

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 1 of 88

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- Coming Up on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [2- World of Experience](#)
- [3- Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #6 Results](#)
- [3- Chamber Ad](#)
- [4- Sen. Mike Rounds Column](#)
- [5- Harry Implement Ad](#)
- [6- SD Searchlight: Lawsuit brings tribe a seat on county commission](#)
- [8- SD Searchlight: Xcel raising electric rates 18 percent as state regulators take no action at initial deadline](#)
- [10- SD Searchlight: Future of U.S. election law at stake as Supreme Court hears North Carolina case](#)
- [13- SD Searchlight: Attempt to help states ease banking for marijuana businesses stumbles in Congress](#)
- [15- SD Searchlight: Congress on track to scrap Pentagon's COVID-19 vaccine mandate in defense bill](#)
- [17- SD Searchlight: Talks over protecting Dreamers pick up in Congress, but agreement still elusive](#)
- [19- Weather Pages](#)
- [24- Daily Devotional](#)
- [25- 2022 Community Events](#)
- [26- Subscription Form](#)
- [27- News from the Associated Press](#)

Groton Community Calendar

Thursday, Dec. 8

Senior Menu: Beef stew, biscuit, Waldorf salad, sherbert.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Chicken sandwich, sweet potatoes.

MS/HS Christmas Concert, 7 p.m.

Friday, Dec. 9

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, corn, chocolate cake, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Biscuits and gravy

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

BB at Hamlin (GBB 8th grade at 4 p.m. followed by 7th grade in multipurpose gym; Boys C game at 4 p.m. in third gym. Girls JV starts at 4 p.m. in the main gym followed by the boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity.



Saturday, Dec. 10

Wrestling Invitational at LaMoure, 10 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Santa Day in Groton at Professional Management Services, 9 a.m.

City Holiday Lighting Contest, 7 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

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PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

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

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

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MS/HS Christmas Program
Thursday, Dec. 8, 2022, 7 p.m.

Hamlin Double Header on Friday

4 p.m.: Boys C Game - MAYBE -

4 p.m.: Girls JV - Shane Clark doing the play-by-play.
Sponsored by Adam and Nicole Wright

Boys JV to follow
Sponsored by Weber Landscaping

Varsity Girls to follow - Shane Clark doing the play-by-play
Varsity Boys to conclude the night

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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 3 of 88

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #6 Results

Team Standings: Chipmunks – 17, Cheetahs – 14, Foxes – 12, Jackelopes – 11, Shihtzus – 10, Coyotes – 8

Men's High Games: Mike Siegler – 214, Doug Jorgensen – 186, Brad Waage – 174

Women's High Games: Vicki Walter – 171, Lori Giedt – 168, Dar Larson – 167

Men's High Series: Mike Siegler – 574, Doug Jorgensen – 507, Brad Waage – 502

Women's High Series: Dar Larson – 464, Sue Stanley – 449, Vicki Walter – 440

Fun Game: Least Strikes à Coyotes with 15

'TIS THE
SEASON TO
SHOP LOCAL

GROTON
Chamber Of Commerce



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 4 of 88



November 28 - December 4, 2022

We're back with another Weekly Round[s] Up as we prepare for the last few weeks before Christmas. Congress is currently in the lame-duck session, a nickname for the period of time between the election and the swearing in of new members of Congress. Before the end of the year, Congress needs to fund the government and pass our annual National Defense bill. This past week, we passed legislation preventing the railroad strike in the United States. I was also able to participate in the unveiling of the B-21 Raider stealth bomber this past weekend. Here's my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakota groups I visited with: Michael Pauley, Executive Director of the South Dakota Catholic Conference; and students and advisors from South Dakota's Jobs for America's Graduates.

Other meetings this week: Jay Timmons, CEO of the National Association of Manufacturers; Col. Mark Himes of the Army Corps of Engineers; Dr. Michael Sulmeyer, the U.S. Army's principal cyber adviser; Lt. Gen. Maria Barrett, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Cyber Command; Jay Debertin, CEO of CHS; Kathy Warden, CEO of Northrop Grumman; Motaz Zahran, Egypt's Ambassador to the United States; Alfred Kelly, CEO of Visa; Ed Tilly, CEO of Cboe; Brad Smith, President and Vice Chair of Microsoft; Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., Chief of Staff of the Air Force; Admiral John C. Aquilino, commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command; and Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall.

