotten a third dose.

To evaluate an extra booster, U.S. officials looked to Israel, which opened a fourth dose to people 60 and older during the omicron surge. The FDA said no new safety concerns emerged in a review of 700,000 fourth doses administered.

Preliminary data posted online last week suggested some benefit: Israeli researchers counted 92 deaths among more than 328,000 people who got the extra shot, compared to 232 deaths among 234,000 people who skipped the fourth dose.

What's far from clear is how long any extra benefit from another booster would last, and thus when to get it.

"The 'when' is a really difficult part. Ideally we would time booster doses right before surges but we

don't always know when that's going to be," said Dr. William Moss, a vaccine expert at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Plus, a longer interval between shots helps the immune system mount a stronger, more cross-reactive defense.

"If you get a booster too close together, it's not doing any harm — you're just not going to get much benefit from it," said Wherry.

The newest booster expansion may not be the last: Next week, the government will hold a public meeting to debate if everyone eventually needs a fourth dose, possibly in the fall, of the original vaccine or an updated shot.

Even if higher-risk Americans get boosted now, Marks said they may need yet another dose in the fall if regulators decide to tweak the vaccine.

For that effort, studies in people — of omicron-targeted shots alone or in combination with the original vaccine — are underway. The National Institutes of Health recently tested monkeys and found "no significant advantage" to using a booster that targets just omicron.

## Civilian Army leader led child porn ring, risked US security

By MICHAEL REZENDES Associated Press

SIERRA VISTA, Ariz. (AP) — David Frodsham was a top civilian commander at a U.S. air base in Afghanistan when he "jokingly" asked an IT technician for access to YouPorn, the video-sharing pornographic website.

During his time in the war zone, Frodsham told one woman that he hired her because he "wanted to be surrounded by pretty women," and routinely called others "honey," "babe," and "cougar" before he was ordered home after the military verified multiple allegations of sexual harassment.

"I would not recommend placing him back into a position of authority but rather pursuing disciplinary actions at his home station," wrote one commanding officer when recommending that the Army order Frodsham to leave his post at Bagram Airfield and return to Fort Huachuca, a major Army installation in Arizona, according to a U.S. Army investigative file obtained by The Associated Press.

But when Frodsham returned to his home station in fall 2015, he rejoined the Network Enterprise Technology Command, the Army's information technology service provider, where he had served as director of personnel for a global command of 15,000 soldiers and civilians, according to his Army resume.

By spring of the following year, he was arrested in Arizona for leading a child sex abuse ring that included an Army sergeant who was posting child pornography to the internet. Among the victims was one of Frodsham's adopted sons

Frodsham pleaded guilty to sex abuse charges in 2016 and is serving a 17-year sentence. But records reviewed by the AP show that the U.S. Army and the state of Arizona missed or ignored multiple red flags over more than a decade, which allowed Frodsham to allegedly abuse his adopted son and other children for years, all the while putting national security at risk.

The state permitted Frodsham and his wife, Barbara, to foster, adopt and retain custody of their many children despite nearly 20 complaints, and attempted complaints, of abuse, neglect, maltreatment and licensing violations. Meanwhile, the Army gave Frodsham security clearances and sensitive jobs at a time when his illicit sexual practices made him vulnerable to blackmail.

"He would have been an obvious target of foreign intelligence services because of his role and his location," said Frank Figliuzzi, the former assistant director of counterintelligence for the FBI. "Fort Huachuca is one of the more sensitive installations in the continental United States. People with security issues should not be there." In addition to NETCOM, where Frodsham worked, Fort Huachuca is home to the Army's Intelligence and Security Command, according to its website.

Public relations officials at Fort Huachuca confirmed that Frodsham was a program manager for NETCOM before he was arrested on child sex abuse charges. They declined to say whether Frodsham was disciplined after returning from Afghanistan, or whether the Army ever considered him a security risk.

Frodsham, former Sgt. Randall Bischak and a third man not associated with the Army are all serving



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prison terms for the roles they played in the child sex abuse ring. But the investigation is continuing because Sierra Vista police believe additional men took part.

Now, the criminal investigation is spilling over into civil court, where two of Frodsham's adopted sons have filed separate lawsuits against the state for licensing David and Barbara Frodsham as foster parents in a home where they say they were physically and sexually abused throughout their lives.

A third adopted son filed suit Tuesday in Arizona state court in Cochise County, said attorney Lynne Cadigan, who represents all three. In the latest complaint, 19-year-old Trever Frodsham says case workers missed or overlooked numerous signs that David and Barbara Frodsham were unfit parents. These included a 2002 sex abuse complaint filed with local police by one of the Frodshams' biological daughters against an older biological brother, and the fact that David and Barbara Frodsham were themselves victims of child sex abuse.

Trever's allegations echo those featured in an earlier lawsuit filed by his older biological brother, Ryan Frodsham, and one filed by Neal Taylor, both of whom were also adopted into the Frodsham household.

In an interview with the AP, Ryan Frodsham said his adoptive father began sexually abusing him when he was 9 or 10 years old and the abuse continued into his teens, when David Frodsham began offering his son's sexual services to other men. "Makes me throw up thinking about it," Ryan said.

In his lawsuit, Ryan Frodsham said the state was informed that David and Barbara Frodsham were physically abusing their children "by slapping them in the face, pinching them, hitting them with a wooden spoon, putting hot sauce in their mouths, pulling them by the hair, bending their fingers back to inflict pain, forcing them to hold cans with their arms extended for long periods time," and refusing to let them use the bathroom unless the door remained open. In his AP interview, Ryan said Barbara never sexually abused him but walked into the room where David was abusing him at least twice.

"She knew what was going on," he said.

The lawsuits and related legal filings also say investigators with the Department of Child Safety and case workers with Catholic Community Services, which subcontracts foster and adoption work from the state, failed to effectively follow up on 19 complaints and attempted complaints regarding the Frodsham home spanning more than a decade.

The complaints began in 2002, when the Frodshams applied for their foster care license, and continued until 2015, when David Frodsham was charged with disorderly conduct and driving drunk with children in his car, prompting the state to suspend their license indefinitely and remove all foster children from their home, although the charges were later dismissed.

Five months later, the Army deployed Frodsham to Afghanistan, where he was ordered back to Arizona after only four months of service.

## REPORTS FELL ON DEAF EARS

The lawsuits say the Frodshams' adopted children attempted to report their own physical and sexual abuse without success.

For instance, Neal Taylor's lawsuit says he attempted to report that David Frodsham was sexually abusing him in two phone calls to his case manager, both of which he placed from school.

The first time, the case manager reported the call to Neal's adoptive mother, who "interrogated" him and "proceeded to punish" him, according to his lawsuit. The second time, the case manager refused to meet with him unless he disclosed the reason for his call over the phone, because he would have had to drive 90 minutes from Tucson to Sierra Vista for a private meeting.

