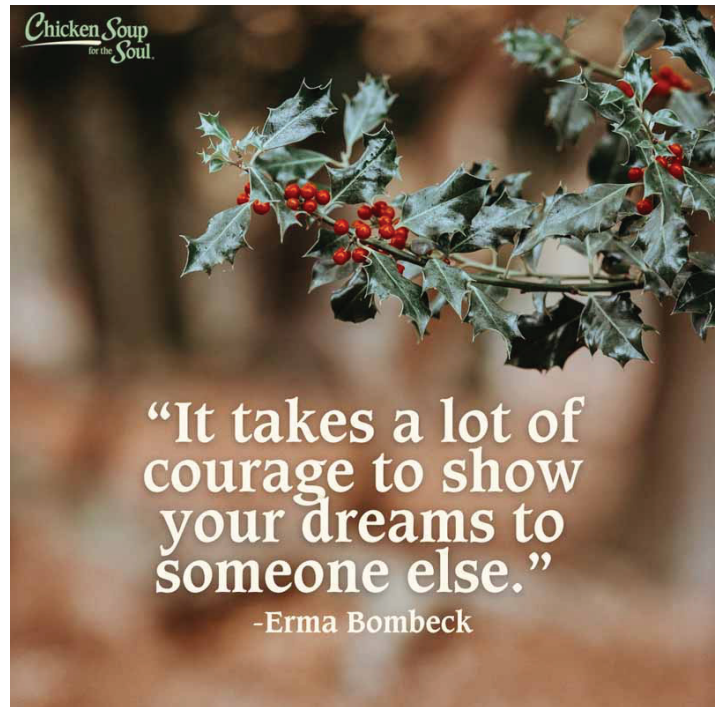


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Groton Community Calendar

Monday, Dec. 5

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, au gratin potatoes, carrots, apple sauce, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Mini pancakes.
School Lunch: Chicken legs, mashed potatoes.
Emmanuel Lutheran Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.
GBB at Sisseton, 6 p.m.
The Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Groton UMC Advent Bible Study, 6 p.m.

Tuesday, Dec. 6

Senior Menu: Baked codfish, parsley buttered potatoes, seasoned cabbage, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Breakfast sandwich
School Lunch: Lasagna hot dish, corn.
St. John's Ladies Aid Christmas Party, noon.
JHGBB hosts Northwestern. 7th grade at 6:15 p.m. followed by 8th grade
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

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

The Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
Groton UMC Bible Study Christmas Party, 10 a.m.;
Conde Advent Bible Study, 6 p.m.

Wednesday, Dec. 7

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, mixed vegetables, garlic toast, pears, sherbert.
School Breakfast: Eggs and breakfast potatoes.
School Lunch: Sloppy joes, potato wedges.
St. John's Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Advent Service, 7 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.
Groton Chamber board meets at noon at City Hall
Community Coffee Hour at Groton UMC, 9:30 a.m.
Confirmation UMYF Angel Tree Shopping, 6 p.m.

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

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**'TIS THE
SEASON TO
SHOP LOCAL**

GROTON
Chamber Of Commerce



Groton Daily Independent

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Weekly Vikings Recap

By Jack & Duane Kolsrud

They say a win is a win, but this is starting to become habit-forming for the Minnesota Vikings. After getting out to a convincing 20-6 halftime lead, the Vikings stalled in the third quarter and let the Jets back in the game and ultimately needing a late game turnover to seal the game. The Vikings now sit atop the NFC North division at 10-2.

The game started pretty quietly, and that was a reflection of the crowd this Sunday - a crowd that wasn't nearly as animated as they were Thanksgiving night, (but a packed house nonetheless). The Vikings and Jets exchanged field goals and made it 3-3 after one quarter.

The game heated up in the second quarter as the running game got going with both Dalvin Cook and Alexander Mattison. Kirk Cousins uncharacteristically struggled with his touch, but Cook and Mattison picked up the slack on offense. Cook scored from 4 yards out on a 14-play drive, and Mattison followed it up with a 14-yard run on an 11-play drive. It looked like this could be the game where the Vikings put in a complete team effort and run a team out of US Bank Stadium. The Vikings lead going into halftime, 20-6.

Just when you think this might be that game, the Vikings bring the 67,000 fans back to reality as they started the third quarter receiving the kick but went three and out on the first possession. The Vikings gained only 10 yards on three possessions in the quarter, while the Jets hit a pair of field goals to make it 20-12 going into the fourth quarter. The defense was doing their best impression of 'bend don't break, but like so many other games this season, they decided to let the Jets hang around until the end.

After Zuerlein kicked his 5th field goal of the day early in the 4th quarter, the Vikings got it going again with an impressive 7-play, 75-yard drive capped off by a Justin Jefferson touchdown. It looked like that might seal the deal, but the Viking defense was tired and gave up big plays on the Jet's next drive as they marched it down the field in just 1:47 and scored on a Mike White one-yard plunge. The scoring stopped there at 27-22, but the Vikings needed a goal-line stance and a late interception by Cam Bynum to get into the victory formation to end the game. 10-2 sounds good to the Viking fanbase.

So where does this leave the Vikings? With five games to play, they can wrap up the NFC North Division with a win in Detroit next week. The Lions have been playing very well as of late, winning four of five games, and now sit in second place at 5-7. The Packers beat the Bears, and the best the Packers can do is get to 9-8. It is nice not having to worry about the Packers in cold Green Bay in January.

The Vikings need to get their defense in check as they have been giving up way too many yards in the past three games and allowing each quarterback they have faced to have career games. Mike White threw for 369 yards on Sunday and seemed to have all day in the backfield to pick the secondary apart. The lack of blitzing and putting some pressure on the QB has been an issue all season, and if this team wants to make a run in January, they will need to step it up.

That said, the season has been quite impressive. Vikings have yet to lose to their division rivals, are 4-0 against the AFC East, and are 4-1 on the road. On to Detroit for their first division road game of the season. SKOL!!

"Be a hero; learn CPR"

We are familiar with the scene on television and movies: a person clutches their chest and drops to the ground, unconscious. Another character starts chest compressions and help is summoned. Although cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR, is often not accurately portrayed in such productions, it serves as a good reminder to all that CPR can save a life.

Cardiac arrest is a general term to describe any situation in which the heart stops pumping blood to other organs in the body, most urgently the brain. Cardiac arrest can have many causes, including a massive heart attack or a deadly heart arrhythmia. Regardless of the cause, the most pressing need of any person after cardiac arrest is, in short, restoring the circulation of oxygen to the brain and other critical organs.

The American Heart Association estimates that over 350,000 cardiac arrests occur outside a hospital in the US each year. These events might happen at home or in a public location. If that person is lucky enough to have a bystander educated in CPR present at the time of the cardiac arrest, their odds of surviving that event are hugely improved.

The most basic and important component of CPR is effective chest compressions. CPR can also include defibrillation, or shocking an electrically malfunctioning heart to restore a normal rhythm. Many public places now keep an automated external defibrillator, or AED, on hand. A CPR class will teach participants to perform effective CPR and how to use a defibrillator.

What can you do? If you have never done so, or if it has been a few years (as all things, the science of CPR has changed and improved), I would encourage you to find a CPR class in your community. If you own or manage a business, consider getting an AED and keep it in a visible location. I hope you will never have to use these skills, but you could be the reason a family member or complete stranger survives an otherwise-fatal event.

Cardiac arrest is a common cause of death, but bystander CPR can be life-saving. If you are able, consider learning this heroic skill. For information on where to find a CPR class, check at redcross.org or with your local hospital.

Kelly Evans-Hullinger, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices internal medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org and on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show providing health information based on science, built on trust, broadcast on SDPB and streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



Based on Science, Built on Trust



Kelly Evans-Hullinger, M.D..

GDILIVE.COM

Girls' Basketball
Monday, Dec. 5, 2022
Groton Area at Sisseton

JV match starts at 6 p.m.

Livestream sponsored by Adam and Nicole Wright

Varsity game to follow

Sponsored by
Bahr Spray Foam
Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Thunder Seed with John Wheeting

Anyone wanting to sponsor a JV or C game, Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460

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3X 30" HD

Gear up for the worst of winter weather with the 3X 30" HD powered by a 420cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel auger housing and side plates
- LED light bar on auger housing plus dual LED in-dash headlights
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum gear box backed by 5-year limited warranty**

MSRP
\$1,999*



3X 26" TRAC

Clear it all with the strength of the 3X 26" Trac featuring a powerful 357cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

- Track Drive ideal for slopes, inclines and gravel driveways
- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel auger housing and side plates
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
- LED light bar on auger housing plus dual LED in-dash headlights
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty**

MSRP
\$2,099*



2X 30" MAX

Take on winter with the commercial-grade durability of the 357cc Cub Cadet 2X 30" MAX snow blower

- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- 14" augers and impeller
- Sealed ball bearings on auger and wheel shafts
- LED light bar on auger housing
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- 16"x6.5" X-Trac tires
- High-arc steel chute
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty

MSRP
\$1,899*

■ Indicates step-up feature



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¹ Restrictions apply. See dealer or cubcadet.com/en_US/financing for details.

[†] When compared to the same engine without IntelliPower™ technology. Improvements vary depending on engine models and specific operating conditions.

* Actual retail prices are set by dealer and may vary. Taxes are additional and vary by location. Freight and PDI charges may be additional and vary by dealer.

Models subject to limited availability. Images may not reflect dealer inventory and/or unit specifications.

** See owner's manual for warranty details and information. Certain restrictions apply.

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OFFERS AVAILABLE!**



New Year's Resolutions: Super Success Strategies

By Bryan Golden

Almost 90% of Americans will make at least one New Year's resolution.

Less than 20% will succeed in accomplishing even one.

The beginning of the year is a great time for life improving resolutions. Common resolutions include losing weight, giving up smoking, maintaining a budget, saving money, finding a better job, getting healthier, becoming more organized, and spending more time with family.

Whatever your resolutions, here are some specific strategies to help you succeed. First and foremost is to take the first step, which is to start. Without action, there will be no success. Action creates results. Intention alone will not work.

Have written goals stating what you want to accomplish. If you want to lose weight, how much and by when? If you want to live within a budget, what is the amount? If you want to continue your education, what school will you go to and which classes will you take?

Take small but consistent steps. Habits are formed by frequent repetition over time. Change occurs by the same process. A resolution is not all or nothing. Partial change is okay. Any progress in the desired direction, regardless of how small, is a success. Accomplishing a resolution is a process, not a one-time effort.

Positive goals are more effective than negative ones. Rather than saying you will eat less, resolve to have a healthier diet. Instead of spending less time at work you can endeavor to spend more time at home. Bad habits can't just be eliminated; they have to be replaced by good ones.

Identify potential obstacles so they don't surprise you. If you experience a setback, don't give up. Don't blame yourself if you stumble. Failure only occurs when you stop trying. Difficulties are an opportunity to learn. If you slide backwards, get back on track, get back in gear, and resume your progress.

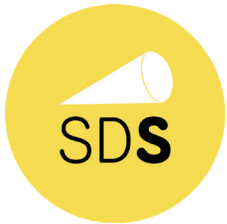
Don't keep your plans a secret. Develop a support system utilizing friends and family. Visualize how great you will feel as you succeed. Take credit for all accomplishments. It doesn't matter if your progress is slower than you would like.

Don't try to change too many things at once or you risk becoming overwhelmed and discouraged. You can have a long list of resolutions so long as you realize all of the items don't have to be addressed simultaneously. Each accomplishment can be followed by another. Change can begin at any time, not just on January 1.

Believe in yourself and your ability to change. Change can feel difficult, uncomfortable, or painful, but you can do it. Become determined to succeed. Don't procrastinate. Although doing nothing is often an appealing alternative, it leads to frustration.

Each day is a new opportunity to work on your resolutions. If you were successful yesterday, fantastic, keep going. If yesterday was a disappointment, today is a new chance to make progress. Replace the word "try" with "will." Do whatever it takes to get the results you want.

Bryan is the author of "Dare to Live Without Limits." Contact Bryan at Bryan@columnist.com or visit www.DareToLiveWithoutLimits.com Copyright 2022 Bryan Golden



Drought causing more minerals to enter Sioux Falls drinking water source

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 4, 2022 12:00 PM

A state water quality report says the part of the Big Sioux River that Sioux Falls uses for drinking water contains dissolved solids beyond the standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency. A city water official says the drought is causing the uptick in minerals, like salt.

The state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources said in a statement that the minerals impact taste, color and odor, but don't present a human health risk. The department is required to issue a water quality report every two years under the federal Clean Water Act.

Ted Lewis, environmental engineer with the Sioux Falls Water Division, said the city is managing the problem with water treatment.

"It's not something that we're overly concerned with," Lewis said. "It's just one of those parameters that we look at and we make sure we're on top of it."

The point on the river where Sioux Falls gets some of its drinking water is just north of the airport. The public doesn't drink that water directly — the water is treated first.

According to Lewis, the EPA advises water systems to keep dissolved solids between 300 and 500 milligrams per liter, and the water source in Sioux Falls has been reporting over 500 milligrams.

Lewis said the uptick in dissolved solids has to do with the drought.

"It's just less water and sort of a concentrated amount of minerals in the water," Lewis said. "And so that concentration just kind of creeps up a little bit when there isn't that added rainfall to fill up the river and dilute things out."

Lewis said the best way to mitigate the problem is by preventing soils from running off cropland and into rivers and streams. Planting grassy buffer strips along the river banks can help.

"The more grasslands that have buffer zones, the more plant life that can kind of take up those minerals, that'll help slow the erosion or the seepage of the minerals into the water and at least keep it from getting exacerbated," Lewis said.

And that is something the state is doing. The Department of Game, Fish & Parks is expanding a conservation program into the Big Sioux Watershed.



Sioux Falls as seen from Falls Park, on the Big Sioux River. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

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The department wants to enroll about 25,000 acres, starting in November. And about 5,000 of those 25,000 acres will target land along the Big Sioux riverbank.

The City of Sioux Falls was recognized by the state with a Secretary's Award for Drinking Water Excellence this year for meeting all monitoring and reporting requirements, drinking water standards, and certification requirements for 10 or more consecutive years.

Other sources of drinking water in the report not meeting the EPA standards include a segment of the James River used by Huron, and portions of the Maple River and Elm River used by Aberdeen.

Firesteel Creek and Lake Mitchell are also listed, but they're used only as emergency backups for the City of Mitchell. And Lake Waggoner and Durkee Lake, two more waterbodies listed in the report, are no longer being used as drinking water sources.



JOSHUA HAIAR ✉️ 🐦

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Table 25: Summary of Waterbodies Not Fully Supporting Domestic Water Supply Use

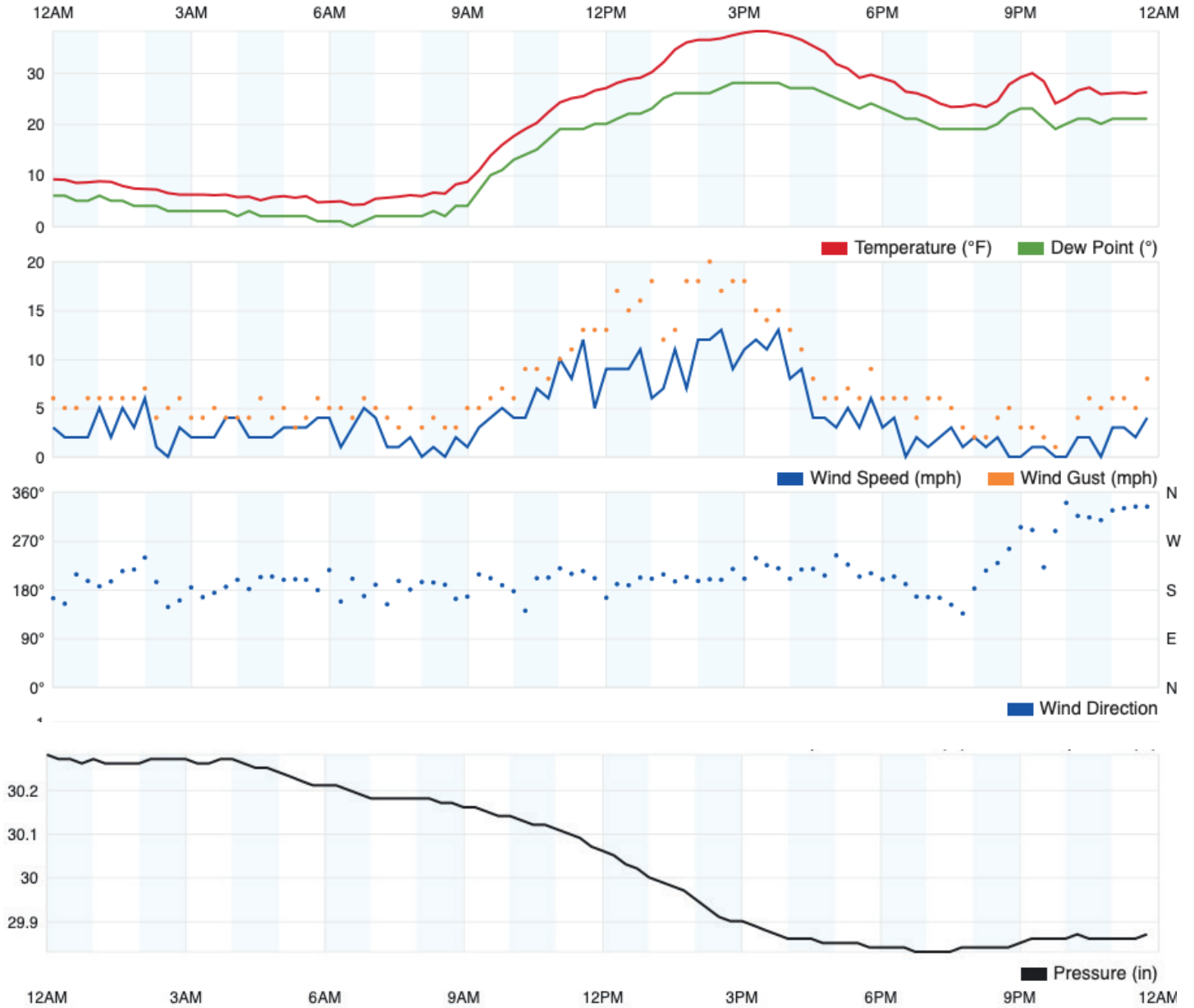
AU ID	Waterbodies	Location	Characterization	Cause
Rivers and Streams				
SD-BS-R-BIG_SIOUX_10	Big Sioux River	I-90 to diversion return	Not Supporting	Total Dissolved Solids (TDS)
SD-JA-R-ELM_01	Elm River	Elm Lake to mouth	Not Supporting	Total Dissolved Solids (TDS)
SD-JA-R-FIRESTEEL_01	Firesteel Creek	West Fork Firesteel Creek to mouth	Not Supporting	Total Dissolved Solids (TDS)
SD-JA-R-JAMES_07	James River	James River Diversion Dam to Huron 3rd Street Dam	Not Supporting	Total Dissolved Solids (TDS)
SD-JA-R-MAPLE_01	Maple River	ND border to Elm River	Not Supporting	Total Dissolved Solids (TDS)
Lakes and Reservoirs				
SD-BA-L-WAGGONER_01	Waggoner Lake	Haakon County	Not Supporting	Chlorophyll-a
SD-CH-L-DURKEE_01	Durkee Lake	Meade County	Not Supporting	pH
SD-JA-L-MITCHELL_01	Lake Mitchell	Davison County	Not Supporting	Chlorophyll-a

Source: SD DANR

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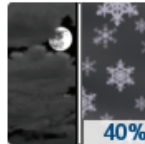



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs







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Today	Tonight	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday
						
Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy then Chance Snow	Chance Snow then Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny
High: 25 °F	Low: 9 °F	High: 28 °F	Low: 1 °F	High: 13 °F	Low: 2 °F	High: 26 °F



Periods of **Light Snow** or flurries today, tonight, & Tuesday night into Wednesday morning. Total accumulations of around 1" or less expected.

Today	Tonight	Tuesday	Tuesday Night
			
Highs: 20s Cooler	Lows: 9 to 15°	Highs: 26 to 36° Warmer	Lows: -3 to +7°
Light Snow mainly west of the Missouri River, expanding to east central South Dakota by late morning.	Light Snow near the North Dakota border.		Light Snow , mainly over the northern half of South Dakota and west central Minnesota.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

www.weather.gov/abr

Graphic Created
12/5/2022 3:30 AM

Highs will only be in the 20s today. Periods of Light Snow or Flurries will be possible today over central to east central South Dakota, tonight near the North Dakota border, and Tuesday night into Wednesday morning across the northern half of South Dakota into west central Minnesota. Total accumulations of around 1 inch or less expected.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 38.1 °F at 3:15 PM

Low Temp: 4.2 °F at 6:30 AM

Wind: 20 mph at 2:15 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 56 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 57 in 1939

Record Low: -25 in 2005

Average High: 33°F

Average Low: 11°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.10

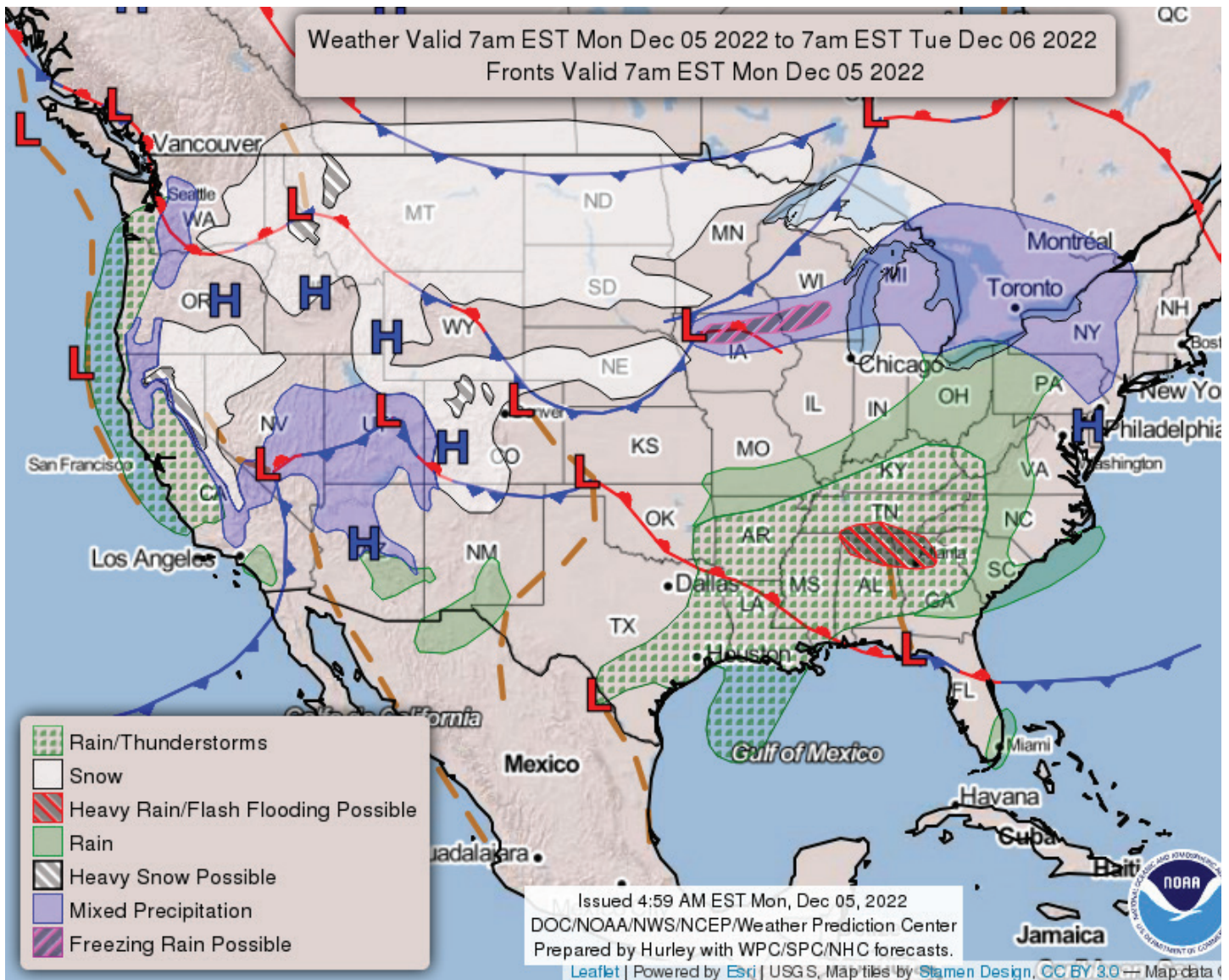
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.31

Precip Year to Date: 16.50

Sunset Tonight: 4:51:23 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:55:50 AM



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Today in Weather History

December 5, 1960: A storm dropped snow on the entire region from the morning of the 4th to the late afternoon of the 5th, with the highest amounts in the western, central and north central parts of South Dakota. Five to 10 inches of snow fell in these areas. The snow, blown by winds of 30 to 40 mph, caused extensive drifting of streets and highways. A brief period of freezing rain preceded the snow and added to hazardous driving conditions on roads. Schools were closed for one to two days, with 27 towns reporting closed schools in the Aberdeen area alone. Telephone and power disruption was widespread in central and north central counties of the state, as poles and wires were broken by a combination of ice, snow, and the wind. The storm produced mostly rain in the extreme eastern counties of South Dakota into west central Minnesota, with a narrow band of freezing rain preceding light snow immediately to the west. No serious automobile accidents or property damage was reported in this area of freezing rain and light snow.