We also had our weekly Senate Bible Study (Our verse of the week was Ephesians 4:1-3) and our Senate Prayer Breakfast (Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith from Mississippi was our speaker).

Last but not least, I had the opportunity to attend the unveiling of the B-21 Raider stealth bomber this weekend in Palmdale, California. This new stealth bomber will have its first two squadrons stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base in the Black Hills, bringing hundreds of new personnel and new growth to the area over the next several years. It will also bolster our national security by strengthening our nuclear triad. While I was in California, I also participated in the Reagan National Defense Forum at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. I spoke on a panel titled "Defending Freedom: Great Power Conflict and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific."

Met with South Dakotans from: Martin, Pierre, Presho, Rapid City, Sioux Falls and Wagner.

Topics discussed: The potential rail strike, the unveiling of the B-21 Raider stealth bomber and artificial intelligence's current and future role in our national security.

Votes taken: 15 – Most noteworthy was the vote to avert a rail strike. I voted yes because of the negative impact a rail strike would have on our nation's economy, specifically farmers and ranchers in South Dakota.

Hearings: I attended a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing on Native American veterans and their access to VA healthcare and benefits.

Classified briefings: I had a briefing with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA); a Strategic Forces Subcommittee briefing on Electronic Warfare; and a Air Force briefing.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen, Brookings, Canova, Carthage, Deadwood, Howard, Lemmon, New Underwood and Watertown.

Steps taken this week: 52,075 steps or 23.8 miles

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<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Lawsuit brings tribe a seat on county commission

Lower Brule v. Lyman County case ends with mutual agreement

BY: SETH TUPPER - DECEMBER 7, 2022 5:33 PM



The village of Lower Brule on the Lower Brule Reservation, near the Big Bend of the Missouri River. (U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers)

A county commissioner in South Dakota will resign and be replaced by a Native American tribal member as the result of a voting rights lawsuit.

The Lower Brule Sioux Tribe filed the lawsuit against Lyman County in May. Much of the tribe's reservation is within the county, on the western bank of the Missouri River in central South Dakota.

"The tribe is elated," said one of the tribe's attorneys, Samantha Kelty, of the Native American Rights Fund. "It is an incredible outcome."

After several twists and turns in the litigation, the two sides went into mediation with a judge. That resulted in a consent decree filed on Tuesday.

Both sides agreed that Lyman County Commissioner Brian Kraus will resign, and the remaining four members of the five-member county commission will appoint

a Lower Brule tribal member as his replacement. The tribe is invited to submit a list of nominees for the position.

Kraus said it was his idea to resign in hopes of resolving the lawsuit.

"I felt like I should take one for the team and make this deal right and get it all done," he said.

No Native American has previously been elected to serve on the commission, according to court documents.

The lawsuit stemmed from a long-running dispute about the Lyman County Commission's makeup. The county previously used an at-large system, in which all five commissioners represented the entire county. That system prevented Native Americans – who make up 47 percent of the county's population – from gaining representation on the commission, the tribe alleged.

Commissioners drew new district boundaries in February, under pressure from Native Americans citing requirements of the federal Voting Rights Act. But instead of using five single-member districts as urged by the tribe, the county commissioners adopted their own multi-member, two-district plan. That plan required changes to state law, which legislators adopted at the county commissioners' request last winter.

The county also delayed implementation of the new districts, such that one of the new representatives wouldn't be elected until 2024 and the other until 2026, while leaving the at-large system in place for last month's general election.

When the tribe filed its lawsuit in May, it alleged ill intent on the part of the county.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 7 of 88

"Lyman County's blatant and irregular actions during the 2021 redistricting process demonstrate its intent to deny Native voters the ability to equally participate in the electoral process," the tribe said in its initial court filing.

But the consent decree filed on Tuesday does not include an admission of wrongdoing. And it says the county's new commissioner districts do not deny or abridge voting rights based on race or color.

One of the new districts encompasses most of the reservation and has a majority Native American voting-age population. That district will elect two commissioners in future elections. The other district has a majority white voting-age population, and will elect three commissioners.