Ryan Frodsham's lawsuit and the related legal filings say he reported repeated alleged physical abuse by Barbara Frodsham to Sierra Vista police when he was 12 years old after running away from home. Police photographed several bruises, returned him to Barbara Frodsham, and reported the incident to the state Department of Child Safety. Despite the photographs and a police report, a case worker who met with Ryan five weeks later found his allegations "unsubstantiated."

Arizona Department of Child Safety spokesman Darren DaRonco declined to answer specific questions about the lawsuits. He instead sent an email outlining the state's procedures for screening prospective foster and adoptive parents. "Despite all of these safeguards, people are sometimes able to avoid detec-

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tion," DaRonco said, "especially if a person has no prior criminal or child abuse history."

Yet David and Barbara Frodsham have both said they were abused as minors.

In their written application to become foster parents, Barbara Frodsham indicated that neither she nor her husband had been sexually victimized. But in recent pretrial testimony for Ryan Frodsham's lawsuit, she said she would have revealed her abuse if she had been asked by a state investigator as part of the licensing process.

David Frodsham, for his part, told a probation official after his guilty plea that he had been abused as a teenager.

Many child welfare experts believe people with a history of child sexual abuse are more likely to abuse children in their own households and should be questioned to ensure they've overcome their trauma before being allowed to provide foster care.

Arizona's child welfare case workers "did not know how to interview and, therefore, they didn't get candid answers from the Frodshams," said Kathleen Faller, an expert witness retained in Ryan Frodsham's lawsuit. In pretrial testimony, Faller also said the state should not have granted the Frodshams' foster care license.

Barbara Frodsham, who divorced David following his guilty plea, did not return multiple telephone calls from the AP, and did not respond to detailed questions left on her voice mail. At the time of her husband's sentencing, she was working at Fort Huachuca as a personnel specialist, according to law enforcement records. A spokeswoman at Fort Huachuca said she still holds the position.

Attorneys for the state and the other defendants are seeking to have the cases dismissed, based in part on state law that grants immunity to state employees for mistakes or misjudgments committed in the course of their work. The law does not provide immunity for "gross negligence," which the Frodsham brothers and Neal Taylor are alleging.

The state also says all the complaints about the Frodsham children and the Frodsham home were properly handled.

## CHILD SEX ABUSE RING

The Frodsham case started as child sex abuse investigations often do: with an undercover Homeland Security agent lurking in a chat room favored by child pornographers. The Philadelphia-based agent, using the Kik messaging app, ran into someone calling himself "Pup Brass" who was posting videos and photos labeled "pedopicsandvidd."

Kik offers users a degree of anonymity but it stores IP addresses, which help identify a device's connection to the internet and can help identify the device's owner. According to a Sierra Vista police probable cause statement, federal and local law enforcement agents using the IP address and other information — some gleaned from social media accounts — soon determined that "Pup Brass" was Sgt. Randall Bischak.

When they raided his home, seizing computers, cell phones, tablets and CDs holding child pornography, Bischak confessed that he'd been having sex with a 59-year-old man he called "Dave" and his teenage son. In at least one instance Bischak had secretly recorded the sex on video. He also told investigators that he and Frodsham discussed having sex with small children and that Frodsham had supplied him with at least one of the "little ones."

Thomas Ransford, who specializes in child sex abuse cases for the Sierra Vista police, was no stranger to Frodsham. In the mid-2000s, he served as a military police officer at Fort Huachuca when Frodsham was director of Training, Plans, Mobilization and Security. "So, I knew him. I was familiar with him, attended meetings with him," Ransford recalled. He also knew that Frodsham's foster kids were always in trouble.

When Ransford first questioned Frodsham he denied everything. "He was pompous, like he was the smartest guy in the room," Ransford recalled. Then Ransford played the video Bischak had secretly taken of himself having three-way sex with Frodsham and his adopted son, Ryan, and Frodsham began to acknowledge his crimes.

Ryan Frodsham also initially denied his father had abused him. "Ryan appeared very defensive of his father and did not want to implicate him in any misconduct," Ransford wrote in a probable cause statement.

But when Ransford showed him a compromising photograph seized from Bischak's cell phone, Ryan began to open up. Over the course of several months, Ransford said, Ryan identified others he said were

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part of his father's child sex abuse ring, fueling the continuing investigation.

"There's others we're aware of," Ransford said. "It's open."

The Frodsham child sex abuse ring is part of a cluster of sex abuse cases that have come to light in Cochise County, Arizona, over the last several years, including several involving U.S. Border Patrol agents, two of whom worked at the Naco, Arizona, Border Crossing. Among them:

— John Daly III. A year ago, authorities arrested the recently retired Border Patrol agent after DNA evidence led them to suspect him in at least eight rapes, and to consider whether he is the so-called East Valley rapist, who terrorized women outside Phoenix throughout the 1990s. Prosecutors in Maricopa and Cochise counties have charged him with multiple counts of sexual assault and kidnapping. Daly, who is being held without bail, has pleaded not guilty.

— Dana Thornhill. A year ago, Thornhill was sentenced to a 40-year prison term after pleading guilty to years of sexually abusing his two children. Thornhill was charged following a stand-off with police in which he holed up in a local church. At the time, Thornhill was the chaplain at the Naco Border Crossing.

— Paul Adams. In 2017, Adams was charged with raping his two daughters, one of whom was just 6 weeks old; taking videos of the sexual assaults; and posting them on the Internet. Adams, who took his own life before standing trial, was also stationed at the Naco Border Crossing.

Ransford believes the cluster of cases should be attributed to good police work and effective prosecution, which give victims and others the confidence to report child sex abuse. "People report because they know something's going to be done about it," he said.

But Cadigan, the attorney representing the Frodsham brothers and Neal Taylor, wonders whether child sex abuse in southern Arizona is on the rise. "Law enforcement has been very effective, and I appreciate their efforts, but I've been taking these cases for 30 years and I've never been so busy," she said.

## A SCANDAL-PLAGUED DEPARTMENT

The physical and sexual abuse allegedly endured by the Frodsham brothers and Neal Taylor occurred at a time when Arizona's child welfare system was embroiled in scandal. In 2013, officials revealed that what was then the Department of Protective Services had a backlog of more than 6,500 abuse and neglect complaints it had never investigated.

The revelation prompted then-Gov. Jan Brewer to dissolve the entire department and create a new Cabinet-level office called the Department of Child Safety. "It is evident that our child welfare system is broken, impeded by years of operational failures," said Brewer, a Republican.

Underlying the scandal were deep budget cuts to family support services, leading to soaring abuse and neglect complaints and what an auditor general's report would later refer to as "unmanageable workloads, staff turnover and the limited experience of some CPS supervisors and newly hired investigators."