December 5, 1976: Cold Canadian air moved across South Dakota during the day on Sunday, December 5th. High winds gusted to 63 mph at Philip and 55 mph at Rapid City. One to two inches of snow fell over all of South Dakota; however, many counties in the southeast, south central, and east-central parts of the state received amounts varying from three to five inches. After this storm, nighttime temperatures fell to below zero. Snowfall amounts included 2 inches at Pierre, Aberdeen, and Watertown; and 3 inches at Redfield and Clear Lake.

1786 - The first of two great early December storms began. The storm produced 18 inches of snow at Morristown NJ, and twenty inches of snow at New Haven CT. It also resulted in high tides at Nantucket which did great damage. (David Ludlum)

December 5, 1886: A southern storm dumped heavy snow up into far southwest Virginia. The storm dumped 11 inches in Montgomery Alabama and 22.5 inches in Knoxville, TN. It also dropped 25 inches in Rome, Georgia, and 26 inches in Ashville, North Carolina.

December 5, 1953: A tornado outbreak occurred over northeastern Louisiana, southeastern Arkansas, and western Mississippi on this day. At least four confirmed tornadoes touched down. The strongest tornado was rated F5 as it destroyed the town of Vicksburg, Mississippi. This tornado first touched down just west of the Mississippi River in East Madison Parish in Louisiana. The tornado crossed the Mississippi River and tore through the downtown area of Vicksburg. On the ground for seven miles, this tornado caused 38 deaths, 270 injuries, and cost an estimated \$25 million in damages in 1953. Estimated cost adjusted for inflation in 2013 Dollars would be over \$200 million. The NWS Office in Jackson, Mississippi has an interactive track map of this event which includes photos and personal accounts.

1972 - Winds gusting to 70 mph sent the temperature at Livingston, MT, plunging from 52 degrees to 18 degrees in just twenty minutes. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - The temperature in New York City's Central Park reached 72 degrees to establish a record high for December. The month as a whole was also the warmest of record. (The Weather Channel)

1988 - Gale force winds continued to usher cold arctic air into the northeastern U.S. Winds gusted to 65 mph at Windsor Locks CT. Up to a foot of snow blanketed the higher elevations of Vermont. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Seventeen cities in the eastern U.S., including nine in Florida, reported record low temperatures for the date. Lakeland FL reported a record low of 31 degrees, and Watertown NY was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 20 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2002 - An early season winter storm brought an expansive shield of snow and ice through much of the eastern U.S., from the lower Ohio Valley, southern Appalachians and into the Northeast. Snow accumulations of 4-8 inches were common along the northern edge of the precipitation shield, while a significant accrual of glaze occurred in the Carolinas. The storm caused at least 17 fatalities, mostly from traffic accidents (CNN). In the Carolinas, electric utilities provider Duke Power characterized the ice storm as the worst in the company's history, with 1.2 million customers or nearly half its entire customer base without power on the morning of the 5th. This surpassed electrical outages inflicted by Hurricane Hugo as it swept through the central Carolinas in September 1989.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

HOW TO GAIN UNDERSTANDING

James the Fifth of Scotland ruled his subjects quite differently than other rulers did. Historians say that he would often lay aside his royal robes, put on the clothes of an ordinary man, work as they worked and live as they lived. His disguise allowed him to move freely among his people without being recognized.

He did this, we are told, to gain an understanding of their needs and problems, sorrows and difficulties. Then, when he returned to his throne, he would have a clearer insight of his subjects and was better able to rule over them with compassion and care.

That is what Jesus, the King of kings, did. He laid aside His glory. Paul writing of this said, "Though he was God, He did not demand and cling to His right as God. He made himself nothing, He took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form!"

It is common for most of us to be selfish and express our pride by "demanding our rights!" We want what we think is "rightfully" ours for any number of reasons. We believe that we have earned something or deserve something and therefore demand something!

But not Jesus. He laid aside every right that was rightfully His in order to serve others. As His followers, we are to live as He lived. We must develop an attitude of love and humility, and willingly and sacrificially, serve others as our Lord did!

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, for becoming like one of us and for going through everything that we go through. Knowing this enables us to know You do care. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 2:5-8 I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession.



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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2022-23 Community Events

- 07/21/2022: Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/22/2022: Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/24/2022: Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
07/27/2022: 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
No Date Set: 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)
09/11/2022: 6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3-5pm
09/11/2022: Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10 a.m.
09/02-04: Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/01/2022: Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/07/2022: Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
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
11/13/2022: Snow Queen Contest
11/19/2022: 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
12/10/2022: Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
07/04/2023 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start (4th of July)
07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)

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News from the Associated Press

Sudanese generals, pro-democracy group sign framework deal

By ASHRAF IDRIS and JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

KHARTOUM, Sudan (AP) — Sudan's ruling generals and the main pro-democracy group on Monday signed a framework deal meant to help resolve the country's crisis and take it to the next elections. However, key dissenters, including some rebel groups and reformists have stayed out of the agreement.

The deal pledges to establish a new, civilian-led transitional government to guide the country to elections and offers a path forward in the wake of Sudan's stalled transition to democracy following the October 2021 coup.

The deal — the first of at least two planned accords — was signed by Sudan's two ruling generals, Abdel-Fattah Burhan and Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, and the leaders from the country's largest pro-democracy group, Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change, at the Khartoum Republican Palace.

However, several of Sudan's key dissenting political forces have boycotted the deal, including Sudan's grassroots pro-democracy network, known as the Resistance Committees, which has continually refused to negotiate with the ruling generals. Several former rebel leaders, who have formed their own political block, have also rejected the deal.

According to the draft, the deal envisions Sudan's military eventually step back from politics. The agreement also stipulates that the "revolutionary forces" that signed the deal will decide upon a new prime minister to oversee a two-year transition, a 24-month period that begins after a premier is appointed.

In response to the signing, the pro-democracy Resistance Committees' leaders called for demonstrations against the agreement.

The deal is roughly based on a draft transitional constitution proposed by Sudan's Bar Association in September. It does not address details concerning thornier political issues, such as a transitional judiciary system and the implementation of military reforms, which have been left for a follow-up accord.

It also stipulates that the military will form part of a new "security and defense council" under the appointed prime minister. The agreement also vows to unify Sudan's armed forces and impose controls on military-owned companies.

The document makes specific mention of Sudan's wealthy paramilitary force, the Rapid Support Forces, headed by Dagalo. The force amassed wealth through its gradual acquisition of Sudanese financial institutions and gold reserves in recent years.

However, no further details were given on how or when these reforms would be implemented. Many of the points in the deal were already promised in a 2020 deal which saw Sudan's previous transitional government make peace with several rebels in Sudan's far-flung provinces.

Sudan has been plugged into turmoil since Gen. Burhan mounted the October 2021 coup that upended the country's former democratic transition after three decades of autocratic rule by President Omar al-Bashir. The former leader was toppled in April 2019, following a popular uprising.

The U.N. special envoy to Sudan, Volker Perthes, attended Monday's signing and later, at a speech at the palace, described the deal as "Sudanese-owned and Sudanese-led."

Monday's development came after months of negotiations between the military and the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change, facilitated by a four-part mediating team, including the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Great Britain.

The deal will hope to draw in new international aid, after donor funds dried up in response to the coup. In recent months, bread and fuel shortages, caused in part by the war in Ukraine, have become routine in Sudan.

Bob McGrath, 'Sesame Street' legend, dies at 90

Bob McGrath, an actor, musician and children's author widely known for his portrayal of one of the first regular characters on the children's show "Sesame Street" has died at the age of 90.

McGrath's passing was confirmed by his family who posted on his Facebook page on Sunday: "The McGrath family has some sad news to share. Our father Bob McGrath, passed away today. He died peacefully at home, surrounded by his family."

Sesame Workshop tweeted Sunday evening that it "mourns the passing of Bob McGrath, a beloved member of the Sesame Street family for over 50 years."

McGrath was a founding cast member of "Sesame Street" when the show premiered in 1969, playing a friendly neighbor Bob Johnson. He made his final appearance on the show in 2017, marking an almost five-decade-long figure in the "Sesame Street" world.

The actor grew up in Illinois and studied music at the University of Michigan and Manhattan School of Music. He also was a singer in the 60s series "Sing Along With Mitch" and launched a successful singing career overseas in Japan.

"A revered performer worldwide, Bob's rich tenor filled airwaves and concert halls from Las Vegas to Saskatchewan to Tokyo many times over," Sesame Workshop said. "We will be forever grateful for his many years of passionate creative contributions to Sesame Street and honored that he shared so much of his life with us."

He is survived by his wife, Ann Logan Sperry, and their five children.

World Cup fans find booze at hotels, Qatar's 1 liquor store

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — In a dusty neighborhood on the outskirts of Qatar's capital, guards stand duty at a gated compound ringed with razor wire, carefully checking passports and permits before allowing anyone inside. But this isn't a prison or a high-security area associated with the ongoing World Cup.

It's the liquor store.

Rigid limits on alcohol are a fact of life in this conservative Muslim nation on the Arabian Peninsula, which follows the same strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam as its neighbor Saudi Arabia. Soccer fans coming to Qatar for the World Cup got a taste of that just before the tournament as authorities cancelled beer sales at stadiums.

Yet corks continue to be popped in luxury boxes at games. Fans are filling pints from beer towers at dozens of hotel bars, lounges and nightclubs with liquor licenses. Sales of \$14 Budweisers at Doha's FIFA Fan Zone continue unabated.

"Not to say that you need alcohol to fuel your life, but it's a good time," said Ed Ball, an American who created an online map for imbibers in Doha to find bars. "The idea being passed around that you can't drink in Qatar is wrong. There are places."

In addition to the bars, there's the liquor store where non-Muslim residents and visitors can shop after applying for a government-issued license. Located next to an Indian school in Doha's dusty Abu Hamour neighborhood, it is run by the Qatar Distribution Co., a state-owned enterprise under the umbrella of Qatar Airways, which holds exclusive rights to distribute alcohol and pork in the country.

The store — currently the only one selling liquor in Qatar — operates on an appointment system, harkening back to the strict coronavirus regulations that governed this country prior to just before the World Cup.

On a recent visit, guards twice checked an Associated Press reporter's identifications and appointments. Razor wire tops the compound's high walls, which bar the public from a peek inside. Signs warn that any abuse aimed at the guards can result in an alcohol license being revoked. Empty silver-colored beer kegs are piled up in the parking lot.

At the end of a chlorine-scented walkway, customers reach the entrance to the store. Inside, the shelves and stands are stocked with bottles of wine largely running from \$12.50 up to \$45. A liter of Absolut vodka goes for \$42, while a liter of Jack Daniels whiskey sets a shopper back \$70. A 24-pack of standard

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Budweiser cans costs nearly \$52.

A small section of the store offers frozen pork pepperoni pizzas, slabs of bacon, Spam and cans of pork and beans.

Customers filled their carts or carried bottles and cans in their hands, checking against shopping lists or texting family members to double check what was needed. Several wore FIFA passes for the tournament around their necks.

Outside the shop, a 31-year-old British woman who works as a school teacher in Qatar, filled the trunk of her car. She declined to offer her name, given the connotations drinking can carry in Qatari society, but dismissed criticism surrounding drinking and the tournament.

"It's really not that big of a deal," she said of the licensing system in Qatar. "It's like going to the super-market — for alcohol."

She added that she thought the restrictions on sales for the matches also made sense. "I'm British. I know what it's like to be around drunk people all the time."

Across the wider Persian Gulf, alcohol remains banned in Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the sheikhdom of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. Drinking alcohol is considered haram, or forbidden, in Islam. Imams point to a verse in the Quran calling wine "the work of Satan."

But the region as a whole has a long history with alcohol, itself an Arabic word. The 8th century poet Abu Nawas even was known for his "khamriyyat," or "wine poems."

Both alcohol and pork face a 100% import duty. Qatar says it uses the tax revenue to improve health care, infrastructure, education and other public services.

Visitors are not allowed to bring alcohol into the country. Many hotels are dry and prohibit guests from bringing alcohol to their rooms.

Ball's online map of bars in Qatar has been viewed over 875,000 times. An accompanying Twitter account shows him downing two pints of beer in 10 seconds.

"For me, drinking is just like eating. It just goes along with the culture," Ball told the AP after returning home to Seattle, where he works for Boeing Co. "I know it's not part of Qatar ... but it's also part of the World Cup. One of the biggest sponsors is Budweiser so it just goes to show you it kind of goes hand in hand."

Bars in Qatar typically scan IDs of those heading in, with many working on a voucher system during the tournament to make sure fans spend at least certain amount.

On Saturday night, a group of Russians screamed expletives at the U.S. team during its match with the Netherlands as they downed shots and posed for photographs with servers at Doha's Irish Harp.

Dermot O'Callaghan, a 66-year-old soccer fan from Dublin, Ireland, enjoyed a much calmer pint at the bar, swaying along to the Cuban band Chicas Melao.

"It's very enjoyable, you can get a drink here if you want in the evenings," O'Callaghan said. "You do have a cohort of fans roaming around, looking for a drink."

China eases controls, gives no sign when 'zero COVID' ends

By JOE McDONALD Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China is easing some of the world's most stringent anti-virus controls and authorities say new variants are weaker. But they have yet to say when they might end a "zero-COVID" strategy that confines millions of people to their homes and set off protests and demands for President Xi Jinping to resign.

On Monday, commuters in Beijing and at least 16 other cities were allowed to board buses and subways without a virus test in the previous 48 hours for the first time in months. Industrial centers including Guangzhou near Hong Kong have reopened markets and businesses and lifted most curbs on movement while keeping restrictions on neighborhoods with infections.

The government announced plans last week to vaccinate millions of people in their 70s and 80s, a condition for ending "zero-COVID" restrictions that keep most visitors out of China and have disrupted

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manufacturing and global trade.

That spurred hopes for a quick end to "zero COVID." But health experts and economists warn it will be mid-2023 and possibly 2024 before vaccination rates are high enough and hospitals are prepared to handle a possible rash of infections.

"China is not ready for a fast reopening yet," Morgan Stanley economists said in a report Monday. "We expect lingering containment measures. ... Restrictions could still tighten dynamically in lower-tier cities should hospitalizations surge."

The changes follow protests demanding an end to "zero COVID" but are in line with Communist Party promises earlier to reduce disruption by easing quarantine and other restrictions. The changes have been highly publicized in a possible effort to mollify public anger, but there is no indication whether any might have been made in response to protests in Shanghai and other cities.

China is the only major country still trying to stamp out transmission while the United States and others relax restrictions and try to live with the virus that has killed at least 6.6 million people and infected almost 650 million.

The protests began Nov. 25 after at least 10 people died in a fire in an apartment building in Urumqi in the northwest. Authorities denied suggestions firefighters or victims were blocked by locked doors or other anti-virus controls. But the disaster became a focus for public frustration.

Ahead of the protests, the Communist Party promised to make "zero COVID" less costly and disruptive but said it was sticking to the overall containment strategy.

The party earlier announced updates to the strategy to make it more focused. Authorities began suspending access to buildings or neighborhoods with an infection instead of whole cities. But a spike in cases starting in October prompted areas across China to close schools and confine families to cramped apartments for weeks at a time.

Authorities say they are "further optimizing" controls and warn the country needs to stay alert.

China faces "new situations and tasks" due to the "weakening of the pathogenicity" of the latest omicron variant, a deputy premier in charge of the anti-virus campaign, Sun Chunlan, said last week. She said China has "effective diagnosis and treatment" and has vaccinated more than 90% of its people.

The ruling party is trying to balance "epidemic prevention, economic stability and security for development," Sun said Wednesday in a conference with health officials, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

Despite the changes, Beijing and other cities are telling some residents to stay home or enforcing other restrictions on neighborhoods with infections.

Travelers at the Chinese capital's train stations and three airports are required to show a negative virus test within the previous 48 hours. Elsewhere, Guangzhou and other cities said areas deemed at high-risk for infection still face additional curbs.

A negative virus test within the past 72 hours still is required to enter public buildings in vast metropolis of Chongqing in the southwest, a hotspot in the latest infection spike. Dining in restaurants in some parts of Beijing still is prohibited.

A newspaper reported last week that some Beijing residents who have mild or asymptomatic COVID-19 cases would be allowed for the first time to isolate themselves at home instead of going to one of China's sprawling quarantine centers. The government has yet to confirm that.

Forecasters say the struggling economy, already under pressure from weak demand for Chinese exports and a government crackdown on debt in the real estate industry, might be contracting this quarter.

Regulators have responded by freeing up more money for lending and are trying to encourage private investment in infrastructure projects. They have eased some financial controls on real estate developers to reverse a slump in one of China's biggest industries.

"Policymakers are focusing their efforts on spurring growth," Eurasia Group analysts said in a report. "However, even if China's transition away from a strict zero-COVID policy is more decisive and accelerated, meeting public health milestones like increasing elderly vaccination will take months."

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On Monday, the government reported 30,014 new cases, including 25,696 without symptoms. That was down from last week's daily peak above 40,000 but still close to record daily highs for China.

Xi's government has held up "zero COVID" as proof of the superiority of China's system compared with the United States and Western countries. China's official death toll stands at 5,235 since the start of the pandemic versus a U.S. count of 1.1 million.

China also has suffered a possible rise in fatalities among people with cancer, heart disease and other conditions who struggled to get care while hospitals focused on treating virus cases. Data on those deaths haven't been reported.

Ukrainians hid orphaned children from Russian deportation

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

KHERSON, Ukraine (AP) — Hours after Russia invaded Ukraine in February, health staff at a children's hospital in the south started secretly planning how to save the babies.

Russians were suspected of seizing orphan children and sending them to Russia, so staff at the children's regional hospital in Kherson city began fabricating orphans' medical records to make it appear like they were too ill to move.

"We deliberately wrote false information that the children were sick and could not be transported," said Dr. Olga Pilyarska, head of intensive care. "We were scared that (the Russians) would find out ... (but) we decided that we would save the children at any cost."

Throughout the war Russians have been accused of deporting Ukrainian children to Russia or Russian-held territories to raise them as their own. At least 1,000 children were seized from schools and orphanages in the Kherson region during Russia's eight-month occupation of the area, say local authorities. Their whereabouts are still unknown.

But residents say even more children would have gone missing had it not been for the efforts of some in the community who risked their lives to hide as many children as they could.

At the hospital in Kherson, staff invented diseases for 11 abandoned babies under their care, so they wouldn't have to give them to the orphanage where they knew they'd be given Russian documents and potentially taken away. One baby had "pulmonary bleeding", another "uncontrollable convulsions" and another needed "artificial ventilation," said Pilyarska of the fake records.

On the outskirts of Kherson in the village of Stepanivka, Volodymyr Sahaidak the director of a center for social and psychological rehabilitation, was also falsifying paperwork to hide 52 orphaned and vulnerable children. The 61-year-old placed some of the children with seven of his staff, others were taken to distant relatives and some of the older ones remained with him, he said. "It seemed that if I did not hide my children they would simply be taken away from me," he said.

But moving them around wasn't easy. After Russia occupied Kherson and much of the region in March, they started separating orphans at checkpoints, forcing Sahaidak to get creative about how to transport them. In one instance he faked records saying that a group of kids had received treatment in the hospital and were being taken by their aunt to be reunited with their mother who was nine months pregnant and waiting for them on the other side of the river, he said.

While Sahaidak managed to stave off the Russians, not all children were as lucky. In the orphanage in Kherson — where the hospital would have sent the 11 babies — some 50 children were evacuated in October and allegedly taken to Crimea, which Russia illegally annexed in 2014, a security guard at the institution and neighbors told The Associated Press.

"A bus came with the inscription Z (a symbol painted on Russian vehicles) and they were taken away," said Anastasiia Kovalenko, who lives nearby.

At the start of the invasion, a local aid group tried to hide the children in a church but the Russians found them several months later, returned them to the orphanage and then evacuated them, said locals.

Earlier this year, The Associated Press reported that Russia is trying to give thousands of Ukrainian children to Russian families for foster care or adoption. The AP found that officials have deported Ukrainian

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children to Russia or Russian-held territories without consent, lied to them that they weren't wanted by their parents, used them for propaganda, and given them Russian families and citizenship.

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, says Russian officials are conducting a deliberate depopulation campaign in occupied parts of Ukraine and deporting children under the guise of medical rehabilitation schemes and adoption programs.

Russian authorities have repeatedly said that moving children to Russia is intended to protect them from hostilities. The Russian Foreign Ministry has rejected the claims that the country is seizing and deporting the children. It has noted that the authorities are searching for relatives of parentless children left in Ukraine to find opportunities to send them home when possible.