The chairman of the Lyman County Commission, Zane Reis, said he is satisfied with the outcome.

"The county is happy with everything, how it turned out," Reis said. "At least now it's all done and over, and I think the tribe was very pleased that it got a seat right now."

The consent decree also requires the county to pay the tribe \$150,000 for attorney fees and expenses.



Plaintiffs from the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe with members of their legal team in a voting rights case against Lyman County. (Photo courtesy of Native American Rights Fund)



SETH TUPPER  

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

Xcel raising electric rates 18 percent as state regulators take no action at initial deadline

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 7, 2022 4:27 PM

A company that provides electricity to nearly 100,000 South Dakota customers will raise its rates by about 18 percent next month as an initial deadline passes for a state regulatory agency to act on the increase.

Xcel Energy will increase its electricity rates by 17.9 percent, starting Jan. 1. That's a jump of \$19.60 per month on an average residential customer's bill. The proposed changes affect 97,500 customers.

Dennis Aanenson owns A&B Business in Sioux Falls and gets electricity from Xcel. He testified against the rate hike last week during a state Public Utilities Commission hearing, where he accused Xcel of poor customer service and criticized the company for paying its CEO more than \$20 million annually in recent years.

"That's over \$10,000 an hour," Aanenson said during his testimony. "He makes more in a half day than your lowest-paid employee. Do you think that's justifiable?"

Xcel stands to gain about \$44 million in annual revenue from the higher rates.

The PUC had six months to investigate and make a decision about the rate request before the company implemented it, but the three-member commission will not declare its decision in that timeframe.

That window closes at the end of December. Commission Chairman Chris Nelson said the PUC rarely completes its investigations in six months.

"Once that rate increase was filed with us, our staff immediately began working through the evaluation process," Nelson said. "That is a very lengthy and complex process."

The commission will subsequently have another six months to make a retroactive decision, but meanwhile, the requested rates will go into effect as an interim rate hike.

The rate increase will affect commercial and industrial customers as well as residential.

PUC's process

When an investor-owned electric utility wants to modify its rates, it must seek permission from the Public Utilities Commission. The utility begins the process by filing an application with the commission that states the proposed rate of increase and the rationale.

Xcel applied for the rate increase on June 30. The commission then moved to suspend the rate increase for six months – providing time to investigate and make a decision before the rate increase could go into effect.

PUC employees, including an attorney and several analysts, began evaluating the rate request. The current PUC staff consists of six analysts and two staff attorneys.

The evaluation includes gathering additional information on factors such as company operating expenses, employee benefits, executive compensation, corporate advertising, and the cost of generation and transmission facilities.

In addition to reviewing the data and evidence submitted by the company and anyone who intervenes in the case, PUC staff request and analyze opinions from outside experts, and ask questions of the parties.

Finally, the staff presents recommendations to the state's three elected public utilities commissioners.

If the commission completes its review by this coming June – as Commissioner Nelson says it will – the commission will take action on the rate increase. If the commission decides the increase was too high, it could order a lesser increase and customers could be eligible for refunds, plus interest. The interest rate is set by the commission.

Xcel's justification

Xcel cited numerous reasons for the rate hike in commission filings, including investments and upgrades into the electrical grid; ensuring safe nuclear generation at its reactors – none of which are in South Dakota – and funding to decommission one of those reactors entirely; plus wind generation investments and keeping up with inflationary cost pressures.

Steve Kolbeck, a soon-to-be state senator and former South Dakota public utilities commissioner, is a principal manager for Xcel Energy and represents the company in front of the PUC.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 9 of 88

Kolbeck said in an interview with South Dakota Searchlight that the rate hike will pay to strengthen the grid and improve the reliability of service.

"At the same time, we're adding more wind energy as we build toward our vision of providing 100% carbon-free electricity to customers by 2050," Kolbeck said.

This rate hike is Xcel Energy's first rate application in South Dakota in eight years, according to Kolbeck. The company is also requesting a rate hike in other states.