In 2014, an analysis produced for the state Legislature showed that the increase in workloads in Arizona during the decade that ended in 2012 was greater than in any other state but one. It also showed that the response time for abuse and neglect complaints ballooned from 63 hours to nearly 250 hours, between 2009 and 2012.

In its defense against Ryan Frodsham's lawsuit, the state is trying to exclude any mention of the department's troubled past. "There is no evidence that the types of problems that led to the dissolution of CPS has any relation to or impact on his case," the state said in a pretrial motion.

But David and Barbara Frodsham were licensed as foster parents in 2002, at the dawn of what was perhaps the department's most troubled period, and formally adopted the three men going to court about a decade later, shortly before the system collapsed. "The jury is entitled to the full picture," lawyers for Ryan Frodsham said.

In his AP interview, Ryan Frodsham said he filed his lawsuit for one reason: "I want the state to admit what it did was wrong."

## Americans ease up on masks, virus safeguards: AP-NORC poll

By RUSS BYNUM and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

Many Americans have taken significant steps back from once-routine coronavirus precautions, with less

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than half now saying they regularly wear face masks, avoid crowds and skip nonessential travel.

Americans are letting down their guard even as experts warn a new wave of COVID-19 cases is coming. A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows fewer people taking protective measures than at any point in AP-NORC polls conducted since early 2021.

The poll found 44% say they often or always wear a face mask around people outside of their homes, down from 65% in January when infections of the highly contagious omicron variant were soaring. Just 40% say they're largely avoiding nonessential travel, compared with 60% in January. And 47% say they regularly stay away from large groups, down from 65% in January.

Most Americans say they at least sometimes still follow those safeguards. But they're increasingly returning to pre-pandemic norms as coronavirus infections have fallen to their lowest level since July.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention no longer recommends masking indoors for most Americans, while cities are lifting mask and vaccine requirements to enter restaurants, bars and concert venues. And more U.S. workers are returning to offices after two years of doing their jobs at home.

Judy Morgan, a retired teacher from Poulsbo, Washington, said she and her husband, a Navy veteran, have gradually become more relaxed about wearing masks and other precautions since getting their vaccine booster shots in late October. Roughly six weeks ago, she went back to shopping without a mask when the Navy base where she buys groceries stopped requiring face coverings.

"I figured when the military starts easing up, because they're pretty strict, that's a very good sign," said Morgan, 80.

Morgan and her husband plan to put their masks back on at the airport later this week when they fly to Florida to celebrate her birthday. She said they were extra cautious earlier in the pandemic because her husband has a heart condition that makes him more susceptible to severe illness from COVID-19 — and she's ready to go back to that behavior if another severe wave of infections hits.

"My hope is that it's tapering off and every variation will be somewhat less viral or significant," Morgan said. "But my fear is something new will happen."

Experts say the coronavirus isn't going away, and most Americans recognize the virus will stick around. In January, an AP-NORC poll showed just 15% of Americans said the pandemic will be over when COVID-19 is mostly eliminated. Most said they expect the pandemic to end when it's largely a mild virus.

But that might not be the case just yet. Experts still say new variants could soon start another wave of rising infections in the U.S. Scientists are closely watching an extra-contagious spinoff of omicron that already has case numbers climbing in parts of Europe and Asia, as well as a delta-omicron hybrid, though so far infections of that variant appear to be rare.

Sonia Montoya, of Albuquerque, New Mexico, isn't taking any chances. The 65-year-old bookkeeper still works remotely from her office colleagues, orders any restaurant meals to go and makes sure to wear a mask when shopping or attending church. Six of Montoya's relatives and friends died from the virus, and she said she's still very worried about getting sick even though she's vaccinated.

"It came back and hit us again once before, and I have a feeling if we aren't cautious we are going to do it again," Montoya said. "Yes, it's slowing down, but there's a lot of stupid people out there, especially the younger ones that don't think it's serious."

Since vaccines became widely available to the American public, AP-NORC polls have consistently shown that vaccinated people are more worried about infections and more likely to take preventive steps than the unvaccinated. The vaccinated are still more likely than the unvaccinated to say they're always or often avoiding nonessential travel (44% to 29%), staying away from large groups (51% to 32%) and wearing face masks around other people (49% to 26%).

But the new poll shows that over the past two months the vaccinated and unvaccinated alike have become less likely to regularly take those precautions. Likewise, both Democrats and Republicans are less likely than they were in January to say they frequently take protective measures.

Jason Newman, of Greenville, Kentucky, said he never wears a mask unless he's required to, has no concerns about dining out and never got vaccinated. He said he's tested positive for COVID-19 twice but suffered no symptoms either time.

The 43-year-old postal worker said in recent months he's noticed more people who seem to be treating the virus the way he does.

"It's always going to be here no matter what, because they won't be able to eradicate it," Newman said. "I think, by and large, they're all over it."

## 'Grooming': The ubiquitous buzzword in LGBTQ school debate

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI and KARENA PHAN Associated Press

Proponents of restrictions on how U.S. public schools address sexual orientation and gender identity say their ultimate goal is to allow parents more involvement in their children's education and ensure classroom materials are age-appropriate.

But in heated debates at school board meetings and in statehouses across the country, the argument they repeatedly put forth is that they are trying to prevent children from being "groomed" — the same term commonly used to describe how sex offenders initiate contact with their victims.

The use of such rhetoric, opponents of the new laws argue, underscores a nationwide push by conservatives to make education a political wedge issue by equating certain teaching materials and educators with pornography and even pedophilia. This latest trend is another volley in the country's ongoing culture wars, during which conservative lawmakers also have opposed the teaching of "critical race theory" and proposed bills requiring schools to post all course materials online so parents can review them.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, an ascending Republican and potential 2024 presidential candidate, has been at the forefront of the movement. On Monday, DeSantis signed a bill into law that forbids instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade. While doing so, he railed against "liberal politicians" and activists who fought against the law, saying, "They support sexualizing kids in kindergarten."

"They support injecting woke gender ideology into 2nd grade classrooms," he added. "They support enabling schools to 'transition students' to a 'different gender' without the knowledge of the parent ... without the parent's consent."

DeSantis never uttered the word "groom," but his press secretary, Christina Pushaw, remarked on Twitter that the legislation dubbed by opponents as the "Don't Say Gay" bill would be more accurately described as an "Anti-Grooming Bill."

The use of the term is an attempt to distort the goal of teachers "who are being intentional about expressing their acceptance of LGBTQ people, or perhaps sharing their own stories ... so that all students can know that they have representation within the school," said Casey Pick, a senior fellow for advocacy and government affairs at the Trevor Project, a nonprofit that provides support services for LGBTQ youth.