Russian children's rights ombudswoman Maria Lvova-Belova personally oversaw moving hundreds of orphans from Russian-controlled regions of Ukraine for adoption by Russian families. She has claimed that some of the children were offered an opportunity to return to Ukraine but refused to do so. Her statement couldn't be independently verified.

UNICEF's Europe and Central Asia child protection regional adviser, Aaron Greenberg, said that until the fate of a child's parents or other close relatives can be verified, each separated child is considered to have living close relatives, and an assessment must be led by authorities in the countries where the children are located.

Local and national security and law enforcement are looking for the children who were moved but they still don't know what happened to them, said Galina Lugova, head of Kherson's military administration. "We do not know the fate of these children ... we do not know where the children from orphanages or from our educational institutions are, and this is a problem," she said.

For now, much of the burden is falling on locals to find and bring them home.

In July, the Russians brought 15 children from the front lines in the nearby region of Mykolaiv to Sahaidak's rehabilitation center and then on to Russia, he said. With the help of foreigners and volunteers, he managed to track them down and get them to Georgia, he said. Sahaidak would not provide further details about the operation for fear of jeopardizing it, but said the children are expected to return to Ukraine in the coming weeks.

For some, the threat of Russia deporting children has brought unexpected results. In October when there were signs that the Russians were retreating, Tetiana Pavelko, a nurse at the children's hospital, worried they'd take the babies with them. Unable to bear children of her own, the 43-year-old rushed to the ward and adopted a 10-month-old girl.

Wiping tears of joy from her cheeks, Pavelko said she named the baby Kira after a Christian martyr. "She helped people, healed and performed many miracles," she said.

Vatican vendettas: Alleged witness manipulation jolts trial

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The text message to the Vatican monsignor offered forgiveness along with a threat: "I know everything about you ... and I keep it all in my archives," it read. "I pardon you, Perlasca, but remember, you owe me a favor."

The message was one of more than 100 newly revealed WhatsApp texts and other correspondence entered into evidence at the Vatican courthouse last week that have jolted a financial crimes trial involving the Holy See's money-losing investment in a London property.

The texts have cast doubt on the credibility of a key suspect-turned-prosecution witness and raised questions about the integrity of the investigation into the London deal and other transactions.

Together with evidence that a cardinal secretly recorded Pope Francis, they confirmed that a trial originally aimed at highlighting Francis' financial reforms has become a Pandora's Box of unintended revelations about Vatican vendettas and scheming.

The trial in the city-state's criminal tribunal originated in the Holy See's 350 million-euro investment to develop a former warehouse for department store Harrods into luxury apartments.

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Prosecutors have accused 10 people in the case, alleging Vatican monsignors and brokers fleeced the Holy See of tens of millions of euros in fees and commissions, and then extorted the Holy See of 15 million euros to get full control of the property.

Monsignor Alberto Perlasca initially was among the prime suspects. As the Vatican official who managed the secretariat of state's 600 million-euro asset portfolio, he was intimately involved in the property deal.

But Perlasca changed his story in August 2020 and started cooperating with prosecutors, blaming his deputy and his superior, Cardinal Angelo Becciu, then the No. 2 in the secretariat of state, for the London investment and other questionable expenditures.

Both the deputy and Becciu are on trial. Perlasca is not, and his statements to prosecutors became a source of leads that formed the basis of several charges in the indictment.

When Perlasca testified for the prosecution last week, some of his claims collapsed under defense questioning. Judge Giuseppe Pignatone gave Perlasca until midweek to remember who helped him write his first tell-all memo on Aug. 31, 2020.

And then came a bombshell, courtesy of the text messages that the prosecutor was compelled to introduce into evidence after he received them. They suggested Perlasca wrote the memo implicating his boss after he had received threats and advice from a woman who had an ax to grind against Becciu.

Public relations specialist Francesca Chaouqui previously served on a papal commission tasked with investigating the Vatican's vast and murky financials. She is known in Vatican circles for her role in the "Vatileaks" scandal of 2015-2016, when she was convicted of conspiring to leak confidential Vatican documents to journalists and received a 10-month suspended sentence.

According to the texts, Chaouqui nurtured a grudge against Becciu, whom she blamed for allegedly supporting her prosecution. She apparently saw the investigation into the London real estate venture as a chance to settle scores and implicate Becciu in alleged wrongdoing she had uncovered during her commission days.

"I knew that sooner or later the moment would come and I would send you this message," Chaouqui wrote Perlasca on May 12, 2020. "Because the Lord doesn't allow the good to be humiliated without repair. I pardon you Perlasca, but remember, you owe me a favor."

Chaouqui didn't say what she wanted. But other messages unveiled in court indicate she persuaded a Perlasca family friend and confidante, Genoveffa Ciferri, that she could help Perlasca avoid prosecution if he followed Chaouqui's advice.

According to Ciferri's texts, the elaborate scheme allegedly unfolded as follows: Ciferri believed Chaouqui when she bragged that she was working hand-in-hand with Vatican prosecutors, gendarmes and the pope in the criminal investigation. Ciferri wanted to help Perlasca, and so fed him Chaouqui's advice anonymously.

Chaouqui subsequently organized a dinner at a Rome restaurant during which Perlasca tried to extract incriminating information from Becciu. Perlasca was led to believe the Vatican prosecutors had bugged the table and were recording their conversation, though no recording has materialized. He provided them with a detailed memo after the Sept. 6, 2020 meal.

The dinner took place 18 days before Francis fired Becciu and stripped him of his rights as a cardinal based on information he said he had received about Becciu's alleged financial misconduct.

Ciferri confessed the whole saga to prosecutor Alessandro Diddi in a Nov. 26 text in which she said she had schemed with Chaouqui in hopes of sparing Perlasca from becoming a criminal defendant. Ciferri forwarded Diddi 126 text messages she exchanged with Chaouqui and said Chaouqui had helped craft the August 2020 memo in which Perlasca turned on the cardinal.

The implications of Chaouqui's alleged interference were clear to those in the courtroom: Perlasca, a key prosecution witness, may have been persuaded to provide possibly false testimony about Becciu and others by someone with a not-so-hidden agenda. In addition, Chaouqui bragged about working closely with investigators on the case.

Becciu's lawyer, Fabio Viglione, denounced the "surreal" machinations that helped lead to his client's indictment, saying Perlasca had been manipulated "to the detriment of the truth, the authenticity of the

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investigation and the honorability of His Eminence.”

Cataldo Intrieri, the lawyer representing Perlasca’s deputy Fabrizio Tirabassi, said the revelations warrant the trial’s suspension and the opening of a new criminal investigation for suspected fraud, threats and obstruction. “Regardless, there are implications for the facts that are the subject of this trial,” Intrieri said.

Judge Pignatone rejected defense calls to suspend the trial, saying the proceedings were based more on documentation about the London deal than Perlasca’s testimony. But he scheduled in-court interrogations for Ciferri and Chaouqui.

Chaouqui, when reached by The Associated Press, declined to comment before her court testimony.

Didi defended the investigation, strongly denied having any dealings with Chaouqui before she was questioned in July and announced he had opened a new investigation into possible false testimony and other potential crimes based on the texts he received from Ciferri. He offered to turn over his cell phone to show he had no dealings with Chaouqui.

“If someone brags about having knowledge (of the investigation) I have to investigate,” he said.

Some defense lawyers also privately complained that Didi had evidence in February 2021 of Chaouqui’s alleged involvement with Perlasca but didn’t inform the defense, part of broader defense complaints about the peculiarities of the Vatican’s legal system. Didi acknowledged last week that Ciferri phone him on Feb. 4, 2021 and mentioned Chaouqui’s name.

Didi also heard from Perlasca on March 1, 2022, when the monsignor filed a formal complaint alleging Chaouqui had threatened him and claimed to be working with prosecutors. The written complaint was only entered into evidence last week. Defense lawyers said it was their first inkling that Perlasca might be a compromised prosecution witness.

“She sent me threatening messages via telephone, saying I was in her hands and that only she could save me from certain prison, making clear she could influence the investigators,” Perlasca wrote in his complaint.

Chaouqui was in touch with Perlasca as recently as Nov. 26. She texted him after his first court appearances and suggested they meet before he went back on the stand.

“My interest, and I think yours, is that my support not emerge at trial because it would be difficult to explain above all the consequences that it had,” she wrote.

Russian oil cap begins, trying to pressure Putin on Ukraine

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Western countries on Monday began imposing a \$60-per-barrel price cap and ban on some types of Russian oil, part of new measures aimed at stepping up pressure against Moscow over its war on Ukraine.

The European Union, along with Australia, Britain, Canada, Japan and the United States agreed to the price cap on Friday. The move has prompted a rejection from Kremlin and also criticism from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy — whose government wants the cap to be half as high.

The 27-country European bloc also imposed an embargo on Russian oil shipped by sea.

Questions have arisen about just how the Western measures will affect market prices. On Monday, U.S. benchmark crude traded up 90 cents to \$80.88.

Many other factors, including COVID-19 prevention measures in China that have crimped its manufacturing, are also having an impact on demand for crude and thus prices. They are far down from a peak earlier during the war.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak, who is in charge of energy issues, warned in televised comments on Sunday that Russia won’t sell its oil to countries that would try to use the cap.

“We will only sell oil and oil products to the countries that will work with us on market terms, even if we have to reduce output to some extent,” Novak said in televised remarks hours before the price cap came into effect.

The Ukrainian government demanded over the weekend a lower price cap, to \$30 per barrel, insisting that at the \$60 level Russia would still reap annual oil revenues of \$100 billion — money that can be used

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to finance its war machine.

Russia, the world's No.2 oil producer, relies on the sale of oil and gas to underpin its economy, which has already come under sweeping international sanctions over President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.

In recent weeks, Russia has been pounding Ukrainian infrastructure — including power plants — with military strikes and keeping an offensive going in the east, notably in and around the town of Bakhmut.

Russian forces have also been digging in near the southern city of Kherson, which was recaptured by Ukrainian forces last month after an 8-month occupation.

The war that began with Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24 has displaced millions from their homes, killed and injured an untold number of civilians, and shaken the world economy — notably through the fallout on the prices and availability of foodstuffs, fertilizer and fuel that are key exports from Ukraine and Russia.

Cowboys score 33 points in 4th quarter, rout Colts 54-19

By SCHUYLER DIXON AP Pro Football Writer

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — Dallas safety Malik Hooker had no idea what he was starting with a fumble return for a touchdown early in the fourth quarter against his former team.

The 38-yard TD return was part of a 33-point fourth quarter that turned a close game into the Cowboys' 54-19 rout of the Indianapolis Colts on Sunday night.

It was just the third time in NFL history a team has scored at least that many in the fourth. And it was a little bit personal for Hooker, who also had one of three interceptions of Matt Ryan.

Hooker was drafted 15th overall by the Colts in 2017, but didn't get a second contract after four injury-plagued seasons. He signed with Dallas during training camp last year.

"It was definitely some extra motivation," Hooker said. "Sorry how it ended and everything, but I just wanted to come out here and prove that I'm still the player I was drafted to be and I feel like I showed that tonight."

Dallas led 21-19 entering the fourth when Dak Prescott threw the last of his three touchdown passes. Hooker's scoop-and-score was the first of four fourth-quarter takeaways by Dallas, all of which led to touchdowns.

Ryan threw his second and third interceptions and lost a fumble during the nightmare finish for the Colts (4-8-1), who fell to 1-3 under interim coach Jeff Saturday and lost for the sixth time in seven games.

Ryan, who threw two touchdown passes, has 18 giveaways this season (13 interceptions, five lost fumbles) to lead the NFL by three over Buffalo quarterback Josh Allen.

"It was tough there at the end," said Ryan, who was re-inserted as the starter by Saturday when Indy's former All-Pro center took over as coach. "When you turn the ball over like we did in the fourth ... credit to them."

Michael Gallup had two touchdown catches and CeeDee Lamb the other when he rolled over safety Rodney McLeod Jr. and stayed on his feet as the Cowboys remained two games behind NFL-leading Philadelphia in the NFC East.

After Gallup's second TD, Hooker scooped up a fumble from tight end Mo Alie-Cox and took off untouched down the right sideline for a 34-19 lead early in the fourth.

Rookie cornerback DaRon Bland was next, intercepting Ryan on consecutive possessions to set up pile-on touchdown runs from Tony Pollard, a 30-yarder, and Ezekiel Elliott.

Ryan's fumble was forced by Osa Odighizuwa, and rookie Sam Williams' TD return on the recovery was overturned on review. Rookie Malik Davis' first career TD on a 23-yarder came three plays later.

"That's the football Gods. That's what they say," Hooker said about the bevy of turnovers. Honestly, though, those guys are just after it up front. You watch the game from beginning to end, those guys are dominating up front. They were creating a lot of those takeaways."

BENCHED ELLIOTT

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Owner Jerry Jones said Elliott didn't start for the first time in 98 career regular-season games because of some "discipline issues" with the coaching staff.

The two-time rushing champ entered the game in the middle of the second series. He finished with 77 yards on 17 carries. Pollard had 91 yards on 12 carries.

"I think there was a little issue he had with his coach, some discipline issues that were being tardy for a meeting or a phone going off," Jones said. "But I won't get into that, but I'm not giving out that punishment. I'd be a lot more lenient than that."

RECRUITING TIME

Gallup and Lamb scored the first three Dallas touchdowns and combined for nine catches for 94 yards on the eve of free agent receiver Odell Beckham Jr.'s Dallas visit.

Beckham has already visited the New York Giants, his first team, and Buffalo. He has been rehabbing an ACL tear from the Super Bowl in February when he won the title with the Los Angeles Rams.

PASSING HIS FAVORITE COWBOY

Prescott's first-quarter TD toss to Lamb gave him 154 career scoring passes, breaking a tie with Pro Football Hall of Famer Roger Staubach for fourth in club history.

Made aware of the possibility during the week, Prescott said Staubach was his favorite Dallas player. He grew up a Cowboys fan in Louisiana, but well after Staubach's time.

"There's certain people that you meet and their energy and just their aura, the way that they carry themselves, is glowing in a sense and that's who Roger is," said Prescott, who also moved past Danny White (155) for third, finishing the night at 156 TD passes.

INJURIES

Colts: CB Kenny Moore II was inactive after injuring an ankle in a 24-17 loss to Pittsburgh last Monday night.

Cowboys: CB Anthony Brown left the game in the third quarter with a torn Achilles.

UP NEXT

Colts: After a bye, Indy visits another NFC playoff contender in Minnesota on Dec. 18.

Cowboys: Houston visits next Sunday in the second of three consecutive games against sub-.500 AFC South teams.

US police rarely deploy deadly robots to confront suspects

By JANIE HAR and CLAUDIA LAUER Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The unabashedly liberal city of San Francisco became the unlikely proponent of weaponized police robots last week after supervisors approved limited use of the remote-controlled devices, addressing head-on an evolving technology that has become more widely available even if it is rarely deployed to confront suspects.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted 8-3 on Tuesday to permit police to use robots armed with explosives in extreme situations where lives are at stake and no other alternative is available. The authorization comes as police departments across the U.S. face increasing scrutiny for the use of militarized equipment and force amid a years-long reckoning on criminal justice.

The vote was prompted by a new California law requiring police to inventory military-grade equipment such as flashbang grenades, assault rifles and armored vehicles, and seek approval from the public for their use.

So far, police in just two California cities — San Francisco and Oakland — have publicly discussed the use of robots as part of that process. Around the country, police have used robots over the past decade to communicate with barricaded suspects, enter potentially dangerous spaces and, in rare cases, for deadly force.

Dallas police became the first to kill a suspect with a robot in 2016, when they used one to detonate explosives during a standoff with a sniper who had killed five police officers and injured nine others.

The recent San Francisco vote, has renewed a fierce debate sparked years ago over the ethics of us-

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ing robots to kill a suspect and the doors such policies might open. Largely, experts say, the use of such robots remains rare even as the technology advances.

Michael White, a professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University, said even if robotics companies present deadlier options at tradeshow, it doesn't mean police departments will buy them. White said companies made specialized claymores to end barricades and scrambled to equip body-worn cameras with facial recognition software, but departments didn't want them.

"Because communities didn't support that level of surveillance. It's hard to say what will happen in the future, but I think weaponized robots very well could be the next thing that departments don't want because communities are saying they don't want them," White said.

Robots or otherwise, San Francisco official David Chiu, who authored the California bill when in the state legislature, said communities deserve more transparency from law enforcement and to have a say in the use of militarized equipment.

San Francisco "just happened to be the city that tackled a topic that I certainly didn't contemplate when the law was going through the process, and that dealt with the subject of so-called killer robots," said Chiu, now the city attorney.

In 2013, police maintained their distance and used a robot to lift a tarp as part of a manhunt for the Boston Marathon bombing suspect, finding him hiding underneath it. Three years later, Dallas police officials sent a bomb disposal robot packed with explosives into an alcove of El Centro College to end an hours-long standoff with sniper Micah Xavier Johnson, who had opened fire on officers as a protest against police brutality was ending.

Police detonated the explosives, becoming the first department to use a robot to kill a suspect. A grand jury declined charges against the officers, and then-Dallas Police Chief David O. Brown was widely praised for his handling of the shooting and the standoff.

"There was this spray of doom about how police departments were going to use robots in the six months after Dallas," said Mark Lomax, former executive director of the National Tactical Officers Association. "But since then, I had not heard a lot about that platform being used to neutralize suspects ... until the San Francisco policy was in the news."

The question of potentially lethal robots has not yet cropped up in public discourse in California as more than 500 police and sheriffs departments seek approval for their military-grade weapons use policy under the new state law. Oakland police abandoned the idea of arming robots with shotguns after public backlash, but will outfit them with pepper spray.

Many of the use policies already approved are vague as to armed robots, and some departments may presume they have implicit permission to deploy them, said John Lindsay-Poland, who has been monitoring implementation of the new law as part of the American Friends Service Committee.

"I do think most departments are not prepared to use their robots for lethal force," he said, "but if asked, I suspect there are other departments that would say, 'we want that authority.'"

San Francisco Supervisor Aaron Peskin first proposed prohibiting police from using robot force against any person. But the department said while it would not outfit robots with firearms, it wanted the option to attach explosives to breach barricades or disorient a suspect.

The approved policy allows only a limited number of high-ranking officers to authorize use of robots as a deadly force — and only when lives are at stake and after exhausting alternative force or de-escalation tactics, or concluding they would not be able to subdue the suspect through alternate means.

San Francisco police say the dozen functioning ground robots the department already has have never been used to deliver an explosive device, but are used to assess bombs or provide eyes in low visibility situations.

"We live in a time when unthinkable mass violence is becoming more commonplace. We need the option to be able to save lives in the event we have that type of tragedy in our city," San Francisco Police Chief Bill Scott said in a statement.

Los Angeles Police Department does not have any weaponized robots or drones, said SWAT Lt. Ruben

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Lopez. He declined to detail why his department did not seek permission for armed robots, but confirmed they would need authorization to deploy one.

"It's a violent world, so we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said.

There are often better options than robots if lethal force is needed, because bombs can create collateral damage to buildings and people, said Lomax, the former head of the tactical officers group. "For a lot of departments, especially in populated cities, those factors are going to add too much risk," he said.

Last year, the New York Police Department returned a leased robotic dog sooner than expected after public backlash, indicating that civilians are not yet comfortable with the idea of machines chasing down humans.

Police in Maine have used robots at least twice to deliver explosives meant to take down walls or doors and bring an end to standoffs.

In June 2018, in the tiny town of Dixmont, Maine, police had intended to use a robot to deliver a small explosive that would knock down an exterior wall, but instead collapsed the roof of the house.

The man inside was shot twice after the explosion, survived and pleaded no contest to reckless conduct with a firearm. The state later settled his lawsuit against the police challenging that they had used the explosives improperly.

In April 2020, Maine police used a small charge to blow a door off of a home during a standoff. The suspect was fatally shot by police when he exited through the damaged doorway and fired a weapon.

As of this week, the state attorney general's office had not completed its review of the tactics used in the 2018 standoff, including the use of the explosive charge. A report on the 2020 incident only addressed the fatal gunfire.

EXPLAINER: Congress is acting on gay, interracial marriage

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Legislation that ensures same-sex and interracial marriages are recognized as legal unions appears headed for final approval and President Joe Biden's signature, a bipartisan agreement that reflects a wider acceptance of gay rights in both Congress and the country.

The measure, which would protect the rights of about a half million married couples, passed the Senate last week and heads to the House this week for near-certain approval.

For many of the couples whose marriages will be protected, approval of the Respect for Marriage Act brought a sense of relief and was cause for celebration. But they also say more work needs to be done.

The measure advanced due to supporters' fears that a conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court may undo rights that took decades to obtain, just as the court overturned the longstanding right to abortion earlier this year. And it does not stop states from denying these couples the right to marry in the future, should the Supreme Court ever overturn the 2015 ruling legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide.

Still the broad support for the bill, which was backed by 12 GOP senators, was unexpected given the long and divisive history of the issue. Biden has said he will "promptly and proudly sign it into law."

WHAT'S IN THE BILL?

The legislation says that federal and state governments must recognize legally celebrated marriages regardless of the individuals' sex, race, ethnicity, or national origin, and it would allow people to sue to enforce those rights.

It also maintains current religious freedom or conscience protections, stating that nonprofit religious organizations or nonprofits that are religious in nature do not need to provide goods, services or accommodations for the celebration of the marriages. For example, a church that doesn't support same-sex marriage would not be required to rent out space for such a union.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

It was roughly 25 years ago that a bipartisan majority passed the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA, which defined marriage as between one woman and one man. It said the federal government did not recognize same-sex marriages for purposes such as filing taxes or receiving Social Security survivor benefits,

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and that states didn't have to recognize same-sex unions conducted in other states.

In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that the part of DOMA that said the federal government wouldn't recognize same-sex marriages was unconstitutional.

Two years later, in an opinion known as *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the court found bans on same-sex marriage unconstitutional. That monumental decision legalized gay marriage nationwide, ending bans in 14 states that still had them. Since then, hundreds of thousands of same-sex couples have married.

For interracial couples in the US, the right to marry has been recognized much longer. A 1960s-era Supreme Court decision, *Loving v. Virginia*, invalidated state laws that banned marriages between people of different races.

In the years after *Obergefell*, some supporters of gay rights worried the freedom to marry could one day be revoked, and pursued versions of the Respect for Marriage Act, said Jon Davidson, senior staff attorney for the ACLU's LGBTQ & HIV Project and co-counsel on *Obergefell*.

But there wasn't the urgency or political will to advance it — until this summer.

WHY NOW?

In June, a new conservative majority on the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 decision that established the right to an abortion and had stood for almost 50 years. The ruling gave states the power to decide whether to ban abortion, and almost immediately a patchwork of laws went into effect, including near-total bans in about a dozen states.

Writing for the majority, Justice Samuel Alito said "(n)othing in this opinion should be understood to cast doubt on precedents that do not concern abortion." But it was the words of a fellow conservative, Justice Clarence Thomas, that alarmed gay-rights supporters.