Xcel Energy was requesting a \$122 million rate increase in Minnesota – raising its 1.3 million customers' bills there by about 6%. The request was opposed by ratepayer advocates — including two state agencies — who said Minnesotans are already reeling from energy price inflation. In response, the company dropped its request. Activists there remain concerned that Xcel will continue its pursuit of a rate increase.

The company has also signaled plans to raise electric rates in Colorado.

Other providers

No other electric utility is currently requesting a rate hike in South Dakota. Commissioner Nelson said no other rate applications have been filed in the last three years.

Searchlight spoke with NorthWestern Energy and Black Hills Energy – each of which said it does not have plans to increase rates in the next year.

Black Hills Energy made the most recent South Dakota rate hike of comparable size in 2010. The company had requested a 19.4% rate increase.

The PUC investigation into that request went past the initial six-month window, and the rate increase took effect in the interim. But upon completion of the commission's investigation, which took the entire 12 months the law allows, the commission approved only a 12.7% increase, resulting in customer refunds.

There are six investor-owned utility companies that provide electric service in South Dakota: Black Hills Energy, MidAmerican Energy, Montana-Dakota Utilities, NorthWestern Energy, Otter Tail Power and Xcel Energy.

The PUC does not regulate the rates charged by electric cooperatives or municipal electric organizations. Each co-op is governed by a board of directors, elected by its membership. Municipal electrics are managed by the local government entity.



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.

Future of U.S. election law at stake as Supreme Court hears North Carolina case

BY: LYNN BONNER AND KIRA LERNER - DECEMBER 7, 2022 5:51 PM

WASHINGTON — North Carolina Republicans appeared to have at least three of the U.S. Supreme Court's conservative justices on their side Wednesday in a case that could determine the future of elections nationwide, and leave decisions about federal elections in the hands of state legislatures and beyond the reach of state courts.

The Supreme Court heard oral arguments in an appeal of a North Carolina Supreme Court ruling that threw out congressional districts drawn by the Republican-led legislature. The state's high court decided in February that the redistricting plans constituted a partisan gerrymander that violated the state constitution.

North Carolina Republicans base their case on something called the "independent state legislature theory," which holds that the U.S. Constitution's Elections Clause makes legislatures the sole authority over federal elections.

"It is federal law alone that places substantive restrictions on state legislatures performing the task assigned them by the federal constitution," said David H. Thompson, the lawyer representing the GOP legislators, during Wednesday's arguments.

Justices Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch, and Samuel Alito seemed to agree with Thompson, indicating their belief that the federal Constitution is enough to protect voters and state constitutions shouldn't play a role in election matters.

The oral arguments lasted almost three hours, twice as long as the court had scheduled, with multiple justices seeking clarifications on how Supreme Court precedent impacts this case and how the Elections Clause of the U.S. Constitution should be interpreted.

"Blast radius" of a ruling for GOP lawmakers highlighted

Three attorneys — former Acting Solicitor General Neal Katyal, former Solicitor General Donald Verrilli, and current Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar — argued on behalf of the respondent voters, voting rights groups, and the U.S. Department of Justice, who oppose the North Carolina Republicans' theory.

The opponents, who brought the original gerrymandering lawsuits, say the North Carolina Republicans' argument relies on a misinterpretation of the Constitution that ignores historical fact.



Protestors outside the U.S. Supreme Court as oral arguments were heard in a pivotal North Carolina case dealing with election law Dec. 7, 2022. (Photo by Kira Lerner/States Newsroom)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 11 of 88

The court's three liberal justices seemed to agree with the opponents. An endorsement of the North Carolina Republicans' position would have far-reaching effects, said Justice Elena Kagan.

"This is a theory with big consequences," she said. "It would say that if the legislature engages in the most extreme forms of gerrymandering, there is no state constitutional remedy for that, even if the courts think that that's a violation of the Constitution. It would say that legislatures could enact all manner of restrictions on voting, get rid of all kinds of voter protections that the state Constitution in fact prohibits. It might allow the legislatures to insert themselves, to give themselves a role in the certification of elections and the way election results are calculated."

She added that the North Carolina Republicans' proposal "gets rid of the normal checks and balances on the way big governmental decisions are made in this country."

Katyal, who represented the parties who originally sued over the redistricting plans, warned of the "blast radius" of a ruling in favor of North Carolina GOP legislators in which state lawmaking is unconstrained by a state constitution.