Asked why she used it, Pushaw replied in an email to The Associated Press, "I have never stated that all groomers are LGBT, all LGBT people are groomers, or anything of that nature." She did not elaborate.

In Tennessee, country music singer John Rich testified in front of lawmakers that school librarians who defend controversial books about gender identity and featuring LGBTQ characters "groom" children to become desensitized to sexual abuse and pornography.

"What's the difference between a teacher, a librarian putting one of these books on the desk of a student, or a guy in a white van pulling up when school lets out, saying, 'Come around kids, let me read you this book?'" Rich asked last month. "What's the difference between those two scenarios? There is a difference. They can run away from the van."

An Oklahoma school choice advocacy blog, Choice Remarks, shared an article on its Facebook page alleging that public schools are sexualizing children. "Groomers are gonna groom," the group declared in comments accompanying the article. "The solution is educational choice."

When the New York State Education Department tweeted a book recommendation of Maia Kobabe's graphic novel "Gender Queer: A Memoir," the agency was attacked online as providing "pornographic" material to children, as well as "grooming" and "preying" on them. The agency later deleted the tweet.

DeSantis and other conservative politicians and parents who have criticized schools' use of books with

sexually explicit material argue that parents, not teachers, should be broaching such subjects with their children.

The main point of the Florida law is that it "empowers parents to be engaged in their children's lives," said Republican Rep. Joe Harding, who sponsored the legislation. At Monday's signing ceremony, a placard affixed to the speakers' podium and signs held up by young children featured the slogan "Protect Children/Support Parents."

But Catherine Oakley, state legislative director and senior counsel at Human Rights Campaign, an LG-BTQ advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., said conservative groups are capitalizing on the fear of unknown materials, books and discussion taking place inside classrooms to propel measures that would place more "surveillance" on teachers, librarians and other educators.

These groups "are really coming from this idea that sexual orientation (and) gender identity is something that's being imposed upon kids," Oakley said. "It comes from just a really fundamentally wrong position about where a person's LGBTQ identity comes from."

The current trend to limit the teaching of sexual orientation and gender identity echoes similar campaigns of the 1970s in which far-right religious groups characterized people who identified as LGBTQ as trying to "convert children," said Sophie Bjork-James, an assistant professor at Vanderbilt University who researches the U.S.-based religious right and the white nationalist movement. The accusation helped stall the expansion of civil rights for sexual minorities, Bjork-James said.

Brittany McBride, associate director of sexuality education at Advocates for Youth, a nonprofit that promotes adolescent sexual health and rights, sees a coordinated effort to create discomfort in school districts across the country, the result of which is to limit the education that students can receive.

"Adult discomfort has always seemed to take the priority over the rights and responsibility as a society to provide our young people with the information that they deserve," McBride said.

## **Bills deal renews debate over public dollars for arenas**

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York looks poised to become the next place to give a huge subsidy to a professional sports arena, despite questions about whether the civic pride of having a team justifies giving so much public money to a private business.

Gov. Kathy Hochul proposed a deal Monday that would give the Buffalo Bills \$850 million in public funds to help the team build a new \$1.4 billion stadium. In return, the Bills would agree to play in Buffalo's suburbs for at least 30 years.

The deal, which still needs approval from the state legislature, immediately renewed a debate about government's role in supporting privately-owned businesses.

Just three years ago, a deal to that would have given Amazon nearly \$3 billion in tax and other incentives to build a headquarters for 25,000 workers in New York City fell apart amid a backlash from activists and progressive politicians who called it a giant corporate giveaway.

Some similar criticism rolled in over the Bills deal.

State Assemblymember Ron T. Kim, a Queens Democrat, used a curse word on Twitter to refer to the proposal. Sochie Nnaemeka, the director of the influential Working Families Party, called the deal "a continuation of trickle-down economic development schemes that have enriched wealthy investors on the backs of Black, brown, and working class communities."

U.S. Rep. Thomas Suozzi, a Long Island Democrat running against Hochul, said he supported the idea of a new Bills stadium, but that it could be built without having New Yorkers "fork over their tax dollars to help a billionaire donor get even richer."

A few barbs came from the right, too.

"I like the Bills as much as anyone but this is outrageous," said Republican state Sen. Mike Martucci, who represents a district in the Catskill Mountains and Hudson Valley. "Republicans are often criticized for being buddies with billionaires. What would you call this?"

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The deal negotiated by the Hochul administration would require the Bills' owners, billionaires Terry and Kim Pegula, whose fortune is linked to natural gas fracking, to put up around 39% of the construction cost.

New York state taxpayers would pay \$600 million, with Erie County, where the team is located, spending another \$250 million.

Hochul, a western New York native and Bills fan, insisted the deal made good economic sense.

She also highlighted the intangible benefits of having pro sports in Buffalo — a rust belt city that the state has already spent hundreds of millions of dollars reviving following the decline of U.S. manufacturing in the 1970s and 80s.

It "goes to our identity," she told reporters Monday.

"We are known globally for being the home of the Buffalo Bills, and it's part of our local psyche, and it makes us so proud," Hochul said, adding, "that's not quantifiable."

That, probably more than anything else, is what has prompted numerous cities and states to put up big bucks for sports arena projects, either to keep teams from moving or luring them away from elsewhere.

Nevada poured \$750 million into a new stadium to get the NFL's Raiders to move from Oakland last year. In Atlanta, the Falcons' owner said he's expecting to get as much as \$700 million in public dollars from future tax revenues over coming decades as part of the deal struck to build the \$1.5 billion Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

A number of cities and states have poured public money into arena deals, even to replace venues that are still relatively new.

New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft bucked the trend of taxpayer support by privately funding his new stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts — after exploring plans to move the team to Boston; Rhode Island; and Hartford, Connecticut.

A more comparable market to Buffalo is Jacksonville, Florida, where the Jaguars TIAA Bank Field was built on part of the former Gator Bowl Stadium in 1995 at a cost of \$134 million (about \$368 million in today's dollars), with 45% of that money coming from the city. Last year, Jaguars owner Shad Khan unveiled a \$450 million plan to redevelop the area around the stadium, with taxpayers providing \$233 million in investments and incentives.

The promise of economic development tied to sports has also led numerous small cities and counties to invest public dollars in minor league teams.

Public officials often argue that they amount of tax dollars spent will be eclipsed by revenue brought in by a team, including taxes on player salaries, jobs created and tourism dollars spent.

That argument doesn't carry much weight with economists, who say decades of research shows sport stadiums don't do much to boost a local economy.

"This is one of those topics where you have almost universal agreement among economists: that stadiums really do not bring a significant financial benefit to the cities that house them," said Michael Leeds, an economics professor at Temple University.