"I agree that '(n)othing in (the Court's) opinion should be understood to cast doubt on precedents that do not concern abortion,'" Thomas wrote. "For that reason, in future cases, we should reconsider all of this Court's substantive due process precedents." That included *Obergefell*, Thomas wrote.

The statements "understandably terrified a lot of people" and gave new momentum to the Respect for Marriage Act, said Andrew Koppelman, John Paul Stevens Professor of Law at Northwestern University.

"We've got half a million same-sex couples in the United States, and Thomas essentially says to them, 'I'm coming for you next,'" Koppelman said. "And so that generates some urgency that was not there before."

There's no case on the horizon that asks the Supreme Court to undo rulings that protect same-sex and interracial marriages. But Democrats opted to act while they had control of both chambers of Congress and the White House.

The House voted on an early version of the bill in July, and the final tally caught some by surprise: 267-157, with 47 Republicans voting in favor.

The vote reflected an overall change in the public's views, Davidson said. At one point, most people in the U.S. opposed same-sex marriage. But in a June Gallup poll, 71% of U.S. adults said same-sex unions should be valid under the law.

Democrats delayed consideration of the bill in the 50-50 Senate until after the Nov. 8 election, hoping to get 10 Republicans on board and reach the 60-vote threshold necessary to overcome the filibuster.

Post-election, there was a new reason for Democrats to act quickly, for fear that a new GOP majority in the House would refuse to consider the bill come January.

WHAT WOULD THE BILL CHANGE?

"In many ways it freezes most of what is already the current law," Davidson said, describing it as "a bulwark against the Supreme Court possibly reversing the *Obergefell* decision as it reversed *Roe v. Wade*."

The legislation wouldn't codify, or enshrine into law, *Obergefell*, which now requires states to issue same-sex marriage licenses. So if the bill is signed into law, and the Supreme Court later overturns *Obergefell*, some states could stop issuing those licenses. But all states would still have to recognize same-sex marriages performed legally in other states.

The practical effect of that would be that some people couldn't get married in their own states, but all same-sex marriages would continue to be recognized and eligible for the legal benefits of marriage.

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The bill also includes provisions to ensure federal benefits remain for same-sex married couples, such as tax, pension and health benefits.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE REACTION?

Most Republicans still oppose the legislation, saying it is unnecessary and citing concerns about religious liberty. In recent weeks some conservative groups also have spoken out against it. After the Senate approved the measure Tuesday, an official from Alliance Defending Freedom criticized it as jeopardizing the religious freedom of millions of Americans.

"This dangerously cynical and completely unnecessary bill is a direct attack on the First Amendment," said Ryan Bangert, the organization's senior vice president of strategic initiatives.

To Davidson, the vote shows how public perception on the issue has changed. He said the public has seen over the past few years that conservatives' doomsday views of what could happen if same-sex couples were allowed was "fear-mongering."

"They actually said 'Civilization as we know it will end,'" he recalled. "And now same-sex couples have been able to get legally married and to have those marriages recognized in the United States for seven years everywhere in the country, and nothing bad has happened."

At the same time, the LGBTQ community has been the target of violence, Davidson said, noting the recent murders at a gay nightclub in Colorado. He called on Congress to do more to protect the transgender community and others who have been victimized.

"Being able to have your marriage recognized and treated equally is important, but it's not as important as being able to stay alive," he said.

What to watch in Tuesday's Georgia Senate runoff election

By HANNAH FINGERHUT and JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The extended Senate campaign in Georgia gives Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock and Republican challenger Herschel Walker a second chance to persuade voters to send them to Washington. But without party control of Congress at stake and absent other candidates on the ticket, the runoff looks different from the November general election.

The results of the AP VoteCast survey illustrate some of the challenges each candidate faces on Tuesday. Walker will need to turn out a GOP base that wasn't enamored with him to start with, and do it without the more popular Gov. Brian Kemp on the ballot. Warnock must get his coalition of some lower-propensity voting groups to turn out.

And both candidates have to motivate voters despite a predetermined balance of power in Washington.

The wide-ranging VoteCast survey of more than 3,200 midterm voters in the state provides a detailed look at the Warnock and Walker coalitions and the attitudes that defined their choices this year. The data reveals advantages — and disadvantages — for both candidates in the runoff.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Fifty-four percent of Georgia midterm voters said they considered party control of the Senate to be the primary factor in their vote in the general election. But that's no longer at stake.

Democrats flipped a Republican-held Senate seat in Pennsylvania to maintain their thin advantage in the chamber without relying on the outcome in Georgia.

In the general, many supporters of both candidates were motivated by party control, and they'll need to be persuaded to vote a second time around when it doesn't hang in the balance.

It's a challenge for Walker in particular, whose supporters were slightly more likely than Warnock's to say control of the Senate was their chief consideration, 57% vs. 52%. A Walker victory in the Senate would keep the 50-50 status quo, but Democrats maintain control with Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote.

REPUBLICAN SUPPORT

Walker benefits from Georgia's Republican-leaning tendencies, but Kemp didn't carry Walker when they were both at the top of the ticket four weeks ago. In fact, Walker's vote tallies fell more than 200,000

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short of his fellow Republican's, which might suggest he has a harder time getting Republicans out for him without Kemp on the ballot.

While 7 in 10 Kemp voters said they enthusiastically backed the governor, only about half of Walker's voters said they were enthusiastically supporting Walker. Among Walker supporters, about 4 in 10 said they backed him with reservations and about 1 in 10 said they were simply opposing the other candidates.

"I've got some reservations, I'm not 100% Walker, but he is a hell of a lot better than what we've got up there now with Warnock in there," said Donny Richardson, a retired Marine who voted for Walker last week in Marietta. "Things need to change."

Warnock has more work to do in a state that resoundingly reelected Kemp over two-time Democratic challenger Stacey Abrams and elected exclusively Republican statewide constitutional officers.

That's especially true when Warnock may have been helped by Republicans who decided not to support Walker but showed up in the general to vote for other Republicans, including their governor. Fifteen percent of moderate and liberal Republicans backed Warnock. Eleven percent of Kemp voters supported Warnock or another candidate, including Libertarian Chase Oliver, compared with just 3% of Abrams voters bucking Warnock.

CONSTITUENCIES

Warnock and Walker both amassed familiar Democratic and Republican constituencies in last month's election. But there were signs that Walker did worse than his fellow Republican Kemp among groups that were core to the governor's success, including white voters and voters in small towns and rural areas. College-educated men and women without a college degree were evenly divided in the Senate race, but both groups went decisively for Kemp in the governor's race.

And most white Protestant voters backed the Republican candidate in both races, but Kemp won them by a wider margin than Walker did.

Warnock won majorities of young voters, Black voters, women, college graduates and suburbanites. Warnock also picked up about two-thirds of ideologically moderate voters.

CHARACTER AND INTEGRITY

The final stretch of campaign featured harsh insults from each candidate on his competitor's character and integrity. Voters in the general were more skeptical about Walker than Warnock, though neither candidate earned glowing marks.

Fifty-six percent of Georgia voters said the incumbent senator "has the right experience to serve effectively" in the job, compared with just 39% saying that of Walker, a 60-year-old political novice.

"I think Herschel Walker is incompetent and Raphael Warnock has more experience, and I think he'll get the job done," said Lolita Baylor, an executive assistant at JCPenney who lives in Morrow. She voted for Warnock.

Voters also were more likely to think Warnock has strong moral values compared with Walker, 53% vs. 43%.

Those critiques of Walker didn't keep some voters from backing him the first time around, though it might eat into his support in a runoff. About a third of his own supporters said he didn't have the right experience and about a quarter said he lacks strong moral values.

TRUMP LINGERS

Walker's endorsement from former President Donald Trump helped him earn the party's nomination, but that may have stunted his success among the state's general electorate.

Biden's razor-thin 2020 win in the state led Trump to falsely claim the results were rigged and to suggest Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger "find" the votes needed to hand Trump a victory. Georgia's voters reelected Kemp and Raffensperger despite Trump's attempts to promote other candidates.

While Walker overwhelmingly won midterm "MAGA" voters — those who say they support the "Make America Great Again" movement — 43% of voters last month said Walker supports Trump too much. Fewer said Kemp or Raffensperger supports Trump too much, though somewhat more said they support Trump too little.

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"He's not a politician," said Kat Shreve of Walker. The nonprofit manager in Marietta backed Warnock. Walker's "a puppet of the Trump administration," she said.

Sixteen percent of Republican voters who don't identify as MAGA supporters backed Warnock in the general.

Even if Trump is not the draw he once was, opposition to his rival might be enough for Walker to convince voters to get back to the ballot box.

Overall, only about half of Walker voters said their vote was meant to signify support for Trump, but far more — about three-quarters — said their vote was in opposition to President Joe Biden. Walker has stressed Warnock's ties to the president throughout the campaign.

"Let's just say he's much better than the Biden guy. Warnock has been. 'Yes sir, Mr. Biden,'" said Jim Howle, a retired voter for Walker. Warnock's "not representing the people."

Warnock, Walker: Starkly different choices for Black voters

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Raphael Warnock is the first Black U.S. senator from Georgia, having broken the color barrier for one of the original 13 states with a special election victory in January 2021, almost 245 years after the nation's founding.

Now he hopes to add another distinction by winning a full six-year term in a Tuesday runoff. Standing in the way is another Black man, Republican challenger Herschel Walker.

Both men have common upbringings in the Deep South in the wake of the civil rights movement and would make history as the first Black person elected from Georgia to a full Senate term. Yet Warnock and Walker have cut different paths and offer clearly opposing visions for the country, including on race and racism.

Black voters say the choice is stark: Warnock, the senior minister of Martin Luther King's Atlanta church, echoes traditional liberal notions of the Black experience; and Walker, a University of Georgia football icon, speaks the language of white cultural conservatism and mocks Warnock's interpretations of King, among other matters.

"Republicans seem to have thought they could put up Herschel Walker and confuse Black folks," said Bryce Berry, president of Georgia's Young Democrats chapter and a senior at Morehouse College, a historically Black campus where both King and Warnock graduated.

Standing beneath a campus statue of King, Berry continued: "We are not confused."

Other Black voters raised questions about Walker's past — his false claims about his business and professional accomplishments, instances of violence against his ex-wife — and the way he stumbles over some public policy discussions as a candidate. Some said they believe GOP leaders are taking advantage of Walker's fame as a beloved Heisman Trophy winner and national champion running back for the Georgia Bulldogs.

"How can you let yourself be used that way as a Black person?" asked Angela Heard, a state employee from Jonesboro. "I think you should be better in touch with your people instead of being a crony for someone."

Even some Black conservatives who back Walker lament his candidacy as a missed opportunity to expand Republicans' reach to a key part of the electorate that remains overwhelmingly Democratic.

"I don't think Herschel Walker has enough relatable life experience to the average Black American for them to identify with him," said Avion Abreu, a 34-year-old realtor who lives in Marietta and has supported Walker since the GOP primary campaign.

Warnock led Walker by about 37,000 votes out of almost 4 million cast in the November general election. AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 3,200 voters in the state, showed that Warnock won 90% of Black voters. Walker, meanwhile, won 68% of white voters.

VoteCast data in the 2021 runoff suggested that Black voters helped fuel Warnock's victory over then-Sen. Kelly Loeffler, comprising almost a third of that electorate, slightly more than the Black share of the

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2020 general electorate.

The senator's campaign has said since then that he'd have to assemble a multiracial coalition, including many moderate white voters, to win reelection in a midterm election year. But they've not disputed that a strong Black turnout would be necessary regardless.

The Republican National Committee has answered with its own uptick in Black voter outreach, opening community centers in several heavily Black areas of the state. But the general election results raise questions about the effectiveness, at least for Walker.

Abreu said she believes Walker still can win the runoff but has to do it with the usual, overwhelmingly white GOP coalition moved by party loyalty and the 60-year-old candidate's emphasis on cultural issues. His campaign, she said, "hasn't told the full story of Herschel's life and related that to people, with an explanation of how he is going to help them."

Indeed, Walker and Warnock share their stories as Black men quite differently.

Warnock doesn't often use phrases like "the Black church" or "the Black experience," but infuses those institutions and ideas into his arguments.

The senator sometimes notes that others "like to introduce me and say I'm the first Black senator from Georgia." He says Georgia voters "did an amazing thing" in 2021 but adds that it's more about the policy results from a Democratic Senate. Born in 1969, he calls himself a "son of the civil rights movement." He talks of King's desire for "a beloved community," an inclusive society Warnock says is anchored in the belief that "we all carry a spark of the divine."

He touts his Senate work to combat maternal mortality, noting the issue is acute among Black women. He campaigns with Black fraternity and sorority alumni. And he tells of his octogenarian mother using her "hands that once picked somebody else's cotton" to "cast a ballot for her youngest son to be a United States senator."

"Only in America is my story possible," he concludes.

Walker, alternately, is often more direct in identifying himself by race, usually with humor.

"You may have noticed I'm Black," he tells audiences that are often nearly all-white. But that jovial aside is the precursor to his indictment of a society — and a political rival — he says are consumed by discussions of race and racism.

"My opponent say America ought to apologize for its whiteness," Walker says in most campaign speeches, a claim based on some of Warnock's sermons referencing institutional racism.

Walker invokes King — "a great man" — with a line from his 1963 "I Have a Dream Speech" and accuses Warnock and "trying to divide us" by race. "He's in a church where a man talked about the content of your character, not the color of your skin," Walker told supporters in Canton on Nov. 10, his first rally of the runoff campaign. In Forsyth County last week, he blasted schools he insisted teach "Critical Race Theory."

"Don't let anyone tell you you're racist," he said in August at a "Women for Herschel" event, which included Alveda King, the conservative evangelical niece of the slain civil rights leader.

He blasts Warnock as anti-law enforcement but without any context about police killings of Black citizens. "What I want to do is get behind our men and women in blue," Walker said in Forsyth.

Walker touts his "minority-owned food services company." Talking to reporters at one fall campaign stop, he recalled being a freshman at the University of Georgia just a decade after the football program integrated with its first Black scholarship players. But when telling voters of his athletics and professional successes, he doesn't allude to race, instead talking in terms of faith.

"The Lord blessed me," he says of each milestone.

It's a contrast to Warnock's framing of growing up in public housing in Savannah, choosing Morehouse because of King, and receiving a Pell Grant for tuition assistance. "I'm talking about good public policy," the senator says.

Doyal Siddell, a 66-year-old Black retiree from Douglasville, said Walker's pitch is disconnected from many Black voters. "Just because you're from the community doesn't mean you understand the community," he said.

It's a contrast not entirely explained by partisan identity of philosophy.

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Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, the Senate's lone Black Republican, talks openly of his his family's struggles through Jim Crow segregation, including his grandfather, who never learned to read or write, and he highlights his status as the only Black American in history elected to both the House and Senate.

"Our family went from cotton to Congress in one lifetime," Scott said as a featured speaker of the 2020 Republican National Convention.

At Morehouse, Berry said Walker could find some Black conservatives and nonpartisans. But he'd have to show up and acknowledge his surroundings.

"You see the senator in the suburbs, in Republican areas," Berry said. "Herschel Walker has not even been to our campus. He's not running a campaign that suggests he wants to represent all Georgians."

Supreme Court taking up clash of religion and gay rights

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is hearing the case Monday of a Christian graphic artist who objects to designing wedding websites for gay couples, a dispute that's the latest clash of religion and gay rights to land at the highest court.

The designer and her supporters say that ruling against her would force artists — from painters and photographers to writers and musicians — to do work that is against their faith. Her opponents, meanwhile, say that if she wins, a range of businesses will be able to discriminate, refusing to serve Black customers, Jewish or Muslim people, interracial or interfaith couples or immigrants, among others.

The case comes at a time when the court is dominated 6-3 by conservatives and following a series of cases in which the justices have sided with religious plaintiffs. It also comes as, across the street from the court, lawmakers in Congress are finalizing a landmark bill protecting same-sex marriage.

The bill, which also protects interracial marriage, steadily gained momentum following the high court's decision earlier this year to end constitutional protections for abortion. That decision to overturn the 1973 Roe v. Wade case prompted questions about whether the court — now that it is more conservative — might also overturn its 2015 decision declaring a nationwide right to same-sex marriage. Justice Clarence Thomas explicitly said that decision should also be reconsidered.

The case being argued before the high court Monday involves Lorie Smith, a graphic artist and website designer in Colorado who wants to begin offering wedding websites. Smith says her Christian faith prevents her from creating websites celebrating same-sex marriages. But that could get her in trouble with state law. Colorado, like most other states, has what's called a public accommodation law that says if Smith offers wedding websites to the public, she must provide them to all customers. Businesses that violate the law can be fined, among other things.

Five years ago, the Supreme Court heard a different challenge involving Colorado's law and a baker, Jack Phillips, who objected to designing a wedding cake for a gay couple. That case ended with a limited decision, however, and set up a return of the issue to the high court. Phillips' lawyer, Kristen Waggoner of the Alliance Defending Freedom, is now representing Smith.

Like Phillips, Smith says her objection is not to working with gay people. She says she'd work with a gay client who needed help with graphics for an animal rescue shelter, for example, or to promote an organization serving children with disabilities. But she objects to creating messages supporting same-sex marriage, she says, just as she won't take jobs that would require her to create content promoting atheism or gambling or supporting abortion.

Smith says Colorado's law violates her free speech rights. Her opponents, including the Biden administration and groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, disagree.

Twenty mostly liberal states, including California and New York, are supporting Colorado while another 20 mostly Republican states, including Arizona, Indiana, Ohio and Tennessee, are supporting Smith.

The case is 303 Creative LLC v. Elenis, 21-476.

Knight, Clooney, Grant feted at Kennedy Center Honors

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A heartfelt Patti LaBelle praised her lifelong friend Gladys Knight. Sean Penn called U2 “four scrappy Dublin punks.” Ballet dancers performed for conductor and composer Tania León. Matt Damon playfully teased his friend George Clooney — a lot — while Sheryl Crow delivered a heartfelt rendition of “Baby Baby” to Amy Grant during Sunday’s Kennedy Center Honors.

Knight, Clooney, Grant, León and U2 were all celebrated at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, which annually honors a select group of people for their artistic influences on American culture. President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and their respective spouses were in attendance, as were members the President’s Cabinet and Congress.

One audience member from the political world — Paul Pelosi, husband of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi — drew some attention. He is recovering from a brutal attack in the Pelosis’ San Francisco home in October. The couple received a standing ovation from the crowd.

Normally performers like U2 or Knight would be headlining such a show, but during the Kennedy Center event the honorees sit in the balcony and watch as their peers laud them and perform their works.

On the red carpet, Clooney, with his wife, Amal, beside him, joked that after seeing friends like Don Cheadle and Julia Roberts in attendance he was worried his tribute would be more of a “roast.” And it was a bit like that, though his friends and family showed obvious respect.

Roberts set the tone by coming out onstage with a dress emblazoned with photos of Clooney. After an introduction that alternated between funny and heartfelt she turned to a set designed to look like a smoky bar — the type Clooney might enjoy. The actor’s father, Nick Clooney, regaled the crowd with stories of a young George, including the time the 7-year-old — heartbroken over the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 — gave his father all his toy guns.

Damon took the funny road, joking about how Clooney once stole then-President Bill Clinton’s stationery and wrote notes to fellow actors on it. Cheadle highlighted Clooney’s philanthropic work. But it was Clooney’s father who probably had the strongest praise, telling the crowd and his son, sitting in the balcony between León and U2’s Bono, “George’s best and most important work is still ahead of him.

Standing on a stage lit by a massive sign reading “Gladys,” LaBelle called Knight her “everything,” saying they had been friends for six decades and had seen each other through laughter and tears. “We do everything together,” LaBelle said. “I am honored to honor you tonight.”

Actor and hip-hop star LL Cool J said that whenever Knight sings she connects with people. “I once heard Gladys sing the ABCs and I thought I was in church,” he said.

Knight — usually with her backup singers, The Pips — has recorded dozens of albums with such classic hits as “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” and “Midnight Train to Georgia.” The challenge of singing that classic in front of the woman who made it famous fell to country music superstar Garth Brooks, who is a Kennedy Center honoree in his own right. He cited Knight’s “roots in country music” before launching into the classic.

Each artist was introduced by a video compilation showing snippets of their lives. In Grant’s, her children talked about their mother’s influence on them. Crow talked about Grant’s influence on her when she was a young college student.

“Amy also taught me that it was possible to be funny, irreverent and Christian all at the same,” said Crow.

Five ballet dancers took to the stage to honor composer and conductor Tania León, who left Cuba as a refugee in 1967; her passport was stamped “Cancelado” when she left the country. The performers were from the Dance Theatre of Harlem, which León helped found when she eventually made her way to New York City. She also instituted the Brooklyn Philharmonic Community Concert Series and in 2021 received the Pulitzer Prize for her work “Stride,” inspired by women’s rights champion Susan B. Anthony.

“How do I convey the extent of your musical genius?” asked actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith. Jazz pianist Jason Moran, singer Alicia Hall Moran and cellist Sterling Elliott played one of León’s creations, “Oh Yemanjá.”

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The last honoree of the night was U2. In a video taped Saturday, U2 guitarist The Edge noted that a group of four "Irish lads" were being honored for contributions to American culture and said there's a bond between the group and America that can't really be explained.

Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder sang U2's "Elevation" and "One." Comedian Sacha Baron Cohen brought his alter ego Borat to the stage as part of the U2 tribute, pretending to mistake Biden for former President Donald Trump. Singers Brandi Carlile, Hozier and Jamala — from the U.S., Ireland and Ukraine, respectively — closed out the show with an emotional version of "Walk On."

U2's Bono is also known for his philanthropic work to eradicate poverty and to raise awareness about AIDS. Jamala, whose home country of Ukraine has been embroiled in nearly a year of bloody warfare after the Russian invasion, touched on that history of social activism as she introduced the night's final song.

"It's fitting that on the night meant to honor them they have once again used their platform to spread a message of peace. Honestly to be here in this bright warm hall this evening is really something extraordinary for me, when there is so much darkness in my home country Ukraine," she said.

The honorees came to the theater from a White House reception where Biden praised them before a star-studded East Room crowd as an "exceptional group of artists."

"Thank you for showing us the power of the arts and 'We the People,'" Biden said.

Bonds, Clemens left out of Hall again; McGriff elected

By JAY COHEN AP Baseball Writer

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Moments after Fred McGriff was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame, almost two decades after his final game, he got the question.

Asked if Barry Bonds belonged in Cooperstown, a smiling McGriff responded: "Honestly, right now, I'm going to just enjoy this evening."

A Hall of Fame committee delivered its answer Sunday, passing over Bonds, Roger Clemens and Curt Schilling while handing McGriff the biggest honor of his impressive big league career.

The lanky first baseman, nicknamed the "Crime Dog," hit .284 with 493 homers and 1,550 RBIs over 19 seasons with six major league teams. The five-time All-Star helped Atlanta win the 1995 World Series.