Outside the court on Wednesday, Katyal said that "the checks and balances laced into the Constitution forbid what these challengers are seeking."

Allison Riggs, co-executive director of the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, told reporters outside the court that the North Carolina legislators' position during the oral arguments was extreme compared to what they argued in their earlier briefings.

"What I take away from today's argument is that legislative leadership in North Carolina still wants the North Carolina constitution to be a meaningless piece of paper," she said.

Conservative attorneys voice concerns

Opponents of the independent state legislature theory have also gained support from conservative lawyers who disagree with it.

"I do not believe there is any support whatsoever in the constitutional text or in the history of the framing of the Constitution that would support the most aggressive version of the independent state legislature theory that the petitioners are arguing for," J. Michael Luttig, a Reagan administration lawyer and former U.S. Appeals Court judge, said in a webinar Tuesday. Luttig is working with Common Cause, the League of Conservation Voters, and a group of voters backed by the National Redistricting Foundation to oppose the North Carolina Republicans' arguments.

Though the immediate case at issue before the Supreme Court is about redistricting, North Carolina Republicans have clashed with Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, Democratic Attorney General Josh Stein and the state Board of Elections over other issues that could be implicated by the court's ruling, such as the deadline for accepting mail-in ballots.

A ruling for North Carolina Republicans would create a confusing, two-tiered election system, with different rules for federal and state elections, national associations representing cities, counties, and mayors argued in a friend of the court brief.

Other recent rulings, including a 2019 Supreme Court case from North Carolina, *Rucho v. Common Cause*, seemed to indicate acceptance of the notion that entities other than legislatures have a lawful role in creating election districts. In *Rucho*, the majority said it would not consider cases about partisan gerrymandering, calling those political questions "beyond the reach of the federal courts." But the majority opinion, written by Chief Justice John Roberts, also noted that state laws, state constitutions, and independent commissions could offer remedies to partisan gerrymandering.

In his live blog of the oral arguments, voting rights expert Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, said the divided Supreme Court appears to be "searching for a middle ground to hold that in really egregious cases state courts can violate the federal constitution when they apply state constitutions (or potentially to interpret state statutes) to limit a state legislature in regulating federal elections."

Specifically, he said that the three justices who appear to be undecided on this case — Chief Justice Roberts and Justices Amy Coney Barrett and Brett Kavanaugh — seem to be looking for a middle ground.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 12 of 88

He said he doesn't believe the court is ready to rule in line with the North Carolina Republicans' view on the independent state legislative theory, but a partial ruling would still be problematic in allowing the federal government to inject itself into state election disputes.

Voting rights advocates and opponents of the independent state legislature theory remain fearful of what a ruling for North Carolina's legislators, or even a partial one, could mean for the future of elections.

During a voting rights conference on Tuesday, Republican election lawyer Ben Ginsberg said that a ruling for North Carolina Republicans would "not be good for certainty in elections at a time when the system is under assault."



LYNN BONNER

Lynn Bonner, Investigative Reporter, joined Policy Watch in October 2020 after 26 years as a reporter at The News & Observer. She covered the state legislature and politics for 20 years, and wrote extensively about mental health, state Medicaid policies and spending, and public education. Before coming to North Carolina, she wrote for newspapers in New England.



KIRA LERNER

Kira is the democracy reporter for States Newsroom where she covers voting, elections, redistricting, and efforts to subvert democracy.

Attempt to help states ease banking for marijuana businesses stumbles in Congress

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - DECEMBER 7, 2022 5:45 PM

The annual Defense Department policy bill members of Congress released late Tuesday did not include measures to loosen federal marijuana restrictions, to the disappointment of advocates.

That leaves few avenues to pass marijuana measures seen as boons to states where the drug is legal before Congress adjourns for the year.

As one of the last must-pass bills Congress would consider while Democrats still control both chambers, the defense bill was a potential target for advocates of legalizing marijuana to attach two bills.

One would clarify that banks lending to legitimate marijuana businesses in states with legal markets are not in violation of federal law. The other would provide federal funding to help states expunge criminal records of people convicted of offenses before the substance was made state-legal.