Sports teams do bring in out-of-town fans who patronize local hotels and restaurants, but the jobs created and tax revenue generated rarely come close to the rosy projections, experts say.

"We don't want to kid ourselves," Leeds said. "What they do bring is very limited geographically and very limited financially."

Buffalo, the NFL's second smallest market, does draw some out-of-state fans, with southern Ontario, Canada, making up more than 15% of its season-ticket base.

Government handouts to big corporations, of course, aren't just for sports. Automakers, aerospace manufacturers, tech companies and others have gotten billions of dollars in tax breaks from U.S. states. New York state pledged more money to help build a Tesla solar panel factory outside Buffalo — \$750 million — than it is giving to the Bills.

Smith College economics professor Andrew Zimbalist said some wealthy sports team owners have, in recent years, taken on a bigger percentage of up-front costs of new stadiums in response to public outcry over sweetheart mega deals.

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"If you go back 25 years, you'll see that 70% of the funding was basically public," Zimbalist said.

The leaders of New York's Assembly and Senate, whose approval is needed for public financing on the Bills deal, have so far been silent, but Hochul looked to have gotten support from at least some top Democrats.

Senate Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes praised the deal and called it a "once in a generation opportunity for advancement."

Pegula Sports and Entertainment executive Ron Raccuia, who represented the Bills in negotiations with the state and county, called the deal a "good investment for everyone."

"We are very thankful that the governor and county executive showed the leadership that they did. But I think people need to realize that we contribute a lot from a tax standpoint. Every dollar that goes into this stadium will be paid back," he said.

John Kaehny, executive director of the government-reform group Reinvent Albany, said that while some downstate progressives were opposed to public funding for a Bills stadium as "a gross corporate handout," they might lack the political traction to block the deal.

## Sanctioned oligarch Abramovich seen at Russia-Ukraine talks

By MEHMET GUZEL and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — Soccer club owner. Ally of Vladimir Putin. Sanctioned oligarch. Could diplomatic go-between be added to the resume of Roman Abramovich?

The 55-year-old billionaire has swapped the skybox seat he once proudly occupied at his beloved Chelsea soccer club in Britain for a spot on the sidelines of negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow aimed at ending Russia's bloody war in Ukraine.

The silver-haired oil-and-aluminum tycoon stood in the background Tuesday as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan entered a hall packed with negotiators in a government building adjacent to the 19th century Ottoman palace, Dolmabahce, on the shores of the Bosphorus in Istanbul.

It was left to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov to try to explain Abramovich's role.

Abramovich has been "ensuring certain contacts between the Russian and Ukrainian sides," Peskov said, but is not an official member of the delegation. He said both sides have approved his role.

Ukraine's ambassador to Britain, Vadym Prystaiko, said, however: "I have no idea what Mr. Abramovich is claiming or doing. He is not a part of the negotiation team."

The talks appeared to yield a cautious step toward scaling back Moscow's offensive when Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin said Russia would "fundamentally" cut back operations near Ukraine's capital of Kyiv and a northern city in a move to build trust.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said the two sides made "the most meaningful progress" since the start of the negotiations at their meeting in Istanbul.

Just being in the room in Istanbul marks a remarkable turnaround for Abramovich, who has been sanctioned by the U.K. government and European Union, although he is conspicuous by his absence from a list of oligarchs sanctioned by the United States.

Abramovich appears to have established contacts high in Ukrainian government circles, to go alongside his long-standing links to the Kremlin.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Sunday that Kyiv had received "signals" with offers of help from Abramovich and others, along with requests to be spared from sanctions.

"Some of them were ready to help restore Ukraine after the war," he said, before citing their offers: "We are ready to give money, we are ready to relocate business to Ukraine. We are now living in England or in Switzerland, we would like to do it. Is it possible not to be on the sanctions list?"

Abramovich's presence in Istanbul was all the more surprising as it came a day after reports that he may have been poisoned at an earlier round of talks.

The investigative news outlet Bellingcat reported Monday that Abramovich and two Ukrainian delegates suffered symptoms of nerve agent poisoning after attending talks on March 3, but all reportedly recovered.

The British Foreign Office said in a statement Tuesday that "the allegations are very concerning." The



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Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has not commented on the report.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba also voiced his concern, telling the 1+1 TV channel: "I advise anyone going to the negotiations with the Russian Federation not to eat or drink anything and preferably avoid touching any surfaces."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he had no details on the poisoning reports, but that the reporting to that effect "raises concerns because Russia has a real track record," a reference to past poisoning cases blamed on Moscow.

Peskov dismissed the reports as "part of the information war. These reports obviously do not correspond to reality."

Abramovich's press representative had no comment on the reported poisoning or on his involvement in Russia-Ukraine talks.

Abramovich amassed a fortune in Russia's oil and aluminum industries following the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union. In 2005, Russian state-owned energy giant Gazprom paid \$13 billion for the Sibneft oil company controlled by Abramovich, allowing Putin's Kremlin to recapture state influence in the lucrative energy industry.

In announcing sanctions against Abramovich, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government called him a "pro-Kremlin oligarch" with an estimated fortune of more than 9 billion pounds (\$12 billion) who should be punished for his association with Putin. Abramovich also was linked with "destabilizing" and threatening Ukraine.

It was a further fall from grace for Abramovich, whose \$2 billion investment in Chelsea over 19 years transformed the English Premier League team into a force in European football and earned it the nicknames "Chelski" and the "Roman Empire."

He is being forced to sell the club after his assets were frozen as part of a crackdown on oligarchs following Russia's Feb. 24 invasion. The Premier League also disqualified him from running the west London club and being a director. Abramovich has said proceeds of the club's sale, which is subject to government approval, will go to a foundation he started for victims of the war in Ukraine.

He has been largely absent from Britain since 2018, when he withdrew an application to renew his visa amid a clampdown on rich Russians after a former Russian spy and his daughter were poisoned in the English city of Salisbury. Britain blamed Russia for the pair's exposure to a nerve agent, an allegation Moscow denied.

He took Israeli citizenship in 2018, although it is not clear how much time he spends in the country. He has been rumored to be in Israel several times since the war erupted, according to the movements of planes purportedly belonging to him. He was seen about two weeks ago at Ben-Gurion airport.

The Solaris, a yacht belonging Abramovich, was seen docked in Turkey's Aegean Sea resort of Bodrum earlier this month, Turkish media reports said. NATO-member Turkey has not joined other members of the alliance in sanctions on Russia. A second yacht belonging to him, the Eclipse, was seen docked at a port in the Turkish resort of Marmaris, other Turkish media said..

## Europeans expel dozens of Russian envoys to combat espionage

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — In what appeared to be a coordinated action to tackle Russian espionage, at least four European allies expelled dozens of Russian diplomats on Tuesday.