McGriff got 169 votes (39.8%) in his final year on the Baseball Writers' Association of America ballot in 2019. Now, he will be inducted into Cooperstown on July 23, along with anyone chosen in the writers' vote, announced Jan. 24.

"It's all good. It's been well worth the wait," said McGriff, who played his last big league game in 2004.

It was the first time that Bonds, Clemens and Schilling had faced a Hall committee since their 10th and final appearances on the Baseball Writers' Association of America ballot. Bonds and Clemens have been accused of using performance-enhancing drugs, and support for Schilling dropped after he made hateful remarks toward Muslims, transgender people, reporters and others.

While the 59-year-old McGriff received unanimous support from the 16 members of the contemporary baseball era committee — comprised of Hall members, executives and writers — Schilling got seven votes, and Bonds and Clemens each received fewer than four.

The makeup of the committee likely will change over the years, but the vote was another indication that Bonds and Clemens might never make it to the Hall.

This year's contemporary era panel included Greg Maddux, who played with McGriff on the Braves, along with Paul Beeston, who was an executive with Toronto when McGriff made his big league debut with the Blue Jays in 1986.

Another ex-Brave, Chipper Jones, was expected to be part of the committee, but he tested positive for COVID-19 and was replaced by Arizona Diamondbacks President Derrick Hall.

The contemporary era committee considers candidates whose careers were primarily from 1980 on. A player needs 75% to be elected.

"It's tough deciding on who to vote for and who not to vote for and so forth," McGriff said. "So it's a great honor to be unanimously voted in."

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In addition to all his big hits and memorable plays, one of McGriff's enduring legacies is his connection to a baseball skills video from youth coach Tom Emanski. The slugger appeared in a commercial for the product that aired regularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s — wearing a blue Baseball World shirt and hat.

McGriff said he has never seen the video.

"Come Cooperstown, I've got to wear my blue hat," a grinning McGriff said. "My Tom Emanski hat in Cooperstown. See that video is going to make a revival now, it's going to come back."

Hall of Famers Jack Morris, Ryne Sandberg, Lee Smith, Frank Thomas and Alan Trammell also served on this year's committee, which met in San Diego at baseball's winter meetings.

Rafael Palmeiro, Albert Belle, Don Mattingly and Dale Murphy rounded out the eight-man ballot. Mattingly was next closest to election, with eight votes of 12 required. Murphy had six.

Bonds, Clemens and Schilling fell short in January in their final chances with the BBWAA. Bonds received 260 of 394 votes (66%), Clemens 257 (65.2%) and Schilling 231 (58.6%).

Palmeiro was dropped from the BBWAA ballot after receiving 25 votes (4.4%) in his fourth appearance in 2014, falling below the 5% minimum needed to stay on. His high was 72 votes (12.6%) in 2012.

Bonds has denied knowingly using performance-enhancing drugs, and Clemens maintains he never used PEDs. Palmeiro was suspended for 10 days in August 2005 following a positive test under the major league drug program.

A seven-time NL MVP, Bonds set the career home run record with 762 and the season record with 73 in 2001. A seven-time Cy Young Award winner, Clemens went 354-184 with a 3.12 ERA and 4,672 strikeouts, third behind Nolan Ryan (5,714) and Randy Johnson (4,875). Palmeiro had 3,020 hits and 568 homers.

Schilling fell 16 votes shy with 285 (71.1%) on the 2021 BBWAA ballot. The right-hander went 216-146 with a 3.46 ERA in 20 seasons, winning the World Series with Arizona in 2001 and Boston in 2004 and 2007.

Theo Epstein, who also served on the contemporary era committee, was the GM in Boston when the Red Sox acquired Schilling in a trade with the Diamondbacks in November 2003.

Players on Major League Baseball's ineligible list cannot be considered, a rule that excludes Pete Rose.

Shootings at power substations cause North Carolina outages

CARTHAGE, N.C. (AP) — Two power substations in a North Carolina county were damaged by gunfire in what is being investigated as a criminal act, causing damage that could take days to repair and leaving tens of thousands of people without electricity, authorities said Sunday.

In response to ongoing outages, which began just after 7 p.m. Saturday across Moore County, officials announced a state of emergency that included a curfew from 9 p.m. Sunday to 5 a.m. Monday. Also, county schools will be closed Monday.

"An attack like this on critical infrastructure is a serious, intentional crime and I expect state and federal authorities to thoroughly investigate and bring those responsible to justice," Gov. Roy Cooper wrote on Twitter.

Moore County Sheriff Ronnie Fields said at a Sunday news conference that authorities have not determined a motivation. He said someone pulled up and "opened fire on the substation, the same thing with the other one."

"No group has stepped up to acknowledge or accept that they're the ones that done it," Fields said, adding "we're looking at all avenues."

The sheriff noted that the FBI was working with state investigators to determine who was responsible. He also said "it was targeted."

"It wasn't random," Fields said.

Fields said law enforcement is providing security at the substations and for businesses overnight.

"We will have folks out there tonight around the clock," Fields said.

Roughly 36,000 electric customers in the county were without power on Sunday evening, according to poweroutage.us.

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With cold temperatures forecast for Sunday night, the county also opened a shelter at a sports complex in Carthage.

Duke Energy spokesman Jeff Brooks said multiple pieces of equipment were damaged and will have to be replaced. He said while the company is trying to restore power as quickly as possible, he braced customers for the potential of outages lasting days.

"We are looking at a pretty sophisticated repair with some fairly large equipment and so we do want citizens of the town to be prepared that this will be a multiday restoration for most customers, extending potentially as long as Thursday," Brooks said at the news conference.

Dr. Tim Locklear, the county's school superintendent, announced classes will be canceled Monday.

"As we move forward, we'll be taking it day by day in making those decisions," Locklear said.

The Pilot newspaper in Southern Pines reported that one of its journalists saw a gate to one of the substations had been damaged and was lying in an access road.

"A pole holding up the gate had clearly been snapped off where it meets the ground. The substation's infrastructure was heavily damaged," the newspaper reported.

The county of approximately 100,000 people lies about an hour's drive southwest of Raleigh and is known for golf resorts in Pinehurst and other communities.

Deshaun Watson returns from ban, declines to express remorse

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — Deshaun Watson signed autographs, posed for selfies, ignored the boos and earned a sloppy win.

Again, he declined to express remorse for behavior that earned him an 11-game suspension.

Back in his old home to play his first game in 700 days, Watson showed plenty of rust debuting with Cleveland, but the Browns didn't need him to do much in a 27-14 victory over the Houston Texans on Sunday.

After signing jerseys for Texans and Browns fans and taking pictures with a few more before the game, Watson was overwhelmed with boos once it started. He heard jeers before each snap in the first half and for much of the afternoon.

"They're supposed to boo. I'm a Cleveland Brown now," Watson said.

Watson has been accused by more than two dozen women of sexual harassment and assault during massage sessions. He has settled 23 civil lawsuits brought by the women, while two others, including one filed in October, are pending.

Asked if he felt remorseful for his actions in his return to Houston, Watson said his legal team told him not to address questions about his suspension.

"Of course, it was a tough situation," he said. "The suspension was tough but, at the same time, my main focus was just to try to be 1-0 as a football player today."

Pressed further, Watson said: "I was just excited to be back on the field today. I did everything I was asked, was required to do. I did all that."

Watson had several supporters in the stands before the game, while a group of the women who accused him of sexual misconduct also planned to attend. Attorney Tony Buzbee, who represents the women, didn't respond to a text message seeking to confirm their attendance. He said earlier in the week about 10 women wanted to attend "to kind of make the statement, 'Hey we're still here. We matter.'"

One fan walked into NRG Stadium wearing a derogatory shirt in Browns colors that includes text saying "I need a massage." He was joined by a fan wearing Watson's No. 4 Browns jersey.

Fans in the parking lot set up a fake massage table with a mannequin wearing a red Texans jersey and a towel.

The few fans in their seats when Watson and the Browns jogged onto the field about an hour before kickoff booed.

"It is what it is," Watson said of the boos. "I can't control what the fans do. My job is to go out there

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and execute.”

He didn’t do that too well.

Watson finished 12-of-22 passing for 131 yards and one interception. The three-time Pro Bowl quarterback posted the worst passer rating of his NFL career at 53.4. The Browns (5-7) got two defensive touchdowns and a special teams score to beat the Texans (1-10-1).

After an interception gave the Browns their first possession at their 43, Watson threw two incomplete passes. He spun away from a sack on third down, and fans cheered when his throw to David Bell hit the ground.

Watson’s first completed pass on his third attempt resulted in a turnover when Anthony Schwartz fumbled after a 12-yard gain. Watson later drove the Browns to Houston’s 11 before throwing a pick in the end zone.

“We don’t expect him to be Superman after he hasn’t played in two years,” All-Pro defensive end Myles Garrett said.

Watson sat out the 2021 season after demanding a trade from Houston. After two grand juries in Texas declined to indict him over allegations of sexual harassment and assault, the Browns traded several draft picks to get Watson and then signed him to a fully guaranteed \$235 million contract.

During warmups, Watson signed jerseys for fans behind the end zone. An 18-year-old man from East Texas got Watson’s autograph on his Browns jersey. A couple from Houston wearing Texans jerseys also got Watson’s signature on their jerseys.

“We don’t really know what happened and everyone deserves a second chance,” said Sherry Holden, explaining her support.

Several Browns fans said they were uncomfortable rooting for Watson.

“I’m cheering for the jersey and the team but it’s hard to accept him as my quarterback,” said Brandon Collins, who traveled from Ohio for the game.

The NFL wanted to suspend Watson for at least one season but settled for 11 games after an independent arbiter initially gave him a six-game ban. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell pointed to former U.S. District Judge Sue Robinson calling Watson’s behavior “egregious” and “predatory” in seeking the full suspension.

Watson also was fined \$5 million and required to undergo professional counseling and therapy. Watson has maintained his innocence but also apologized to the women he impacted and

The Browns went 4-7 with veteran Jacoby Brissett filling in for Watson.

Coach Kevin Stefanski committed to starting Watson next week and emphasized him getting his first game out of the way.

“He looked very sharp in practice and he’s excited for the next one so he understood this one was going to be different,” Stefanski said.

England reaches World Cup quarterfinals, beats Senegal 3-0

By JAMES ROBSON AP Soccer Writer

AL KHOR, Qatar (AP) — Like all great strikers, Harry Kane’s timing was perfect.

The England captain got off the mark Sunday, scoring his first goal at this year’s World Cup in a 3-0 victory over Senegal that set up a must-see match against France in the quarterfinals.

“I was waiting patiently to try to score and thankfully that was today,” said Kane, who was the leading scorer at the last World Cup. “I feel good and hopefully this can start a good run for me personally because I know that will help the team as well.”

It certainly was a good time for Kane to end his dry spell in Qatar because Kylian Mbappe, the tournament’s leading scorer with five goals, is waiting to face England on Saturday at Al Bayt Stadium.

With that in mind, England could do with its most prolific striker at his sharpest.

“It is the biggest test that we can face,” England coach Gareth Southgate said. “They are world champions, they have an incredible depth of talent, outstanding individual players, very difficult to play against and score goals against. It is a fantastic challenge.

“(Mbappe) is a world class player, has already delivered in big moments in this tournament and in previ-

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ous tournaments.”

Kane scored six goals at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, each one helping England reach the semifinals. But it has been harder this time around, with the captain having to wait until first-half stoppage time against Senegal to finally get one.

When the moment came, he never looked like missing. Head down, he powered a shot past Senegal goalkeeper Edouard Mendy to put England ahead 2-0. Then, arms spread wide, the relief poured out as he ran away in celebration.

“As a striker scoring goals is what you do and it’s one of the best feelings you can have in football,” Kane said. “The ball just sat up nicely and the connection was perfect. I had one just before that I should have done better with so it was nice to see that one go in.”

It was Kane’s 52nd goal for England, moving him within one of Wayne Rooney’s national record. He also overtook Gary Lineker as his country’s leading scorer in major tournaments with 11 goals.

“You could see the lift that gave him in the second half,” Southgate said. “For any striker, when you haven’t scored, it is there in the back of your mind and you get that lift of confidence when it comes.

“There is nobody I would rather have in that moment bearing down on goal, a really clinical finish.”

England’s great strength at this year’s World Cup has been the amount of different goal threats it has, and another emerged on Sunday when Jordan Henderson gave his team the lead. Bukayo Saka completed the scoring with his third of the tournament.

Marcus Rashford, who has also scored three goals in Qatar, didn’t even make the starting lineup.

“The great thing for us is the goals have been spread,” Southgate said. “We’ve not been dependent upon him (Kane). It’s great that we are showing another side to our attacking play.”

Jude Bellingham is also one of England’s goal scorers, but his game is about so much more. He proved that with a dominant midfield performance against Senegal.

“Goodness me, @BellinghamJude is unbelievably good. He’s the leader in this team. His parents must be so proud. Love him,” Lineker wrote on Twitter after the 19-year-old Borussia Dortmund midfielder crossed for Henderson to score the first goal in the 38th minute.

Up to then, Senegal had been creating the more dangerous chances. But everything changed once Bellingham seized control, charging into the box to set up Henderson before starting the move that led to Kane’s goal.

“I’ve spoken really highly of him,” Kane said. “He’s a fantastic player, has everything with and without the ball, presses really well, getting around the pitch, tackles. With the ball he can run, take players on, play a through ball. As you saw today he was really important with our goals.”

STAYING POWER

The match was played to the beat of the Senegal fans’ drums, which provided the soundtrack from start to finish. England’s fans struggled to be heard over the noise — even when the result was beyond doubt.

STERLING WAIT

Raheem Sterling was ruled out before the match started because of a “family matter” and is on his way back to England. There was no indication if or when he would be able to return.

RECORD SET

Bellingham became the youngest England player to provide an assist at a World Cup.

US intel chief thinking ‘optimistically’ for Ukraine forces

By JAMEY KEATEN and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The head of U.S. intelligence says fighting in Russia’s war in Ukraine is running at a “reduced tempo” and suggests Ukrainian forces could have brighter prospects in coming months.

Avril Haines alluded to past allegations by some that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s advisers could be shielding him from bad news — for Russia — about war developments, and said he “is becoming more informed of the challenges that the military faces in Russia.”

“But it’s still not clear to us that he has a full picture of at this stage of just how challenged they are,” Haines, the U.S. director of national intelligence, said Saturday at the Reagan National Defense Forum in

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Simi Valley, California.

She said her team was "seeing a kind of a reduced tempo already of the conflict" and looking ahead expects both sides will look to refit, resupply, and reconstitute for a possible Ukrainian counter-offensive in the spring.

"But we actually have a fair amount of skepticism as to whether or not the Russians will be in fact prepared to do that," said Haines, speaking to NBC's Andrea Mitchell. "And I think more optimistically for the Ukrainians in that time frame."

On Sunday, the British Ministry of Defense, in its latest intelligence estimate, pointed to new signs from an independent Russian media outlet that public support in Russia for the military campaign was "falling significantly."

Meduza said it obtained a recent confidential opinion survey conducted by the Federal Protection Service, which is in charge of guarding the Kremlin and providing security to top government officials.

The survey, commissioned by the Kremlin, found that 55% of respondents backed peace talks with Ukraine while 25% wanted the war to go on. The report didn't mention the margin of error.

Levada Center, Russia's top independent pollster, found in a similar poll carried out in November that 53% of respondents supported peace talks, 41% spoke in favor of continuing the fight, and 6% were undecided. It said that poll of 1,600 people had a margin of error of no more than 3.4%.

The British Defense Ministry noted that "despite the Russian authorities' efforts to enforce pervasive control of the information environment, the conflict has become increasingly tangible for many Russians" since Putin in September ordered a "partial mobilization" of reservists to bolster his forces in Ukraine.

"With Russia unlikely to achieve major battlefield successes in the next several months, maintaining even tacit approval of the war amongst the population is likely to be increasingly difficult for the Kremlin," the British ministry said.

In recent weeks, Russia's military focus has been on striking Ukrainian infrastructure nationwide, pressing an offensive in the Donetsk region city of Bakhmut and shelling sites in the city of Kherson, which Ukrainian forces liberated last month after an 8-month Russian occupation.

In his nightly address on Saturday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy lashed out at Western efforts to crimp Russia's crucial oil industry, a key source of funds for Putin's war machine, saying their \$60-per-barrel price cap on imports of most Russian oil was insufficient.

"It is not a serious decision to set such a limit for Russian prices, which is quite comfortable for the budget of the terrorist state," Zelenskyy said, referring to Russia. He said the \$60-per-barrel level would still allow Russia to bring in \$100 billion in revenues per year.

"This money will go not only to the war and not only to further sponsorship by Russia of other terrorist regimes and organisations. This money will be used for further destabilisation of those countries that are now trying to avoid serious decisions," Zelenskyy said.

Australia, Britain, Canada, Japan, the United States and the 27-nation European Union agreed Friday to cap what they would pay for Russian oil at \$60 per barrel. The limit is set to take effect Monday, along with an EU embargo on Russian oil shipped by sea.

Russian authorities have rejected the price cap and threatened Saturday to stop supplying the nations that endorsed it.

"We will sell oil and oil products to those countries, which will work with us on market conditions, even if we have to somewhat cut production," Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said Sunday.

In yet another show of Western support for Ukraine's efforts to battle back Russian forces and cope with fallout from the war, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland on Saturday visited the operations of a Ukrainian aid group that provides support for internally displaced people in Ukraine, among her other visits with top Ukrainian officials.

Nuland assembled dolls out of yarn in the blue-and-yellow colors of Ukraine's flag with youngsters from regions including Kharkiv in the northeast, Kherson in the south and Donetsk in the east.

"This is psychological support for them at an absolutely crucial time," Nuland said.

"As President Putin knows best, this war could stop today, if he chose to stop it and withdrew his forces

— and then negotiations can begin,” she added.

CFP: Georgia vs Ohio St in Peach; Michigan vs TCU in Fiesta

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

For this college football season, the BCS probably would have been fine.

Two days after the College Football Playoff announced it is expanding to 12 teams, the field of four to determine this season’s national champion included two schools that did not even win their conferences.

Georgia, Michigan, TCU and Ohio State were selected Sunday for the playoff, giving the Big Ten multiple programs in the four-team field for the first time.

The top-ranked and reigning champion Bulldogs (13-0) and fourth-seeded Buckeyes (11-1) will meet Dec. 31 at the Peach Bowl in Atlanta. Ohio State got a reprieve, moving back into the top four after losing to Big Ten rival Michigan just a week ago.

“How we got here, at this point, I guess doesn’t really matter now that we’re here,” Ohio State Ryan Day said.

The second-seeded Wolverines (13-0) and third-ranked Horned Frogs (12-1) will play at the Fiesta Bowl in Glendale, Arizona, in the first game of the New Year’s Eve doubleheader.

The Horned Frogs were third coming into the weekend, but had to sweat out their spot Saturday night after losing the Big 12 title game to Kansas State in overtime.

“I was really nervous,” TCU quarterback Max Duggan said about watching ESPN’s slow rollout of the pairings Sunday afternoon.

The Frogs had nothing to fear. They had already built enough equity to stay in the top four, and they erupted with cheers of relief at their watch party in Fort Worth, Texas, when it became official.

The playoff was born in 2014 from the constant controversy and complaining about the Bowl Championship Series and how deserving teams would often be left out of the 1 vs. 2 postseason game it created.

This year, a Georgia-Michigan game would not have generated many complaints.

Georgia, which won the Southeastern Conference championship game in a rout, is a 6 1/2-point favorite against Ohio State, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. Michigan, which took the Big Ten title, is favored by 9 1/2 points over TCU.

CFP selection committee chairman Boo Corrigan said the 13-member panel went through its usual process of grouping teams in threes to compare them for the final rankings, but not for long.

“I can’t actually remember which team got pulled in for the third, but as we went into it, we wanted to make sure we got those first two set and then we moved forward,” said Corrigan, who is the athletic director at North Carolina State.

The national championship game is Jan. 9 at Sofi Stadium in Inglewood, California, and because there will be four teams and not just two, it could be a rematch of rivals Ohio State and Michigan in what will soon be Big Ten country as the conference expands with UCLA and USC.

The Buckeyes and Wolverines have never played outside of their annual regular-season game in a bitter rivalry that dates to 1902.

The most interesting part of Sunday’s unveiling was whether the committee would pair Michigan and Ohio State in the semifinals and whether Alabama might be slip in as the first two-loss playoff team.

“I truly believe that they got it right,” first-year TCU coach Sonny Dykes said. “Conference championship games, I don’t think you should be punished for playing in them. But you never know just how those conversations are going to go.”

In the end, the committee sprung no surprises. The rest of the New Year’s Six bowls were also set:

- Tennessee vs. Clemson in the Orange Bowl on Dec. 30.
- Alabama vs. Kansas State in the Sugar Bowl on Dec. 31.
- Tulane vs. USC in the Cotton Bowl on Jan. 2.
- Utah vs. Penn State in the Rose Bowl on Jan. 2.

That’s an appealing slate, but with no championship stakes the question Crimson Tide coach Nick Saban

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already faced Sunday was: How many of the Tide's best players will play?

"I'm hopeful that players will see this as an opportunity to create value for themselves, even if they're older players and have a chance to get drafted this year and come out -- whether they're seniors or juniors," Saban said in an interview with ESPN.

Shuffle some of those bowl matchups around to fit the new 12-team format and turn them into playoff games and they would be a lot more appealing — and a lot more valuable. Expansion becomes a reality in 2024.

Ohio State was given a second life in the four-team playoff race when Southern California lost the Pac-12 championship game Friday night to Utah, and the Buckeyes were deemed the best of a flawed batch on contenders.

Alabama (10-2) was fifth in the committee rankings, missing the CFP for just the second time in its nine-year history. Tennessee (10-2) was sixth and Atlantic Coast Conference champion Clemson (11-2) was seventh.

An argument could be made Georgia got the tougher draw of the top two. By the recruiting rankings, Ohio State has as good a roster as anyone in the country.

Georgia coach Kirby Smart talked about how familiar the Bulldogs are with Ohio State's players because the teams recruit from the same pool of blue-chippers.

"I know the NFL teams really enjoy watching these kids go against each other," Smart said.

For Georgia, it is the second straight CFP appearance and third overall. This time, though, Smart's Bulldogs enter as the No. 1 team and clear favorite after following up last season's national title with a perfect season. Stetson Bennett and the 'Dawgs will try to become the first team to repeat as CFP champions.

Ohio State is making its fifth playoff appearance. The Buckeyes won their last national title as the four seed in 2014.

This is the fourth time two teams from the same conference reached the playoff. Alabama and Georgia have done it twice of the SEC and the Atlantic Coast Conference has done it once, when Clemson and ACC guest member Notre Dame made the 2020 pandemic-season playoff.

Michigan is in as the second seed for the second straight year after losing to Georgia in the Orange Bowl semifinal last season.

Last year, Michigan was the first team reach the College Football Playoff after starting the season unranked in the AP Top 25.

TCU is now the second. The Horned Frogs also are just the 13th different school to make the field in nine years. That lack of variety is one of the main reasons the CFP is growing — even if sometimes two will do for settling who is No. 1.

Kylian Mbappé leads France past Poland 3-1 at World Cup

By ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writer

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — It all seems so straightforward — laughable, perhaps — for Kylian Mbappé when it comes to the World Cup.

The France forward, who scored four goals when he led his country to the title four years ago as a 19-year-old phenom, put on yet another demonstration of how devastating he can be on the soccer field.

After it was over, Mbappé almost seemed to be chuckling as Robert Lewandowski came over to congratulate him.

Mbappé scored two goals Sunday and set up another for Olivier Giroud to give France a 3-1 victory over Poland and move the 2018 champions within three wins of successfully defending their title. He already has a tournament-best five goals in Qatar as Les Bleus have reached the quarterfinals for the third straight World Cup.

"The only objective for me is to win the World Cup," Mbappé said. "The only thing I dream is this. I came here to win this World Cup. I didn't come here to win the Golden Ball or Golden Boot. If I win it of course I'm going to be happy but that's not why I'm here. I'm here to win and I'm here to help the French

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national team.”

Lewandowski, a two-time FIFA player of the year, scored from the penalty spot in second-half stoppage time for Poland.

France will play England for a spot in the semifinals. The English team beat Senegal 3-0.

Mbappé scored his first goal in the 74th minute when he was left unmarked to blast in a long-range shot following a counterattack. He added another in stoppage time when Poland goalkeeper Wojciech Szczęsny could only get a weak glove on another powerful shot from the man in the No. 10 shirt.

“He can change a match in just a moment and he’s always playing with such joy and we all want to share those smiles with him,” France coach Didier Deschamps said. “France needed a great Kylian Mbappé tonight and they got one.”

Having also provided two assists, Mbappé has easily been the most productive player in Qatar.

After his latest exploits, Mbappé explained why he hadn’t addressed the media in Qatar before Sunday.

“I needed to focus on the tournament and my soccer,” he said through a translator, adding that he had volunteered to pay a French federation fine for his silence. “When I want to concentrate on something that’s the way I function. And that’s why I didn’t want to come speak to you before now.

“I’ve been preparing for this tournament throughout the season, physically and mentally,” he added. “I wanted to be ready for this tournament and I am.”

Mbappé celebrated his second goal by waving his arms for the crowd to cheer louder. Then he hoisted himself up onto the crossbar shortly after the final whistle in front of France’s celebrating fans.

Mbappé already has nine career World Cup goals and if he stays healthy, he could probably play in another three editions of soccer’s biggest event — meaning he might approach the tournament’s career scoring record held by Germany striker Miroslav Klose, who scored 16 goals over four World Cups.

“He hurt us today but I am cheering for him because he is a real star,” Poland coach Czesław Michniewicz said through a translator. “I’m talking about (Lionel) Messi, (Cristiano) Ronaldo, Lewandowski. If someone is going to take over, I think Mbappé will be the player to be the best one (for) many years.”

No country has repeated as World Cup champions in six decades — since Brazil achieved the feat by claiming consecutive trophies in 1958 and 1962. Italy is the only other nation to have won two straight, in 1934 and 1938.

While Lewandowski is a prolific scorer himself, he’s never come close to winning a major title with a Poland team that struggles to get him the ball.

Mbappé, by contrast, is supported by a large array of talented players — even though half a dozen top France players are out injured.

The French team took the lead when Mbappé threaded a pass to Giroud and the AC Milan striker quickly slotted the ball into the far corner. It was Giroud’s 52nd career international goal — breaking a tie with Thierry Henry on France’s all-time scoring list.

After Mbappé leaped into Giroud’s arms to celebrate, pumping his fists, Giroud held up seven fingers to the cameras — five on one hand and two on the other for “52.”

It’s all the more sweet for Giroud because he wasn’t even supposed to be a starter on this year’s squad until Ballon d’Or winner Karim Benzema was ruled out because of injury. Giroud also scored two goals in France’s opening 4-1 win over Australia.

On a record-setting night for France, goalkeeper Hugo Lloris matched the national team mark of 142 appearances held by Lilian Thuram.

With two European teams playing, there weren’t all that many supporters of either country inside Al Thumama Stadium except for small pockets of France fans beating drums behind one goal and red-and-white clad spectators chanting “Polska” behind the opposite goal. There were also plenty of empty seats.

JEWELRY BREAK

Play was paused briefly in the first half when France defender Jules Kounde was told by a match official to remove two gold chains he was wearing.

France coach Didier Deschamps was asked if Kounde kept the chains on because they displayed a rain-

bow symbol.

"I don't know what was on his necklace," Deschamps said. "Jules is superstitious and he usually wears that necklace even in training."

Supreme Court weighs 'most important case' on democracy

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is about to confront a new elections case, a Republican-led challenge asking the justices for a novel ruling that could significantly increase the power of state lawmakers over elections for Congress and the presidency.

The court is set to hear arguments Wednesday in a case from North Carolina, where Republican efforts to draw congressional districts heavily in their favor were blocked by a Democratic majority on the state Supreme Court because the GOP map violated the state constitution.

A court-drawn map produced seven seats for each party in last month's midterm elections in highly competitive North Carolina.

The question for the justices is whether the U.S. Constitution's provision giving state legislatures the power to make the rules about the "times, places and manner" of congressional elections cuts state courts out of the process.

"This is the single most important case on American democracy — and for American democracy — in the nation's history," said former federal judge Michael Luttig, a prominent conservative who has joined the legal team defending the North Carolina court decision.

The Republican leaders of North Carolina's legislature told the Supreme Court that the Constitution's "carefully drawn lines place the regulation of federal elections in the hands of state legislatures, Congress and no one else."

Three conservative justices already have voiced some support for the idea that the state court had improperly taken powers given by the Constitution when it comes to federal elections. A fourth has written approvingly about limiting the power of state courts in this area.

But the Supreme Court has never invoked what is known as the independent state legislature theory. It was, though, mentioned in a separate opinion by three conservatives in the Bush v. Gore case that settled the 2000 presidential election.

If the court were to recognize it now, opponents of the concept argue, the effects could be much broader than just redistricting.

The most robust ruling for North Carolina Republicans could undermine more than 170 state constitutional provisions, over 650 state laws delegating authority to make election policies to state and local officials, and thousands of regulations down to the location of polling places, according to the Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University School of Law.

Luttig, who advised former Vice President Mike Pence that he had no authority to reject electoral votes following the 2020 election, is among several prominent conservatives and Republicans who have lined up against the broad assertion that legislatures can't be challenged in state courts when they make decisions about federal elections, including congressional redistricting.

That group includes former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, law professor Steven Calabresi, a founder of the conservative Federalist Society and Benjamin Ginsberg, a longtime lawyer for Republican candidates and the party.

"Unfortunately, because of ongoing and widespread efforts to sow distrust and spread disinformation, confidence in our elections is at a low ebb," Ginsberg wrote in a Supreme Court filing. "The version of the independent state legislature theory advanced by Petitioners in this case threatens to make a bad situation much worse, exacerbating the current moment of political polarization and further undermining confidence in our elections."

The arguments are taking place a day after the final contest of the 2022 midterms, the Georgia Senate runoff between Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock and Republican Herschel Walker.

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In that contest, state courts ruled in favor of Democrats to allow for voting on the Saturday before the election, over the objections of Republicans.

Jason Snead, of the conservative Honest Elections Project, said the case is an opportunity for the high court to rein in out-of-control state courts which are being pushed by Democratic attorneys to effectively create new rules governing voting, including the Georgia example.

"We've seen a fairly pervasive attempt to use courts to rewrite election laws if those laws don't suit partisan agendas," Snead said in a call with reporters. "That's not something we want to see when it flies in the face of the Constitution."

He is among proponents of the high court's intervention who argue the case doesn't represent "a threat to democracy."

The justices can instead write a narrow opinion that places limits on state courts without upsetting the choices New York and other states have made to restrict partisan redistricting, a group of New York voters wrote in a court filing.

The New Yorkers implicitly recognize that if the court gives more power to state legislatures over drawing congressional lines, Republicans may not necessarily benefit.

During the last redistricting cycle, states that used independent redistricting commissions rather than legislatures were largely Democratic-dominated ones. Commissions drew 95 House seats in states with Democratic legislatures and governors, as opposed to only 12 in states with GOP control. A ruling that grants legislatures ultimate power over redistricting could eradicate those commissions and let Democrats redraw a major chunk of the House map.

"The bottom line is the impact of this fringe theory would be terrible," said former Attorney General Eric Holder, chairman of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee. "It could unleash a wave of gerrymandering from both parties."

Even less dramatic changes may not necessarily tilt the GOP's way on a national redistricting map that was essentially fought to a draw, and where state court rulings cost Democrats about as many House seats as Republicans.

The Supreme Court refused to step into the North Carolina case in March, allowing the court-drawn districts to be used this year.

Justices Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch and Clarence Thomas dissented. Writing for the three, Alito said "there must be some limit on the authority of state courts to countermand actions taken by state legislatures when they are prescribing rules for the conduct of federal elections. I think it is likely that the applicants would succeed in showing that the North Carolina Supreme Court exceeded those limits."

Justice Brett Kavanaugh has separately written about the need for federal courts to police the actions of state courts when it comes to federal elections.

Chief Justice John Roberts' record on this question gives both sides some hope. In 2015, he wrote a strong dissent from the court's decision upholding an independent redistricting commission in Arizona.

Roberts wrote that the Constitution does not permit "a state to wholly exclude 'the Legislature' from redistricting."

But in 2019, Roberts wrote the court's majority opinion that closed federal courts to claims of partisan gerrymandering but noted state courts remained open. "Provisions in state statutes and state constitutions can provide standards and guidance for state courts to apply," he wrote, in an opinion joined by Alito, Gorsuch, Kavanaugh and Thomas.

The court's other conservative justice, Amy Coney Barrett, has no track record in this area.

In North Carolina, a new round of redistricting is expected to go forward next year and produce a map with more Republican districts, whatever the outcome of the high-court case.

In last month's elections, voters flipped the majority on the state Supreme Court, electing two new Republican justices that give the GOP a 5-2 edge and make it probable, though not certain, that the court would uphold a map with more Republican districts.

Blinken vows US support for Israel despite unease over gov't

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Sunday the U.S. will not shrink from its unwavering support for Israel despite stark differences with Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu and concerns the Biden administration may have about potential members of his incoming right-wing government.

Speaking to a left-leaning group that some on the right accuse of being too sympathetic to the Palestinians and Iran, Blinken said the United States will remain a stalwart friend of Israel even as it pursues goals that Netanyahu has opposed, including a two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a restoration of the languishing 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

The U.S.-Israel "partnership — and all that it's produced for the people of our nations and the world — has always been underwritten by the United States ironclad commitment to Israel's security, a commitment that has never been stronger than it is today," he said.

Blinken said the Biden administration would engage with Netanyahu's government based on its policies and not on personalities, including potential senior Cabinet ministers who have expressed vehement anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab views in the past.

But, Blinken also warned that the U.S. would object to policies that marginalize the Palestinians, diminish their "horizon for hope," or make a two-state resolution more difficult. He said those would be detrimental to Israel's long-term security or future as a Jewish democratic state.

"We expect the new Israeli government to continue to work with us to advance our shared values, just as we have previous governments," he said.

"We will gauge the government by the policies it pursues rather than individual personalities. We will hold it to the mutual standards we have established in our relationship over the past seven decades," Blinken said.

U.S. officials have previously expressed concerns about the possible positions in Netanyahu's government of at least two right-wing Israeli politicians: Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich.

Ben-Gvir, a lawmaker known for anti-Arab vitriol and provocative stunts, has been offered the job of national security minister, a powerful position that will put him in charge of Israel's police force. Meanwhile, Smotrich, leader of the Religious Zionism party, which shares anti-Palestinian and anti-gay views, has been offered oversight over the Israeli agency for Palestinian civil affairs.

Blinken noted that the U.S.-Israel relationship is seven decades old and the Biden administration would "speak honestly" with the new Israeli government as well as the Palestinians, whose leaders he said must also refrain from raising tensions that endanger a two-state solution.

He pointed out that the Biden administration continues to support its predecessor's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and is working to expand former President Donald Trump's "Abraham Accords" that saw several Arab nations normalize relations with Israel. He lauded the recent completion of a maritime border accord between Israel and Lebanon.

Blinken's comments came at the annual conference of J Street, a pro-Israel group that has distinguished itself from the much larger and older American Israel Public Affairs Committee by advancing positions often supported by the Democratic party.

Trump rebuked for call to suspend Constitution over election

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump faced rebuke Sunday from officials in both parties after calling for the "termination" of parts of the Constitution over his lie that the 2020 election was stolen.

Trump, who announced last month that he is running again for president, made the claim over the weekend on his Truth Social media platform.

"A Massive Fraud of this type and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution," he wrote. "Our great 'Founders' did not want, and would

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not condone, False & Fraudulent Elections!"

Incoming House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries on Sunday described Trump's statement as strange and extreme and said Republicans will have to make a choice whether to continue embracing Trump's anti-democratic views.

"Republicans are going to have to work out their issues with the former president and decide whether they're going to break from him and return to some semblance of reasonableness or continue to lean in to the extremism, not just of Trump, but Trumpism," Jeffries said.

Trump, who is the first to be impeached twice and whose term ended with his supporters violently storming the Capitol in a deadly bid to halt the peaceful transition of power on Jan. 6, 2021, faces a escalating criminal investigations, including several that could lead to indictments. They include the probe into classified documents seized by the FBI from Mar-a-Lago, and ongoing state and federal inquiries related to efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Asked about Trump's comments Sunday, Rep. Mike Turner of Ohio, the top Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, said he "vehemently" disagrees and "absolutely" condemns the remarks, saying they should be a factor as Republicans decide who should lead their party in 2024.

"There is a political process that has to go forward before anybody is a frontrunner or anybody is even the candidate for the party," he said. "I believe that people certainly are going to take into consideration a statement like this as they evaluate a candidate."

Rep.-elect Mike Lawler, R-N.Y., also objected to the remarks, saying it was time to stop focusing on the "grievances of prior elections."

"The Constitution is set for a reason, to protect the rights of every American," Lawler said. "I think the former president would be well-advised to focus on the future, if he is going to run for president again."

Trump's comments came after Twitter's new owner, Elon Musk, said he would reveal how Twitter engaged in "free speech suppression" leading up to the 2020 election. But files released Friday, which focused on the tech company's confused response to a story about Biden's son Hunter, do not show Democrats trying to limit the story.

The White House on Saturday assailed Trump, saying, "You cannot only love America when you win."

"The American Constitution is a sacrosanct document that for over 200 years has guaranteed that freedom and the rule of law prevail in our great country," spokesman Andrew Bates said in a statement. "Attacking the Constitution and all it stands for is anathema to the soul of our nation."

Jeffries appeared on ABC's "This Week," Turner spoke on CBS' "Face the Nation" and Lawler was on CNN's "State of the Union."

Group aiding kin of slain CIA officers comes out of shadows

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Calista Anderson was at a sleepover when the email from a friend arrived. She was 12 years old and had just experienced the worst moment of her life: Her mother had been killed while working overseas. The email offered a further jolt.

It linked to a news article revealing that, contrary to what she had been told, her mother hadn't worked for the State Department. She was a CIA officer.

"I called my dad and I was like, 'Come get me from the sleepover. We need to talk,'" she said.

Losing a parent is painful for any child. But for children of CIA officers killed in the line of duty, the pain can be compounded by stunning revelations about who their parents were and how they had died. Sometimes the children don't find out what happened.

Now 24, Anderson works at a foundation supporting families like hers. The CIA Officers Memorial Foundation provides college tuition and other expenses to children and spouses of fallen officers. Unsurprisingly, much of the charitable work to support those families goes on in private.

The leaders want to change that by holding gatherings for the children of fallen officers and gradually telling more of their stories publicly.

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"The people we support need to stay in the shadows, but the foundation doesn't need to be," said John Edwards, a retired CIA senior executive who became the foundation's president last year.

There are nearly 70 children of officers who receive college tuition and other expenses from the foundation. And the foundation's work won't end anytime soon, with 80 more children expected to receive scholarships.

Two decades after Sept. 11, intelligence agencies are shifting resources toward Russia and China, and focusing on advanced technologies. But while U.S. forces are no longer involved in Afghanistan, officers from the CIA and other intelligence agencies continue to work in combat zones and so-called "denied areas" where Americans aren't welcome.

"I'd love for us to be out of business," Edwards said. "The nature of the work says that probably won't be the case."

It's not known how many intelligence officers died in Iraq or Afghanistan. There are 139 stars on the CIA's memorial wall honoring officers who died over the agency's 75-year history. Fifty-two of the stars have been added since Sept. 11. Not all of those officers have been named publicly.

Intelligence agencies and the military provide death benefits to the families of personnel killed on duty, but those payments don't typically cover every cost, particularly the cost of college.

One regular event is the concert known as "Spookstock," which jointly benefits the CIA foundation and Special Operations Warrior Foundation. It's typically staged in an undisclosed location outside of Washington and draws the families of fallen officers, senior intelligence officers and families, and corporate sponsors and supporters.

Edwards said he wanted to maintain the foundation's core mission of funding scholarships and expand its offerings for families. The foundation has started a daycare program and added career services to connect scholarship recipients with corporate executives.

But he also wanted to have a more public role and to promote relationships among a group that people connected to the foundation often call "the kids" — the children of slain officers who have received scholarships, some now in their 30s.

"You get these kids together who had similar life circumstances and traumatic situations that they've been through, it's an instant bond," Edwards said. "The more that we can engage these students, the better."

Anderson has "instant credibility," he said, as someone well-known both among recipients and current and former intelligence officials.

As a child, Anderson lived in England for four years with her father, two younger brothers and her mother, Jennifer Matthews. Unbeknownst to her children, Matthews had a senior position in the CIA's London station. Shortly after they moved back to Virginia, Matthews went to Afghanistan for what her children thought was a diplomatic assignment.

Matthews was instead chief of base in Khost, part of the CIA's counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

The CIA was working to assess the reliability of a Jordanian doctor believed to have information on the whereabouts of al-Qaida's then-No. 2 official, Ayman al-Zawahri. The Jordanian, Humam al-Balawi, was brought to the Khost base in December 2009 for what officials hoped would be a critical meeting, according to results of agency reviews released the following year by then-Director Leon Panetta.

Instead, shortly after he entered the compound, al-Balawi set off a deadly explosion. He killed five CIA employees, two agency security contractors, a Jordanian intelligence officer and the Afghan driver who had brought him to Khost.

The attack threw an international spotlight almost immediately onto Anderson, her father and her two brothers as they grieved and tried to understand what happened.

Her father explained what he knew about her mother's work, and friends of her mother working at the CIA filled in more gaps over the coming years. Old co-workers also told stories about her mother's love of pedicures and a glass of champagne.

As she grew older, Anderson stopped reading about her mother on the internet and avoided portrayals of her in pop culture. She has not watched "Zero Dark Thirty," the film about the hunt for Osama bin

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Laden that fictionalizes part of her mother's time at Khost and her earlier work in a CIA cell hunting for bin Laden before and after Sept. 11.

Whether the CIA could have prevented the Khost bombing remains a point of contention within the intelligence community and Matthews' family. Some former officers have blamed Matthews.

Internal agency reviews concluded that critical warnings were not shared widely enough and that it was unclear who was in charge of the operation. The CIA did not fire or discipline any personnel, Panetta said in 2010, but tightened security procedures and established new groups to better train officers in combat zones and spot double agents.

After a CIA team in late July killed al-Zawahri in a drone strike, several of Matthews' former colleagues said they thought of her.

"She was passionately committed to bringing down (al-Qaida), and if she were here today, no one would be more proud of that achievement than her," said former CIA Director Gina Haspel, a close colleague of Matthews, in a recent speech at a foundation event.

Anderson graduated from the University of Richmond and then got a master's in art history — a degree that she jokes left her with no choice but to take the foundation's job offer as events coordinator.

She helped with the latest edition of "Spookstock" and recently organized a golf outing for current scholarship recipients during their Thanksgiving break.

At events like those and in conversations with other children of fallen officers, she often brings up her own memories of her mother and experiences after her mother's death. The feelings of grief and shock sometimes come back.

"There are moments where it can be extremely emotionally difficult; it can be extremely tiring. I can feel very empty," she said. "But in so many ways, I'm really grateful for those moments, because they really remind me about why we do what we do."

World Cup Viewer's Guide: Neymar expected to play for Brazil

By JENNA FRYER AP National Writer

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — Welcome back, Neymar, at just the right time at the World Cup.

Neymar seemed healthy in training before Monday's game against South Korea in the round of 16. The forward missed the final two matches of the group stage after injuring his right ankle in the opening game win over Serbia.

Brazil easily moved into the next round without Neymar. No longer bothered by his ankle, Neymar was expected to start — and not come off the bench as a precautionary measure — if he plays against South Korea.

"I prefer to use my best player from the start," Brazil coach Tite said. "It's the coach who has to make that decision and take on that responsibility."

In footage released by the Brazilian soccer federation, he appeared to be in good condition, doing drills with the ball and taking shots on goal without signs of his injury.

"Obviously we won't say that it's better to face Brazil when Neymar is playing, but I always prefer when the best players are there," South Korea coach Paulo Bento said.

Bento hasn't been pleased with the three-day rest period between games from the group stage to the knockout round. Brazil advanced with a game to spare and was able to rest the team's stars in its final match, but South Korea had to claw its way into the knockout round with a win over Portugal.

"It's not fair," Bento said. "I think that it has to do with the new FIFA reality, which is to create worse conditions for the less-favored teams and probably better conditions for the more-favored ones."

Even after the surprise win over Portugal, South Korea had to wait for over nine agonizing minutes of extra time for a game across Qatar to end. The outcome of Uruguay against Ghana determined if the South Korean's advanced into the round of 16.

When Uruguay failed to score the goals it needed to best South Korea for the final spot in Group H, the South Korean players who had formed a circle on the field to watch the game on phones erupted into

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joyous celebration.

South Korean captain Son Heung-min even began to cry.

South Korea is now trying to advance past the round of 16 for the first time since the Asian team's historic run as a co-host in 2002, when it reached the semifinals and finished fourth. South Korea was eliminated in the group stage in 2014 and 2018.

South Korea advanced by beating Portugal 2-1 with a dramatic stoppage-time goal by Hwang Hee-chan, who was a second-half substitute. He's expected to be in the starting lineup again against Brazil after missing the team's first two games because of a hamstring injury.

"In the first match it was impossible for me to play and the pain got worse. I did a little running, but I thought I could play the second match, but they held me out," Hwang said, adding that playing against Portugal "was a little bit of a risk. But I didn't care what happened to me personally. I just wanted to contribute."

It will be the first official meeting between Brazil and South Korea, with the South Americans winning six of seven friendlies. South Korea was victorious in 1999.

"We can't think it's going to be an easy game like it was in that friendly," Brazil captain Thiago Silva said. "Now it's the World Cup and they've advanced in a very tough group. We have a lot of respect for them."