The expulsions come as relations between Russia and the West have plunged into a deep freeze following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

The Netherlands said it was expelling 17 Russians who it described as intelligence officers masquerading as diplomats. Belgium said it was ejecting 21 Russians. The Czech Republic gave one Russian diplomat 72 hours to leave the country. Ireland told four senior Russian officials to leave the country because of activities deemed not "in accordance with international standards of diplomatic behaviour."

North Macedonia announced late Monday it is expelling five Russian diplomats for "activities contrary to

the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.”

“Together with our allies, we are reducing the Russian intelligence presence in the EU,” the Czech Foreign Ministry said.

Poland last week expelled 45 Russians whom the government identified as intelligence officers using their diplomatic status as cover to operate in the country.

The Netherlands said it took its decision in consultation with “a number of like-minded countries,” citing similar expulsions by the United States, Poland, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Montenegro.

“The cabinet has decided to do this because of the threat to national security posed by this group,” the Dutch ministry said in a statement. “The intelligence threat against the Netherlands remains high. The current attitude of Russia in a broader sense makes the presence of these intelligence officers undesirable. The deportation is a measure taken in the context of national security.”

Dutch Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra said he was prepared for a retaliation from Moscow.

“Experience shows that Russia does not leave these kinds of measures unanswered,” he said. “We cannot speculate about that, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is prepared for various scenarios that may arise in the near future.”

That was demonstrated earlier Tuesday, when Russia said it expelled a total of 10 diplomats from the three Baltic EU states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in retaliation for those countries expelling Russian diplomats earlier this month.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said it was cancelling the accreditation of four Lithuanian diplomats, three Latvians and three Estonians and they would be required to leave the country. That corresponds to the number of Russian diplomats each country previously expelled.

On March 18, the three Baltic countries ordered the expulsion of 10 Russian embassy staff members in a coordinated action taken in solidarity with Ukraine.

Moscow called that move “provocative and entirely baseless” and that it had summoned the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian ambassadors in Moscow for an official protest.

## Shanghai lockdown tests ‘zero-COVID’ limits, shakes markets

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese authorities sought to reassure companies and jittery investors on Tuesday as a two-phase lockdown of Shanghai’s 26 million people entered its second day, casting an unusual quiet over the normally bustling center of finance, manufacturing and trade.

The omicron outbreak in Shanghai is one of a series across the country that is testing the government’s ability to enforce a strict “zero-COVID” strategy without overly disrupting the economy and people’s daily lives.

Many shops were shuttered and pedestrians were sparse even in the half of the city that remained open. The lockdown is being conducted in two phases to limit the disruption, starting with the Pudong financial district and adjacent areas on the east side of the Huangpu River that divides Shanghai.

Zhang Meisha, taking a morning jog along the fabled Bund on the river’s west bank, said she hoped to enjoy more sunshine before the lockdown shifted to Puxi. Only an occasional tourist lingered on the promenade lined with century-old historic buildings.

“It’s so beautiful, but not many people can come here to enjoy and appreciate,” Zhang said of the red and yellow tulips along the Bund. “Such a pity! I hope the spring of Shanghai can wait for us.”

The shutdown has added to anxiety in financial markets over Russia’s war on Ukraine, the U.S. Federal Reserve’s effort to cool surging inflation by raising interest rates and other challenges facing the global economy.

Market reactions including Monday’s 7% drop in oil prices in London don’t reflect the “true reality of the situation,” but investors already were uneasy about China and the global economy, said Michael Every of Rabobank.

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"We have a whole mountain of problems to worry about, and this is just one foothill among many," he said. "If that's all it is, a COVID lockdown, it's not difficult to look in recent history books and see how it plays out. But this interfaces with a lot of other issues."

Any interruption of activity at the port of Shanghai poses a greater threat to industry and trade. State media reported that the world's biggest port was handling normal cargo volumes and that managers were ensuring that vessels "can call normally" at the port. General Motors Co. and Volkswagen AG said their Shanghai factories were operating normally.

The new omicron BA.2 subvariant is widely blamed for a surge of cases in China this month. By far, the hardest hit area has been Jilin province in the northeast.

Only two deaths have been reported, bringing the total since the start of the pandemic to 4,638. The relatively low death toll and case count has been touted by the ruling Communist Party as evidence of the wisdom of its zero-COVID approach.

Outside of mainland China, new cases have declined in Hong Kong following a recent wave that has led to more than 7,000 deaths. The semi-autonomous city of 7.4 million people recorded 7,596 new cases in the latest 24-hour period.

Shanghai recorded 4,477 new cases on Monday, all but 96 of them asymptomatic. Gymnasiums and exhibition centers have been converted into sprawling centers to isolate positive cases under the zero-COVID approach.

The measures confining the residents of Pudong to their homes, closing nonessential businesses and requiring mass testing are to be lifted Friday after four days. At that time, the Puxi area on the opposite side of the river will go under lockdown.

Shops in Puxi along the Nanjing Road pedestrian shopping street were mostly closed Tuesday, with few people out and about. Restaurants offered only takeaway service, and a long line formed outside a McDonald's of people waiting to pick up their orders.

Authorities are working to ensure food supplies after panic buying on Sunday and reports of shortages of meat and vegetables.

The Shanghai lockdown stands to become the largest of any city in China's campaign against the virus, in which millions have been confined to their homes for weeks at a time in cities across much of the country.

Government workers in hazmat suits, joined by about 68,000 volunteers, are stationed at checkpoints around residential compounds that have been walled off with traffic dividers and improvised barriers.

Despite central government calls for a more targeted approach and some tweaking of the system, the decision to lock down Shanghai shows the continuing reliance on extreme measures.

Besides the two-phase approach, authorities have also given definite end dates for the lockdowns in Shanghai, unlike in other cities earlier.

Financial services firm Macquarie Group said the Shanghai lockdown indicates China will stick with its zero-COVID strategy at least until the ruling Communist Party holds its once-every-five-year congress this fall.

Authorities have promoted the need for stability in the runup to the event, when Xi Jinping is expected to be granted a third five-year term as party leader in a break with recent practice.

China boasts a vaccination rate of around 87% but the percentage is much lower among seniors, who are more vulnerable to the virus.

Macquarie Group said in a report that China should be able to contain the virus in the next few weeks, given the effectiveness of lockdowns.

"But COVID does pose substantial growth downside risk in the rest of this year, as lockdown is also very costly," the report said, adding that consumer spending and the housing market were set to take the biggest hits.

Wang Hui, who runs a shop near the Bund, said high rents and a lack of customers could cost him his business.

"I don't know how much longer we can last," Wang said.

## US job openings, quitting at near record high in February

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Job openings hovered at a near-record level in February, little changed from the previous month, continuing a trend that Federal Reserve officials see as a driver of inflation.