JAPAN-CROATIA

Japan and Croatia meet for the first time in the knockout round of the World Cup after the teams squared off two previous times in group play. Croatia won in 1998 and the teams finished with a goalless draw eight years later.

This time, Japan won Group E after come-from-behind 2-1 victories over Germany and Spain and is in the knockout round for back-to-back tournaments for the first time in team history.

At stake for Japan is its first trip to the quarterfinals in four tries.

"Japan is a team that doesn't quit," Croatia coach Zlatko Dalić said. "They conceded goals at the beginning of the match both against Germany and Spain, but they came back. They had a lot of faith in themselves, and that is a great virtue of the Japan national team."

Croatia, the runner-up to France in the 2018 World Cup, is making its third appearance in the knockout round. Croatia beat Romania in 1998 to advance to the semifinals and defeated Denmark 3-2 on penalties in 2018 en route to the final game — a 4-2 loss to reigning World Cup champion France.

It is the first time Croatia will play an Asian team in a World Cup knockout match after eight previous games against European teams.

"For us, it will be key that we are also disciplined and patient," Dalić said. "We cannot make mistakes because Japan has the quality to punish those mistakes. We need to be good at falling back if we lose the ball."

Croatia advanced despite two goalless draws in group play — equaling the number of scoreless games it had in the 2006, 2014 and 2018 tournaments, a span of 13 games.

Iran morality police status unclear after 'closure' comment

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — An Iranian lawmaker said Sunday that Iran's government is "paying attention to the people's real demands," state media reported, a day after a top official suggested that the country's morality police whose conduct helped trigger months of protests has been shut down.

The role of the morality police, which enforces veiling laws, came under scrutiny after a detainee, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, died in its custody in mid-September. Amini had been held for allegedly violating the Islamic Republic's strict dress codes. Her death unleashed a wave of unrest that has grown into calls for the downfall of Iran's clerical rulers.

Iran's chief prosecutor Mohamed Jafar Montazeri said on Saturday the morality police "had been closed," the semi-official news agency ISNA reported. The agency did not provide details, and state media hasn't reported such a purported decision.

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In a report carried by ISNA on Sunday, lawmaker Nezamoddin Mousavi signaled a less confrontational approach toward the protests.

"Both the administration and parliament insisted that paying attention to the people's demand that is mainly economic is the best way for achieving stability and confronting the riots," he said, following a closed meeting with several senior Iranian officials, including President Ebrahim Raisi.

Mousavi did not address the reported closure of the morality police.

The Associated Press has been unable to confirm the current status of the force, established in 2005 with the task of arresting people who violate the country's Islamic dress code.

Since September, there has been a reported decline in the number of morality police officers across Iranian cities and an increase in women walking in public without headscarves, contrary to Iranian law.

Montazeri, the chief prosecutor, provided no further details about the future of the morality police or if its closure was nationwide and permanent. However he added that Iran's judiciary will "continue to monitor behavior at the community level."

In a report by ISNA on Friday, Montazeri was quoted as saying that the government was reviewing the mandatory hijab law. "We are working fast on the issue of hijab and we are doing our best to come up with a thoughtful solution to deal with this phenomenon that hurts everyone's heart," said Montazeri, without offering details.

Saturday's announcement could signal an attempt to appease the public and find a way to end the protests in which, according to rights groups, at least 470 people were killed. More than 18,000 people have been arrested in the protests and the violent security force crackdown that followed, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran, a group monitoring the demonstrations.

Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, said Montazeri's statement about closing the morality police could be an attempt to pacify domestic unrest without making real concessions to protesters.

"The secular middle class loathes the organization (morality police) for restricting personal freedoms," said Alfoneh. On the other hand, the "underprivileged and socially conservative class resents how they conveniently keep away from enforcing the hijab legislation" in wealthier areas of Iran's cities.

When asked about Montazeri's statement, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian gave no direct answer. "Be sure that in Iran, within the framework of democracy and freedom, which very clearly exists in Iran, everything is going very well," Amirabdollahian said, speaking during a visit to Belgrade, Serbia.

The anti-government demonstrations, now in their third month, have shown no sign of stopping despite a violent crackdown. Protesters say they are fed up after decades of social and political repression, including a strict dress code imposed on women. Young women continue to play a leading role in the protests, stripping off the mandatory Islamic headscarf to express their rejection of clerical rule.

After the outbreak of the protests, the Iranian government hadn't appeared willing to heed the protesters' demands. It has continued to crack down on protesters, including sentencing at least seven arrested protesters to death. Authorities continue to blame the unrest on hostile foreign powers, without providing evidence.

But in recent days, Iranian state media platforms seemed to be adopting a more conciliatory tone, expressing a desire to engage with the problems of the Iranian people.

As Musk is learning, content moderation is a messy job

By DAVID KLEPPER and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

Now that he's back on Twitter, neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin wants somebody to explain the rules.

Anglin, the founder of an infamous neo-Nazi website, was reinstated Thursday, one of many previously banned users to benefit from an amnesty granted by Twitter's new owner Elon Musk. The next day, Musk banished Ye, the rapper formerly known as Kanye West, after he posted a swastika with a Star of David in it.

"That's cool," Anglin tweeted Friday. "I mean, whatever the rules are, people will follow them. We just need to know what the rules are."

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Ask Musk. Since the world's richest man paid \$44 billion for Twitter, the platform has struggled to define its rules for misinformation and hate speech, issued conflicting and contradictory announcements, and failed to fully address what researchers say is a troubling rise in hate speech.

As the "chief tweet" may be learning, running a global platform with nearly 240 million active daily users requires more than good algorithms and often demands imperfect solutions to messy situations — tough choices that must ultimately be made by a human and are sure to displease someone.

A self-described free speech absolutist, Musk has said he wants to make Twitter a global digital town square. But he also said he wouldn't make major decisions about content or about restoring banned accounts before setting up a "content moderation council" with diverse viewpoints.

He soon changed his mind after polling users on Twitter, and offered reinstatement to a long list of formerly banned users including ex-President Donald Trump, Ye, the satire site The Babylon Bee, the comedian Kathy Griffin and Anglin, the neo-Nazi.

And while Musk's own tweets suggested he would allow all legal content on the platform, Ye's banishment shows that's not entirely the case. The swastika image posted by the rapper falls in the "lawful but awful" category that often bedevils content moderators, according to Eric Goldman, a technology law expert and professor at Santa Clara University law school.

While Europe has imposed rules requiring social media platforms to create policies on misinformation and hate speech, Goldman noted that in the U.S. at least, loose regulations allow Musk to run Twitter as he sees fit, despite his inconsistent approach.

"What Musk is doing with Twitter is completely permissible under U.S. law," Goldman said.

Pressure from the EU may force Musk to lay out his policies to ensure he is complying with the new law, which takes effect next year. Last month, a senior EU official warned Musk that Twitter would have to improve its efforts to combat hate speech and misinformation; failure to comply could lead to huge fines.

In another confusing move, Twitter announced in late November that it would end its policy prohibiting COVID-19 misinformation. Days later, it posted an update claiming that "None of our policies have changed."

On Friday, Musk revealed what he said was the inside story of Twitter's decision in 2020 to limit the spread of a New York Post story about Hunter Biden's laptop.

Twitter initially blocked links to the story on its platform, citing concerns that it contained material obtained through computer hacking. That decision was reversed after it was criticized by then-Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey. Facebook also took actions to limit the story's spread.

The information revealed by Musk included Twitter's decision to delete a handful of tweets after receiving a request from Joe Biden's campaign. The tweets included nude photos of Hunter Biden that had been shared without his consent — a violation of Twitter's rules against revenge porn.

Instead of revealing nefarious conduct or collusion with Democrats, Musk's revelation highlighted the kind of difficult content moderation decisions that he will now face.

"Impossible, messy and squishy decisions" are unavoidable, according to Yoel Roth, Twitter's former head of trust and safety who resigned a few weeks into Musk's ownership.

While far from perfect, the old Twitter strove to be transparent with users and steady in enforcing its rules, Roth said. That changed under Musk, he told a Knight Foundation forum this week.

"When push came to shove, when you buy a \$44 billion thing, you get to have the final say in how that \$44 billion thing is governed," Roth said.

While much of the attention has been on Twitter's moves in the U.S., the cutbacks of content-moderation workers is affecting other parts of the world too, according to activists with the #StopToxicTwitter campaign.

"We're not talking about people not having resilience to hear things that hurt feelings," said Thenmozhi Soundararajan, executive director of Equality Labs, which works to combat caste-based discrimination in South Asia. "We are talking about the prevention of dangerous genocidal hate speech that can lead to mass atrocities."

Soundararajan's organization sits on Twitter's Trust and Safety Council, which hasn't met since Musk took over. She said "millions of Indians are terrified about who is going to get reinstated," and the company has stopped responding to the group's concerns.

"So what happens if there's another call for violence? Like, do I have to tag Elon Musk and hope that

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he's going to address the pogrom?" Soundararajan said.

Instances of hate speech and racial epithets soared on Twitter after Musk's purchase as some users sought to test the new owner's limits. The number of tweets containing hateful terms continues to rise, according to a report published Friday by the Center for Countering Digital Hate, a group that tracks online hate and extremism.

Musk has said Twitter has reduced the spread of tweets containing hate speech, making them harder to find unless a user searches for them. But that failed to satisfy the center's CEO, Imran Ahmed, who called the rise in hate speech a "clear failure to meet his own self-proclaimed standards."

Immediately after Musk's takeover and the firing of much of Twitter's staff, researchers who previously had flagged harmful hate speech or misinformation to the platform reported that their pleas were going unanswered.

Jesse Littlewood, vice president for campaigns at Common Cause, said his group reached out to Twitter last week about a tweet from U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene that alleged election fraud in Arizona. Musk had reinstated Greene's personal account after she was kicked off Twitter for spreading COVID-19 misinformation.

This time, Twitter was quick to respond, telling Common Cause that the tweet didn't violate any rules and would stay up — even though Twitter requires the labeling or removal of content that spreads false or misleading claims about election results.

Twitter gave Littlewood no explanation for why it wasn't following its own rules.

"I find that pretty confounding," Littlewood said.

Twitter did not respond to messages seeking comment for this story. Musk has defended the platform's sometimes herky-jerky moves since he took over, and said mistakes will happen as it evolves. "We will do lots of dumb things," he tweeted.

To Musk's many online fans, the disarray is a feature, not a bug, of the site under its new ownership, and a reflection of the free speech mecca they hope Twitter will be.

"I love Elon Twitter so far," tweeted a user who goes by the name Some Dude. "The chaos is glorious!"

AP Top 25: Georgia, Michigan, TCU, Ohio State on top

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

Georgia, Michigan, TCU and Ohio State were the top four in the final Associated Press college football poll of the regular season.

The Bulldogs (13-0) are No. 1 for the ninth straight week and 12th time this season in the AP Top 25 presented by Regions Bank. Georgia received 62 first-place votes and Michigan (13-0) received the other one in the poll released Sunday.

The final College Football Playoff rankings to set the four-team field for the national championship tournament was scheduled to be released later Sunday.

TCU (12-1) remained third, despite losing for the first time this season in the Big 12 title game on Saturday. The Horned Frogs lost in overtime to Kansas State.

The Buckeyes moved up a spot to No. 4, ahead of Alabama and Tennessee.

Utah was No. 7 after beating Southern California in the Pac-12 championship game. The Trojans slipped four spots to No. 8.

Penn State was ninth and Clemson stayed at No. 10 after winning the Atlantic Coast Conference title.

Big 12 champ Kansas State moved up two spots to No. 11.

Tulane reached a season-high 14th after winning the American Athletic Conference and Troy made its season debut at No. 23.

South African president awaits party decision on his fate

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — South African President Cyril Ramaphosa looked relaxed and shared a joke with journalists as he made a brief appearance Sunday at a meeting of the African National Congress party's national working committee, which is discussing his political fate.

Ramaphosa's future hangs in the balance as he faces calls from within the ANC and from opposition parties to step down from his position amid a scandal involving the president's animal farm.

Ramaphosa was recused from Sunday's meeting of the ruling ANC, which came days after an independent parliamentary panel issued a report that suggested he may have broken anti-corruption laws.

The report follows a criminal complaint laid by the country's former head of intelligence, Arthur Fraser, who has accused Ramaphosa of money laundering related to the theft of a large sum of cash from his farm in 2020.

The president has denied any wrongdoing in the matter. Addressing journalists briefly on Sunday, he noted it was ANC tradition that someone should be recused from a meeting that deals with issues that affect them personally.

However, Ramaphosa confirmed he planned to attend a Monday meeting of ANC's national executive committee, its highest decision-making body within conferences. The executive committee is tasked with making a final decision on Ramaphosa's future in the party.

"Tomorrow I will attend the national executive committee meeting as well, that is how everything will flow. After that it is up to the NEC, to which I am accountable, to make a decision," Ramaphosa said.

Ramaphosa's spokesman, Vincent Magwenya did not respond to questions Sunday regarding reports that Ramaphosa had no intention of resigning from his position and planned to challenge the findings of the report.

South African lawmakers are expected to debate the independent report on Tuesday and then vote on whether further action should be taken against the president, including whether to proceed with impeachment proceedings.

The report questioned his explanation that the money was from the sale of buffaloes to a Sudanese businessman, asking why the animals remained at the farm more than two years later.

It also said Ramaphosa put himself into a situation of conflict of interest, saying the evidence presented to it "establishes that the president may be guilty of a serious violation of certain sections of the constitution."

Flash flood kills nine at church gathering in South Africa

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — At least nine people died and eight others were missing in South Africa after a flash flood swept away members of a church congregation along the Jukskei River in Johannesburg, rescue officials said Sunday.

The dead and missing were all part of the congregation, which was conducting religious rituals along the river on Saturday, officials said. Rescue workers reported finding the bodies of two victims that day and another seven bodies when the search and recovery mission resumed Sunday morning.

The teams were interviewing people from the congregation to establish how many others were unaccounted for.

Religious groups frequently gather along the Jukskei River, which runs past townships such as Alexandra in the east of Johannesburg, for baptisms and ritual cleansing.

Johannesburg Emergency Services spokesman Robert Mulaudzi said Sunday that officials had warned residents about the dangers of conducting the rituals along the river.

"We have been receiving a lot of rain on the city of Johannesburg in the last three months, and most of the river streams are now full. Our residents, especially congregants who normally practice these kinds of rituals, will be tempted to go to these river streams," Mulaudzi said during a news briefing.

"Our message for them is to exercise caution as and when they conduct these rituals," he added.

Keep COVID military vaccine mandate, defense chief says

By TARA COPP Associated Press

ABOARD A U.S. MILITARY AIRCRAFT (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said he wants to keep the military's COVID-19 vaccine mandate in place to protect the health of the troops, as Republican governors and lawmakers press to rescind it.

This past week more than 20 Republican governors sent a letter to President Joe Biden asking that the administration remove the mandate, saying it has hurt the U.S. National Guard's ability to recruit troops. Those troops are activated by governors to respond to natural disasters or unrest.

Congress may consider legislation this coming week to end the mandate as a requirement to gather enough support to pass this year's defense budget, which is already two months late.

Austin said he would not comment on pressure from the Hill.

"We lost a million people to this virus," Austin told reporters traveling with him Saturday. "A million people died in the United States of America. We lost hundreds in DOD. So this mandate has kept people healthy."

"I'm the guy" who ordered the military to require the vaccine, Austin added. "I support continuation of vaccinating the troops."

Last year Austin directed that all troops get the vaccine or face potential expulsion from the military; thousands of active duty forces have been discharged since then for their refusal to get the shots.

No OPEC+ oil shakeup as Russian price cap stirs uncertainty

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — The Saudi-led OPEC oil cartel and allied producers including Russia did not change their targets for shipping oil to the global economy amid uncertainty about the impact of new Western sanctions against Russia that could take significant amounts of oil off the market.

The decision at a meeting of oil ministers Sunday comes a day ahead of the planned start of two measures aimed at hitting Russia's oil earnings in response to its invasion of Ukraine. Those are: a European Union boycott of most Russian oil and a price cap of \$60 per barrel on Russian exports imposed by the EU and the Group of Seven democracies.

It is not yet clear how much Russian oil the two sanctions measures could take off the global market, which would tighten supply and drive up prices. The world's No. 2 oil producer has been able to reroute much, but not all, of its former Europe shipments to customers in India, China and Turkey.

The impact of the price cap is also up in the air because Russia has said it could simply halt deliveries to countries that observe the limit. But analysts say the country would likely also find ways to evade the cap for some shipments.

On the other side, oil has been trading at lower prices on fears that coronavirus outbreaks and China's strict zero-COVID restrictions would reduce demand for fuel in one of the world's major economies. Concerns about recessions in the U.S. and Europe also raise the prospect of lower demand for gasoline and other fuel made from crude.

That uncertainty is the reason the OPEC+ alliance gave in October for a slashing production by 2 million barrels per day starting in November, a cut that remains in effect. Analysts say that took less than the full amount off the market because OPEC+ members already can't meet their full production quotas.

An OPEC+ statement Sunday pushed back against criticism of that October decision in view of the recent weakness in oil prices, saying the cut had been "recognized in retrospect by the market participants to have been the necessary and the right course of action towards stabilizing global oil markets."

The White House, which has pressed for more oil supply to keep gasoline costs down for U.S. drivers, at the time called the cut "shortsighted" and said the alliance was "aligning with Russia."

With the global economy slowing, oil prices have been falling since summertime highs, with international benchmark Brent closing Friday at \$85.42 per barrel, down from \$98 a month ago. That has eased gasoline prices for drivers around the world.

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Average gas prices have fallen for U.S. drivers in recent days to \$3.41 per gallon, according to motoring club federation AAA.

While U.S., European and other allies seek to punish Russia for the war in Ukraine, they also want to prevent a sudden loss of Russian crude that could send oil and gasoline prices back up.

That is why the G-7 price cap allows shipping and insurance companies to transport Russian oil to non-Western nations at or below that threshold. Most of the globe's tanker fleet is covered by insurers in the G-7 or EU.

Russia would likely try to evade the cap by organizing its own insurance and using the world's shadowy fleet of off-the-books tankers, as Iran and Venezuela have done, but that would be costly and cumbersome, analysts say.

The cap of \$60 a barrel is near the current price of Russian oil, meaning Moscow could continue to sell while rejecting the cap in principle. Oil use also declines in the winter, in part because fewer people are driving.

"If Russia ends up taking off more oil than about a million barrels per day, then the world becomes short on oil, and there would need to be an offset somewhere, whether that's from OPEC or not," said Jacques Rousseau, managing director at Clearview Energy Partners. "That's going to be the key factor — is to figure out how much Russian oil is really leaving the market."

The OPEC+ statement set its next meeting for June 4 but said the coalition could meet at any time to address market developments.

TCU's loss gets Tide a last look, but Frogs should make CFP

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

Alabama is going to get one last look from the College Football Playoff selection committee.

Whether the Crimson Tide deserves it is debatable, at best, but after both TCU (12-1) and Southern California (11-2) lost the committee has to at least talk about making Alabama (10-2) the first team with two losses to make the playoff.

Tide coach Nick Saban, without a game to play, spent his Saturday making a media tour and lobbying for his team.

"If we played any of those teams that are on the edge of getting in, would we be the underdogs or the favorite?" Saban said on Fox at halftime of the Big Ten championship.

The field of four will be announced Sunday.

Defending champion Georgia (13-0) will be No. 1 after the Bulldogs won the Southeastern Conference — emphatically. No debate about that.

TCU coach Sonny Dykes said he was concerned about the Horned Frogs' playoff status, but that he had faith in the committee.

"I think we're certainly deserving," Dykes said.

He is right, but the top four didn't fall gently into place on championship weekend.

No. 4 USC's loss to Friday to No. 12 Utah in the Pac-12 championship pretty much ended the Trojans' playoff hopes.

That was huge news for No. 5 Ohio State and coach Ryan Day.

"You're welcome, Coach Day," Utah's Kyle Whittingham said.

A week after the Buckeyes (11-1) were thumped at home by No. 2 Michigan, fans in Columbus were glued to the events in Las Vegas and got the result they needed — and maybe a rematch with the Wolverines in their future.

Michigan (13-0) stomped Purdue on Saturday night on the way to a second consecutive Big Ten championship.

Championship Saturday started with the third-ranked Horned Frogs falling to No. 13 Kansas State in the Big 12 title game. As has been the case all year, it was a wild ride for the Hypnotoads. They erased an 11-point deficit in the fourth-quarter behind a heroic effort by Max Duggan before losing in overtime.

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The Frogs headed to the clubhouse having beat every team they have played, with plenty of close calls and comebacks, but no conference championship.

There is precedent for unbeaten teams losing their conference title games and remaining in the top four. Georgia was No. 1 when it happened last year against Alabama and fell to No. 3.

In 2020, Notre Dame lost a rematch with Clemson in the Atlantic Coast Conference title game and went from No. 2 to No. 4.

There is no previous case to support Alabama making the playoff under these circumstances, but this system has been around for only nine years. Don't get too hung up on previous results predicting future performance by the committee.

The Tide have their supporters.

"I am no expert but no one can convince me that @AlabamaFTBL isn't better than these teams I have been watching despite 2 heartbreaking L's. if rule is BEST 4 for playoffs BAMA should be in," ESPN college basketball analyst Dick Vitale tweeted.

So 'Bama has that going for it.

The 13-person selection committee already made one questionable call that went Alabama's way when it ranked the Tide sixth last week and Tennessee, which beat Alabama in October, seventh.

The committee chairman cited Alabama's close losses compared with the Volunteers (10-2) being beat soundly in the two games they have dropped.

Alabama twice lost on the last play of the game, by three at Tennessee and by one at No. 11 LSU (9-4). The LSU result doesn't look quite so impressive after Georgia hung a 50-30 loss on the Tigers, just because it could.

Also of note: Tennessee beat LSU 40-13.

Alabama has its share of great escapes, too. Games against Texas and Texas A&M came down to the last play. Alabama's best victories? Probably against Mississippi State, Mississippi and Texas, all 8-4.

TCU's resume is built mostly on the foundation of the Big 12 being a conference with no easy outs. Oddly, the Frogs' best victory got better Saturday when they lost a rematch to Kansas State, which already was in the committee's top 10.

The best argument for Alabama is made by advanced metrics. Coming into this weekend, ESPN's SP+ had the Tide fourth and its FPI had Alabama second. FEI, used by Football Outsiders, had Alabama fifth.

A composite of popular computer formula rankings had Alabama third and TCU eighth. Those are the type of forward-looking metrics used by oddsmakers.

Saban is right. Put the Tide and Frogs on a neutral field and, yes, Alabama is favored by at least a touchdown.

But Alabama was favored against both Tennessee (7 1/2 points, according to FanDuel Sportsbook) and LSU (12 1/2).

The recruiting rankings also give Alabama an edge. The Tide has the second-most talented roster in college football behind Georgia if you count up the stars. TCU's is 32nd.

But results of games have to matter or why even make Alabama play?

"How are they playing at present?" Saban said to ESPN, citing the Tide's 3-0 finish to the season with a healthy quarterback Bryce Young.

As it is the Tide, and Ohio State for that matter, essentially benefited from failing to win their divisions and not playing at present while USC and TCU had to prove themselves one more time.

"I don't think we should be punished for coming to the Big 12 championship game," Dykes said.

A playoff bid should be a reward for the season. What has Alabama done on the field to earn it?

WHAT ABOUT THE HEISMAN?

The Heisman Trophy appeared to be USC quarterback Caleb Williams' to lose heading into the weekend.

The Trojans lost, but Williams was as impressive as ever, hobbling through most of the Pac-12 championship game after straining his hamstring. He passed for 363 yards, facing heavy pressure and without his usual mobility.

Still, the door was open at least a crack for Duggan, and, boy, did he bust through.

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Battered and bruised, Duggan had 251 yards passing and 110 rushing. For some reason on two tries at the end zone from the 1 in OT, Dykes didn't call Duggan's number either time.

Williams finished the regular season with 37 touchdown passes, four interceptions, 9.1 yards per pass and 10 rushing touchdowns.

Duggan heads into the postseason with 30 touchdown passes, four picks, 9.0 yards per pass and six rushing touchdowns.

Heisman finalists will be announced Monday, but both Williams and Duggan should be booking trips for New York City for the handout next Saturday.

Right after some time in the cold tub.

SELECTION SUNDAY

Here's how the College Football Playoff and New Year's Six bowl selections should shake out:

Peach Bowl — No. 1 Georgia vs. No. 4 Ohio State

Fiesta Bowl — No. 2 Michigan vs. No. 3 TCU

Rose Bowl — Utah vs. Penn State

Sugar Bowl — Kansas State vs. Alabama

Orange Bowl — Clemson vs. Tennessee

Cotton Bowl — USC vs. Tulane.

In Georgia, how sports explain a political battleground

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

SMYRNA, Ga. (AP) — The reception area of a metro Atlanta office suite is a veritable museum of Herschel Walker's football success for the University of Georgia Bulldogs and the NFL. The office is part of the Atlanta Braves' real estate development in the Major League Baseball franchise's new suburban home.

This headquarters for Georgia's Republican U.S. Senate nominee isn't officially about athletics, of course. Yet the location and décor help show much professional sports and college loyalties explain political divides in this battleground state, where Walker is trying to unseat Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock in a Tuesday runoff.

"Sports are a cultural identifier, and in the South, college fandom is a big part of that," said David Mowery, a University of Georgia alumnus, avid Bulldogs supporter and now an Alabama-based political consultant who works with Republicans and Democrats. "Now our politics and campaigns are so much about identity," Mowery said. "We see all these overlaps."

Sports and politics have long intersected in America. But the flashpoints — racial segregation of college campuses and professional leagues, the use of Native American mascots and imagery, athletes protesting over civil rights, power struggles over taxpayer-funding for stadiums — are ever-present in Georgia.

For Republicans, whose coalition trends older, whiter and less urban than the general population, that means an open embrace of the Bulldogs and baseball's Braves, each with fan bases that trend whiter and more suburban and rural. And it's not just Walker, who carried the Bulldogs to the national championship in 1980 and won the Heisman Trophy two years later.

"Great politics, great place to campaign," said Gov. Brian Kemp, a UGA alumnus, as he tailgated with supporters in Athens ahead of a Georgia game earlier this season.

The governor grew up in Athens and is close to the family of the late Bulldog Coach Vince Dooley. His wife, Marty, was a Georgia cheerleader in her student days, he reminded reporters as he previewed the Bulldogs' 2022 prospects. The defending national champions, he said, "have got the players" but "got to stay humble." (They won the Southeastern Conference Championship on Saturday.)

Kemp and Lt. Gov.-elect. Burt Jones, who also played for Georgia, join Walker in using red and black as their campaign colors. Attorney General Chris Carr, who won a second term in November, sometimes calls himself a "Double Dawg" — the honorific for someone with two UGA degrees.

Democrats' coalition, meanwhile, is anchored by metropolitan areas and nonwhites, who now account for about 4 out of 10 Georgia voters. So, when politicians like Warnock bring sports into their campaigns,

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it's to drop by an Atlanta sports bar during the recent World Cup soccer match between the U.S. and Iran.

Warnock will campaign Sunday in Athens. But on Saturday, when Walker was at the SEC Championship game, Warnock was in Augusta. The senator visited his alma mater, the historically Black Morehouse College, on Homecoming weekend this fall, but he notes, with a mix of seriousness and humor, a different focus and scale.

"You know how it is if you go ... to an HBCU football game," Warnock told a campaign event of HBCU fraternities and sororities. "It's not just a game, it's a fashion show and the Battle of the Bands."

Jason Carter, Democrats' 2014 nominee for governor, has explained Georgia politics by pointing to Atlanta's professional soccer team and its demographically diverse fans. "Stacey needs the Atlanta United vote," he'd say of Stacey Abrams, who lost to Kemp in 2018 and 2022.

Certainly, there are white soccer fans in Republican-leaning suburbs and Democrats, white and Black, who love the Bulldogs and Braves. One of Warnock's top aides organized "Dawgs for Abrams" as a UGA undergraduate in 2018. Nonetheless, the partisan split in campaign styles dovetails with race and geography, even if it's not explicit.

When Walker and Kemp chose campaign offices near each other in the Braves' Cobb County development, Republicans described a straightforward decision to be near metro Atlanta's northern suburbs so critical to their winning coalition. The Braves themselves had made the same calculation, leaving the city in 2017 after a half-century and explaining the surprise move by saying they'd be closer to most of their season-ticket holders. (Cobb County politicians also gave the team \$400 million-plus in stadium financing, something Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed refused to do. Reed instead steered city money to refurbish a downtown arena for the NBA's Hawks.)

Perhaps most notably, Republicans' embrace of the Braves came alongside controversies over Native American imagery in sports and a separate political tempest over Republicans' 2021 overhaul of Georgia election laws.

Democrats, including Warnock, blasted the law as "Jim Crow 2.0," claiming it made it harder for some Black voters to cast ballots. Georgia-based corporations Delta and Coca-Cola criticized the law. The Braves stayed out of the fray. But baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred moved the 2021 All-Star Game from Cobb County in response. Kemp blamed "woke" Democrats relentlessly, though Warnock and Abrams didn't call for the change.

The two Democrats also haven't said the Braves should change their name or abandon fans' "Tomahawk Chop" at home games, but others, including the Biden White House, have said changes should be on the table.

"He need to come out and say, do he believe they should change the name. Well, I don't," Walker said in one Fox News appearance. When Warnock largely ignored the issue, a Walker aide tweeted that the senator "must be a Mets fan."

Yet it's unquestionably Walker's football acclaim that forges a unique bond between a Black conservative and a multigenerational white political base.

"When I was in high school, Herschel Walker was the biggest name in town," Republican National Committee member Ginger Howard said of the 1980 championship season. Now, she said, her young nephews say excitedly: "Ginger, you know Herschel!"

On Saturday, Zach Jacobs and Zach Adams, 23-year-olds from the Atlanta exurb of Woodstock, waited near Mercedes-Benz Stadium downtown to get a picture with Walker. Both voted for their football hero in the general election and said they will again Tuesday.

"He's a man of the people, just connects with who Georgia is," Jacobs said.

Walker has on occasion talked about being among the first generation of Black players at UGA, which was founded in 1785. Dooley, who endorsed Walker before the iconic coach died in October, first offered scholarships to Black athletes in 1971. Walker was 8 years old.

Warnock, born in 1969, was not a star athlete and matriculated at Morehouse, which opened its doors during post-Civil War Reconstruction, a founding legacy that Warnock's fellow HBCU alumni say supersedes athletics.

"We have a motto, a program: 'A Voteless People is a Hopeless People,'" Marcus Montgomery said of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity he shares with the senator.

Adams, a white UGA graduate, acknowledged Warnock's deep Georgia roots. But, gesturing to the surrounding downtown Atlanta, he said, "Herschel is the man who can improve all of this, and the rest of Georgia."

Walker's runoff election night celebration will be nearby in downtown Atlanta, just a few blocks from Warnock's party. It's a shift from Walker's and Kemp's Nov. 8 affairs adjacent to the Braves' stadium. But the former star running back isn't necessarily breaking the mold. His venue this time: the College Football Hall of Fame.

FDA change ushers in cheaper, easier-to-get hearing aids

By TOM MURPHY AP Health Writer

It's now a lot easier — and cheaper — for many hard-of-hearing Americans to get help.

Hearing aids can now be sold without a prescription from a specialist. Over-the-counter, or OTC, hearing aids started hitting the market in October at prices that can be thousands of dollars lower than prescription hearing aids.

About 30 million people in the United States deal with hearing loss, according to the Food and Drug Administration. But only about 20% of those who could use a hearing aid seek help.

Here's a closer look:

WHO MIGHT BE HELPED

The FDA approved OTC hearing aids for adults with mild-to-moderate hearing loss. That can include people who have trouble hearing phone calls or who turn up the TV volume loud enough that others complain.

It also can include people who have trouble understanding group conversations in noisy places.

OTC hearing aids aren't intended for people with deeper hearing loss, which may include those who have trouble hearing louder noises, like power tools and cars. They also aren't for people who lost their hearing suddenly or in just one ear, according to Sterling Sheffield, an audiologist who teaches at the University of Florida. Those people need to see a doctor.

HEARING TEST

Before over-the-counter, you usually needed to get your hearing tested and buy hearing aids from a specialist. That's no longer the case.

But it can be hard for people to gauge their own hearing. You can still opt to see a specialist just for that test, which is often covered by insurance, and then buy the aids on your own. Check your coverage before making an appointment.

There also are a number of apps and questionnaires available to determine whether you need help. Some over-the-counter sellers also provide a hearing assessment or online test.

WHO'S SELLING

Several major retailers now offer OTC hearing aids online and on store shelves.

Walgreens drugstores, for example, are selling Lexie Lumen hearing aids nationwide for \$799. Walmart offers OTC hearing aids ranging from about \$200 to \$1,000 per pair. Its health centers will provide hearing tests.

The consumer electronics chain Best Buy has OTC hearing aids available online and in nearly 300 stores. The company also offers an online hearing assessment, and store employees are trained on the stages of hearing loss and how to fit the devices.

Overall, there are more than a dozen manufacturers making different models of OTC hearing aids.

New devices will make up most of the OTC market as it develops, Sheffield said. Some may be hearing aids that previously required a prescription, ones that are only suitable for people with mild to moderate hearing loss.

Shoppers should expect a lot of devices to enter and leave the market, said Catherine Palmer, a hearing expert at the University of Pittsburgh.

"It will be quite a while before this settles down," she said.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Look for an OTC label on the box. Hearing aids approved by the FDA for sale without a prescription are required to be labeled OTC.

That will help you distinguish OTC hearing aids from cheaper devices sometimes labeled sound or hearing amplifiers — called a personal sound amplification product or PSAP. While often marketed to seniors, they are designed to make sounds louder for people with normal hearing in certain environments, like hunting. And amplifiers don't undergo FDA review.

"People really need to read the descriptions," said Barbara Kelley, executive director of the Hearing Loss Association of America.

And check the return policy. That's important because people generally need a few weeks to get used to them, and make sure they work in the situations where they need them most. That may include on the phone or in noisy offices or restaurants.

Does the company selling OTC devices offer instructions or an app to assist with setup, fit and sound adjustments? A specialist could help too, but expect to pay for that office visit, which is rarely covered by insurance.

Sheffield said hearing aids are not complicated, but wearing them also is not as simple as putting on a pair of reading glasses.

"If you've never tried or worn hearing aids, then you might need a little bit of help," he said.

THE COST

Most OTC hearing aids will cost between \$500 and \$1,500 for a pair, Sheffield said. He noted that some may run up to \$3,000.

And it's not a one-time expense. They may have to be replaced every five years or so.

Hearing specialists say OTC prices could fall further as the market matures. But they already are generally cheaper than their prescription counterparts, which can run more than \$5,000.

The bad news is insurance coverage of hearing aids is spotty. Some Medicare Advantage plans offer coverage of devices that need a prescription, but regular Medicare does not. There are discounts out there, including some offered by Medicare Advantage insurer UnitedHealthcare in partnership with AARP.

Shoppers also can pay for the devices with money set aside in health savings accounts or flexible spending accounts.

Don't try to save money by buying just one hearing aid. People need to have the same level of hearing in both ears so they can figure out where a sound is coming from, according to the American Academy of Audiology.

FIFA official Wenger knocks teams protesting at World Cup

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — FIFA official Arsène Wenger took a shot at World Cup teams who tried to make political statements in Qatar, saying Sunday they lacked focus for their first games.

Wenger said teams who had a good opening game were mentally ready to focus on the competition and "not on political demonstration." The former Arsenal manager did not specify which teams he was talking about while speaking during an analysis of group games at a FIFA-hosted media event as Chief of Global Football Development.

Denmark and Germany both under-performed in their first games. The Danes drew 0-0 with Tunisia and the Germans lost to Japan 2-1.

They were among seven European soccer federations at the World Cup who wanted their captains to wear an armband as part of a Dutch diversity and anti-discrimination campaign to expose the host nation's poor human rights record.

However, Wenger overlooked the part FIFA played in the dispute by avoiding the issue before teams arrived at the World Cup. Then, seemingly under pressure from Qatari authorities, letting it spill into Nov. 21, hours before England and the Netherlands played and won their first games.

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Hours before those games, FIFA forced a climbdown from the European federations by threatening to ensure England captain Harry Kane and Netherlands counterpart Virgil van Dijk would be shown a yellow card. They would have risked getting a second yellow and being sent off and suspended for the next game.

Denmark played on Nov. 22 without protest, one day before Germany's players lined up for their pregame team photo and covered their mouths to show they felt silenced by World Cup organizers. Both teams later failed to advance to the knockout round.

The Danish soccer federation was consistently critical before the tournament of Qatar's treatment of the migrant workers who helped build World Cup projects, and brought toned-down uniforms with a black option to represent the color of mourning. The black jersey was not worn in Denmark's three games.

Wenger, who is a long-time commentator for Qatari broadcaster beIN Sports, also said Sunday the World Cup games had been popular around the world "despite all the negative publicity we got before."

Sharing the stage with Wenger, German soccer great Jurgen Klinsmann highlighted the mental demands on European players in Qatar and offered a different theory.

Klinsmann is analyzing games for FIFA and noted players in Europe's biggest leagues had to adapt from playing club games until only one week before the World Cup started. Teams usually have at least two weeks to prepare after the European season for a typical World Cup starting in June.

"For coaches to prepare a team with one week is very, very difficult, obviously," said Klinsmann, who was twice a World Cup coach, with Germany in 2006 and the United States in 2014.

"There have been extreme mental challenges for the teams," he said, adding that the expanded squads with 26 players instead of the usual 23 left coaches "dealing with 15 unhappy players."

Two tactical trends were highlighted by Wenger from the 48 games in the group stage — the importance of attacking from wide positions on the field and goalkeepers' ability to pass the ball as an outlet for teammates being pressed by opponents.

"I personally think the team with the best wide players will win this tournament," Wenger said.

He said attacking teams were forced to find space on the flanks because opponents now better protect the center of the field, and this also led to fewer long-distance shots being taken.

Evolution of the "sweeper keeper" role pioneered by Germany captain Manuel Neuer saw a 70% increase since the 2018 World Cup of goalkeepers offering to receive the ball with their feet.

"It is a fascinating development of the position of the goalkeeper," Klinsmann said, adding youth training likely needs to adapt so potential keepers also spend time playing an outfield position to develop their ball control and passing skills.

3 Chinese astronauts return to Earth after 6-month mission

BEIJING (AP) — Three Chinese astronauts landed in a northern desert on Sunday after six months working to complete construction of the Tiangong station, a symbol of the country's ambitious space program, state TV reported.

A capsule carrying commander Chen Dong and astronauts Liu Yang and Cai Xuzhe touched down at a landing site in the Gobi Desert in northern China at approximately 8:10 p.m. (1210 GMT), China Central Television reported.

Prior to departure, they overlapped for almost five days with three colleagues who arrived Wednesday on the Shenzhou-15 mission for their own six-month stay, marking the first time China had six astronauts in space at the same time. The station's third and final module docked with the station this month.

The astronauts were carried out of the capsule by medical workers about 40 minutes after touchdown. They were all smiles, and appeared to be in good condition, waving happily at workers at the landing site.

"I am very fortunate to have witnessed the completion of the basic structure of the Chinese space station after six busy and fulfilling months in space," said Chen, who was the first to exit the capsule. "Like meteors, we returned to the embrace of the motherland."

Liu, another of the astronauts, said that she was moved to see relatives and her fellow compatriots.

The three astronauts were part of the Shenzhou-14 mission, which launched in June. After their arrival at Tiangong, Chen, Liu and Cai oversaw five rendezvous and dockings with various spacecraft including

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one carrying the third of the station's three modules.

They also performed three spacewalks, beamed down a live science lecture from the station, and conducted a range of experiments.

The Tiangong is part of official Chinese plans for a permanent human presence in orbit.

China built its own station after it was excluded from the International Space Station, largely due to U.S. objections over the Chinese space programs' close ties to the People's Liberation Army, the military wing of the ruling Communist Party.

With the arrival of the Shenzhou-15 mission, the station expanded to its maximum weight of 100 tons.

Without attached spacecraft, the Chinese station weighs about 66 tons — a fraction of the International Space Station, which launched its first module in 1998 and weighs around 465 tons.

With a lifespan of 10 to 15 years, Tiangong could one day be the only space station still up and running if the International Space Station retires by around the end of the decade as expected.

China in 2003 became the third government to send an astronaut into orbit on its own after the former Soviet Union and the United States.

China has also chalked up uncrewed mission successes: Its Yutu 2 rover was the first to explore the little-known far side of the moon. Its Chang'e 5 probe also returned lunar rocks to Earth in December 2020 for the first time since the 1970s, and another Chinese rover is searching for evidence of life on Mars.

Officials are reported to be considering an eventual crewed mission to the moon, although no timeline has been offered.

Today in History: December 5, Nelson Mandela dies at 95

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 5, the 339th day of 2022. There are 26 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 5, 2013, Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid leader who became South Africa's first Black president, died at age 95.

On this date:

In 1791, composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died in Vienna, Austria, at age 35.

In 1792, George Washington was reelected president; John Adams was reelected vice president.

In 1848, President James K. Polk triggered the Gold Rush of '49 by confirming that gold had been discovered in California.

In 1932, German physicist Albert Einstein was granted a visa, making it possible for him to travel to the United States.

In 1933, national Prohibition came to an end as Utah became the 36th state to ratify the 21st Amendment to the Constitution, repealing the 18th Amendment.

In 1952, the Great Smog of London descended on the British capital; the unusually thick fog, which contained toxic pollutants, lasted five days and was blamed for causing thousands of deaths.

In 1955, the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations merged to form the AFL-CIO under its first president, George Meany.

In 1994, Republicans chose Newt Gingrich to be the first GOP speaker of the House in four decades.

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In 2009, a jury in Perugia, Italy convicted American student Amanda Knox and her former Italian boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito (rah-fy-EHL'-ay soh-LEH'-chee-toh), of murdering Knox's British roommate, Meredith Kercher, and sentenced them to long prison terms. (After a series of back-and-forth rulings, Knox and Sollecito were definitively acquitted in 2015 by Italy's highest court.)

In 2018, former President George H.W. Bush was mourned at a memorial service at Washington National Cathedral attended by President Donald Trump and former Presidents Barack Obama, Bill Clinton

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and Jimmy Carter along with their spouses; former president George W. Bush was among the speakers, eulogizing his dad as "the brightest of a thousand points of light."

In 2019, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced that she had asked the relevant House committee chairs to begin drawing up articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump, saying his actions left them "no choice" but to act swiftly; in response, Trump tweeted that Democrats had "gone crazy." (Trump would be impeached by the House on charges of obstruction and abuse of power, but the Senate voted to acquit in the first of two Trump impeachment trials.)

In 2020, at a Georgia rally where he urged supporters to turn out for a pair of Republican Senate candidates in a January runoff election, President Donald Trump spread baseless allegations of misconduct in the November voting in Georgia and beyond. Hours before the rally, according to officials with knowledge of the call, Trump asked Georgia Republican Gov. Brian Kemp to order a special legislative session to give him the state's electoral votes, even though Joe Biden had won the majority of the vote; Kemp refused to do so.

Ten years ago: Port clerks ended an eight-day strike at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach after winning guarantees against the outsourcing of jobs. Jazz composer and pianist Dave Brubeck died in Norwalk, Connecticut, a day before he would have turned 92.

Five years ago: Democratic congressman John Conyers of Michigan resigned from Congress after a nearly 53-year career, becoming the first Capitol Hill politician to lose his job amid the sexual misconduct allegations sweeping through the nation's workplaces. In a bitterly contested runoff election, Atlanta voters narrowly chose Keisha Lance Bottoms as the city's next mayor; a result that would be upheld after a recount requested by rival Mary Norwood. The International Olympic Committee barred Russia and its sports leaders from the upcoming Winter Olympics in South Korea after concluding that members of the Russian government concocted a doping scheme at the 2014 Sochi Games; some Russians would be able to compete as "Olympic Athletes from Russia."

One year ago: Bob Dole, who overcame disabling war wounds to become a sharp-tongued Senate leader from Kansas, a Republican presidential candidate and then a symbol and celebrant of his dwindling generation of World War II veterans, died at 98. U.S. health officials said that while the omicron variant of the coronavirus was rapidly spreading throughout the country, early indications suggested it could be less dangerous than the delta variant, which continued to drive a surge of hospitalizations. Buck O'Neil, a champion of Black ballplayers during a monumental, eight-decade career on and off the field, joined Minnie Miñoso, Gil Hodges and three others in being elected to the baseball Hall of Fame by veterans committees.

Today's Birthdays: Author Calvin Trillin is 87. Actor Jeroen Krabbe (yeh-ROHN' krah-BAY') is 78. Opera singer Jose Carreras is 76. Musician and singer Jim Messina is 75. College Football Hall of Famer and former NFL quarterback Jim Plunkett is 75. World Golf Hall of Famer Lanny Wadkins is 73. Actor Morgan Brittany is 71. Actor Brian Backer is 66. Pro and College Football Hall of Famer Art Monk is 65. Country singer Ty England is 59. Rock singer-musician John Rzeznik (REZ'-nihk) (The Goo Goo Dolls) is 57. Country singer Gary Allan is 55. Comedian-actor Margaret Cho is 54. Writer-director Morgan J. Freeman is 53. Actor Alex Kapp Horner is 53. Actor Kali Rocha is 51. Rock musician Regina Zernay (Cowboy Mouth) is 50. Actor Paula Patton is 47. Actor Amy Acker is 46. Actor Nick Stahl is 43. Actor Adan Canto is 41. R&B singer Keri Hilson is 40. Actor Gabriel Luna is 40. Actor Frankie Muniz is 37. Actor Ross Bagley is 34. MLB outfielder Christian Yelich is 31.