There were 11.3 million available jobs last month, matching January's figure and just below December's record of 11.4 million, the Labor Department said Tuesday.

The number of Americans quitting their jobs was also historically high, at 4.4 million, up from 4.3 million in January. More than 4.5 million people quit in November, the most on records dating back two decades. Many people are taking advantage of numerous opportunities to switch jobs, often for higher pay. The vast majority of those quitting do so to take another position.

Tuesday's report is separate from the government's monthly employment report, which in February showed that employers added a robust 678,000 jobs.

The data "shows that the labor market remains torrid," Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Amherst Pierpont, said in a research note. "In a month when the economy added 678,000 jobs, the number of job openings only went down by 17,000. That speaks to the depth of the bid that employers have for labor."

The outsize number of available jobs and quits has contributed to rampaging inflation, as many companies have had to raise pay to attract and keep workers. In February, there were 1.8 openings for every unemployed worker. Before the pandemic, there were usually more unemployed people than job openings.

The unemployment rate, at 3.8%, is near the pre-pandemic level of 3.5%, which was the lowest in five decades. And there are still several million fewer people working or looking for work than before the pandemic, forcing employers to compete among a smaller labor pool.

Because of those trends, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell has singled out openings and quits as a key measure of the labor market's health and a target of the Fed's interest-rate policies. Powell has said that the central bank hopes to reduce the number of available jobs as a way of cooling wage increases and price inflation.

"If you were just moving down the number of job openings ... you would have less upward pressure on wages," Powell said. "We need to use our tools to move supply and demand back" into alignment.

With employers desperate to find workers, wages and salaries rose 4.5% in 2021, the fastest pace in at least two decades. Many businesses have, in turn, charged their customers more to cover the higher labor costs.

Inflation jumped 7.9% in February from a year earlier, a four-decade high.

Earlier this month the Fed said it had raised its short-term interest rate for the first time in four years, to about 0.375%, to rein in inflation. More rate hikes are expected this year, including potentially one or more half-point increases.

Powell's hope is that by reducing job openings and slowing wage gains, the Fed can bring down inflation without causing widespread layoffs and pushing unemployment higher. Economists overall are skeptical, however, that the Fed can achieve such a "soft landing" for the economy. They worry that the Fed's rate hikes will result in job losses and potentially even a recession.

## Ethiopian court orders journalist to be released on bail

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — An Ethiopian court has ordered Ethiopian journalist Amir Aman Kiyaro to be released on bail after being imprisoned for four months without charges.

A judge in the capital, Addis Ababa, on Tuesday granted bail to Kiyaro while prosecutors determine whether or not to press charges against him. Kiyaro remained in custody while bail procedures were being followed before his expected release.

Kiyaro, 30, a video journalist accredited to The Associated Press, was detained on Nov. 28 in Addis Ababa under the country's war-related state of emergency powers.

Kiyaro is accused of "serving the purposes" of what the government has classified a terrorist group by

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interviewing its officials, according to reports by Ethiopian state media, citing federal police. Local journalist Thomas Engida was arrested at the same time and faces similar charges.

If the journalists are found guilty of violating Ethiopia's anti-terrorism law or the state of emergency law, they could face sentences of seven to 15 years behind bars, federal police inspector Tesfaye Olani has told state media.

Despite the granting of bail after four months of police investigation and detention, it still remains uncertain whether prosecutors will proceed to press charges against Kiyaro. The state of emergency was lifted in February as the government cited changing conditions in the deadly conflict between Ethiopian forces and those of the northern Tigray region.

"We are pleased that journalist Amir Aman Kiyaro has been granted bail and we are eager for his release from prison after being detained in Ethiopia for more than 120 days," Julie Pace, the AP's executive editor, said in response to the bail order.

"However, the investigation against him remains ongoing, with no charges filed," Pace said. "Amir is an independent journalist who has been targeted because of his work and we urge the Ethiopian authorities to drop their investigation."

## From Hollywood's illusion factory, some unexpected reality

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

In the minutes and hours after Will Smith accosted and slapped Chris Rock before a live audience of millions, social media platforms lit up with a breathless and emphatic hot take: Surely, multitudes insisted, the whole thing was staged.

They talked of the specifics of the altercation ("Rock barely moved"). Of its apparent artifice ("It just looks like Chris arched his back the way they do in stage combat"). Of the participants ("Was this just amazing acting?"). Some who watched were just stunned ("Wait that wasn't staged??"), others openly critical ("a pathetic attempt to get some viewers to tune in").

Hollywood, the illusion factory, had churned out some unexpected reality at the Oscars. And — surprise! — a lot of people thought it was another illusion.

This is America in 2022 — tantalized by immersive special effects, mesmerized by reality TV, upended by misinformation spread by both the malevolent and the sloppy. And forever asking, albeit about a constantly evolving set of circumstances: What around here is real?

"It's not at all surprising to me that the first response is, 'Oh, this must be a bit, right? This must be scripted,'" says Danielle J. Lindemann, author of "True Story: What Reality TV Says About Us."

"We are always looking for these authentic moments. ... We feel kind of a triumph when we see something that was actually real," says Lindemann, a sociologist at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. "But when we encounter what is really an authentic moment, we have the skepticism about it."

Is it any wonder? After all, we exist in a culture where clothing factories pre-rip blue jeans to make them look "distressed" — like they've been worn and frayed through years of actual life experiences. Where followers on Twitter — or faces appearing in your LinkedIn feed — might not be actual people at all. Where lip-syncing in "live" performances — not too long ago a major faux pas — now passes with barely a second look.

"Life has become art, so that the two are now indistinguishable from each other," cultural critic Neal Gabler wrote in "Life: the Movie." That was 1998, a generation ago. Since then, the "mockumentary" format pioneered by 1984's "This Is Spinal Tap" has become its own genre, begetting the likes of TV's "The Office," "Parks and Recreation" and "Modern Family," which featured documentary-style interviews embedded in their storylines.

Next month heralds a new Nicolas Cage movie starring Nicolas Cage playing Nicolas Cage — or, more accurately rendered, "Nicolas Cage." It's the latest in a long tradition of stars portraying themselves (the actual director Cecil B. DeMille appearing in the fictional 1950 movie "Sunset Boulevard," John Malkovich playing "John Malkovich" in 1999's "Being John Malkovich," Bill Murray playing "Bill Murray" in 2009's

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"Zombieland").

Each asks, in short: Where does actor end and performance begin? Or is the line a blurred and muddy one?

That's what produced some of the confusion Sunday night in media both social and professional: Was this a scripted skit, embedded in a nonfiction show that itself is designed to reward the pinnacles of artistic artifice? One in which Will Smith and Chris Rock played "Will Smith" and "Chris Rock"? Or was it what it actually (apparently) turned out to be — real anger and violence, both genuine and unscripted, playing itself out on stage?

For every person who frame-grabbed in service of proving fraud, another made an equally intense case for the opposite — sometimes using the same evidence.

"We are so used to things being scripted," says Marty Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, which studies the impact of entertainment on society. "And we're kind of hip and savvy about these things, except we're not."

"This one pierced the veil," Kaplan says. "It was like a rent in the fabric of reality."

Part of it is that awards shows are different. In the wilds of entertainment, they've long been a unique beast — a moment when stars convene under their own names, but still performing for the cameras and the crowds.

They're not documentary, exactly (though they have elements of it). They're not mockumentary (though they can certainly veer in that direction). Like Hollywood itself, they're a stew of their own myths and realities, a high-end variety show where the identities of the winners, the fabulous outfits and the remarks are the planned and generally mannered narrative engines. Until Sunday night, when they weren't.

"Awards shows have a certain kind of organization and protocol. You're supposed to act in a certain kind of way," says Shilpa Davé, a media studies scholar at the University of Virginia. "We're not used to seeing this in real time on these kinds of shows. We always see them in movies — we see them performing this, but not really doing it."

Live events, particularly sports, are generally still perceived as trustworthy, Davé says, because they're happening in real time and "you can make your own assumptions about what you're seeing." But Sunday's events — particularly since the profane audio was bleeped out for U.S. audiences — challenged that.

"The fact that there's skepticism about whether this was real is people bringing that cynicism to live events," she says.

For those of a certain generation, the incident brought to mind another notorious on-air slap — when pro wrestler Jerry Lawler struck comic actor Andy Kaufman on David Letterman's show in 1982. Lawler and Kaufman had maintained a feud over Kaufman's performances related to wrestling, and Kaufman had ended up in a neck brace after a wrestling match between the two.

A few months later, in the course of a joint appearance on Letterman, the wrestler stood up and whacked Kaufman across the face, knocking him out of his chair, neck brace and all. "It was not clear if the altercation was staged," said one newspaper. NBC said at the time it received dozens of calls from viewers asking if the fight was real. (It wasn't, though that wasn't revealed until Kaufman was 10 years dead.)

And now we have Twitter (where Lawler posted Monday about the similarities), and instantaneous opinions, and a cacophony of declarative statements rather than phone calls to the network asking questions. As TV scholar Robert Thompson of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture says, the skepticism is double-edged.

"Believing everything you see — especially in the technology era — is naive. But not believing anything ever, no matter how much evidence comes out — that's equally unhealthy and debilitating," Thompson says.

Yet in a nation where the "real" often proves to be fake, the "fake" can turn out to be real and we all join the masses in mass assumption along the way, how do you ever sort it all out? Particularly because, in the end, all of what happened Sunday night felt distinctly of a piece, whether real or fake or somewhere in between: There was a stage, there was an audience, and there were players.

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## Today in History

By The Associated Press

Today is Wednesday, March 30, the 89th day of 2022. There are 276 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 30, 1981, President Ronald Reagan was shot and seriously injured outside a Washington, D.C., hotel by John W. Hinckley Jr.; also wounded were White House press secretary James Brady, Secret Service agent Timothy McCarthy and a District of Columbia police officer, Thomas Delahanty.

In 1822, Florida became a United States territory.

In 1842, Dr. Crawford W. Long of Jefferson, Georgia, first used ether as an anesthetic during an operation to remove a patient's neck tumor.

In 1867, U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward reached agreement with Russia to purchase the territory of Alaska for \$7.2 million, a deal ridiculed by critics as "Seward's Folly."

In 1870, the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited denying citizens the right to vote and hold office on the basis of race, was declared in effect by Secretary of State Hamilton Fish.

In 1923, the Cunard liner RMS Laconia became the first passenger ship to circle the globe as it arrived in New York.

In 1945, during World War II, the Soviet Union invaded Austria with the goal of taking Vienna, which it accomplished two weeks later.

In 1959, a narrowly divided U.S. Supreme Court, in *Bartkus v. Illinois*, ruled that a conviction in state court following an acquittal in federal court for the same crime did not constitute double jeopardy.

In 1975, as the Vietnam War neared its end, Communist forces occupied the city of Da Nang.

In 1987, at the 59th Academy Awards, "Platoon" was named best picture; Marlee Matlin received best actress for "Children of a Lesser God" and Paul Newman was honored as best actor for "The Color of Money."

In 2010, President Barack Obama signed a single measure sealing his health care overhaul and making the government the primary lender to students by cutting banks out of the process.

In 2015, Comedy Central announced that Trevor Noah, a 31-year-old comedian from South Africa, would succeed Jon Stewart as host of "The Daily Show."

In 2020, Florida authorities arrested a megachurch pastor after they said he held two Sunday services with hundreds in attendance in violation of coronavirus restrictions. (The charges were later dropped.)

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama said he was plowing ahead with potential sanctions against countries that kept buying oil from Iran, including allies of the United States, in a deepening campaign to starve Tehran of money for its disputed nuclear program. Anthony Davis became the first Kentucky basketball player and second freshman to be selected The Associated Press' Player of the Year.

Five years ago: North Carolina rolled back its "bathroom bill" in a bid to end a yearlong backlash over transgender rights that had cost the state dearly in business projects, conventions and basketball tournaments; the measure had required that transgender people use public restrooms that corresponded to the sex on their birth certificate. At Cape Canaveral, SpaceX successfully launched and then retrieved its first recycled rocket. Twitter said it was easing its 140-character limit in replies.

One year ago: G. Gordon Liddy, a mastermind of the Watergate burglary and a radio talk show host after emerging from prison, died at age 90 at his daughter's home in Virginia. NFL team owners agreed to increase the regular season to 17 games and reduce the preseason to three games.

Today's Birthdays: Game show host Peter Marshall is 96. Actor John Astin is 92. Actor-director Warren Beatty is 85. Rock musician Eric Clapton is 77. Actor Justin Deas is 74. Actor Paul Reiser is 66. Rap artist MC Hammer is 60. Singer Tracy Chapman is 58. Actor Ian Ziering (EYE'-an ZEER'-ing) is 58. TV personality Piers Morgan is 57. Rock musician Joey Castillo is 56. Actor Donna D'Errico is 54. Singer Celine Dion is 54. TV personality/producer Richard Rawlings is 53. Actor Mark Consuelos is 51. Actor Bahar Soomekh is 47. Actor Jessica Cauffiel is 46. Singer Norah Jones is 43. Actor Fiona Gubelmann is 42. Actor Katy Mixon is 41. Actor Jason Dohring is 40. Country singer Justin Moore is 38. Actor Tessa Ferrer is 36. Country singer Thomas Rhett is 32. Rapper NF is 31.