Though the bulk of the defense bill deals with authorizing Pentagon programs, it is often filled with additional policy measures.

But when 4,400 pages of text for the 2022 bill were released Tuesday night, neither marijuana proposal was included.

With less than two weeks left in the session, the path to passage is now either as part of a year-end spending bill — another popular target for legislation — or on its own, Morgan Fox, the political director for the cannabis advocacy group National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, said in an interview.

“I’m glad that we still have other options,” Fox said Wednesday. “It’s pretty disappointing.”

A vote on a standalone marijuana bill is unlikely, with the Senate in session only a handful of days this year and a list of priorities remaining, including the year-long government funding bill and a measure to clarify election laws.

Split with states

Though the federal government places marijuana on its list of the most restricted controlled substances, 21 states have legalized recreational use.

That policy split leads to unique challenges for state-legal businesses in areas like banking, where some financial institutions refuse to work with the marijuana industry out of fear they would violate federal law.

The banking bill, introduced by U.S. Rep. Ed Perlmutter, a Colorado Democrat retiring at the end of the year, would clarify that federal regulators could not penalize banks for doing business with marijuana retailers in compliance with their states’ laws.

The banking bill has passed the House seven times since its first introduction in 2019, but the Senate



David Burr demonstrates removing leaves on marijuana plants to allow more light for growth at Essence Vegas’ 54,000-square-foot marijuana cultivation facility on July 6, 2017, in Las Vegas, Nevada. (Photo by Ethan Miller/Getty Images)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 14 of 88

has never passed it.

The streak in the House may be in danger as Republicans take over next year. Despite its bipartisan support and a 321-101 vote in favor last year, the legislation could face long odds next year if Ohio Republican Jim Jordan becomes the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, as expected. Jordan has consistently voted against marijuana legalization efforts, including against the banking bill.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, an advocate of liberalizing marijuana laws, told reporters before the defense bill's text was released Tuesday he was working on getting the banking measure passed.

"It's a priority for me," Schumer said. "I'd like to get it done. We'll try and discuss the best way to get it done."

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican from Kentucky, opposed including marijuana provisions in the defense bill, listing the banking bill as an item that did not belong there.

"We're talking about a grab bag of miscellaneous pet priorities — making our financial system more sympathetic to illegal drugs," he said. "If Democrats wanted these controversial items so badly, they had two years to move them across the floor."

Colorado support

The bill is a priority for states where legal marijuana businesses comprise major industries, such as Colorado, where marijuana sales started in 2014 and reached \$2.2 billion last year.

In a written statement, Conor Cahill, a spokesman for Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, commended Perlmutter for his work and predicted passage this year.

"Governor Polis has long advocated for the passage of the SAFE Banking Act, and has repeatedly called upon Congress to pass this important legislation to protect cannabis-related businesses, support minority, women, and veteran-owned small businesses owners, create jobs, and strengthen public safety in Colorado communities and in the states," Cahill wrote in a Tuesday email. "We hope and expect to see the final passage of his decade-long effort by the end of the lame-duck session."

Members of both parties from states that have legalized recreational use continued to call for the bill's passage.

"The Senator is continuing to work every day to build consensus so we can pass "SAFE Banking" into law this year," a spokesperson for Montana Republican U.S. Sen. Steve Daines said in a Wednesday email.

A spokesperson for Daines' Democratic counterpart, Jon Tester, also said he "would like to see it pass this Congress."

Both Daines and Tester are among the 42 cosponsors of the bill.

Schumer resisted bringing the banking bill to the floor this Congress as he sought to instead pass a broader federal legalization measure he introduced with fellow Senate Democrats Cory Booker of New Jersey and Ron Wyden of Oregon.

"Although the SAFE Banking Act is common-sense policy that I support, it has to be coupled with strong restorative justice provisions that seek to right the many injustices experienced by Black and brown communities as part of our nation's failed war on drugs," Booker said in a statement last year.

A spokesman for Booker did not return a message seeking comment Wednesday.

Schumer's advocacy would be crucial to passage, Fox said, though the deference to a more comprehensive bill may have hurt its chances this year.

"Having support of Senate leadership I think was really important," Fox said. "I wish they'd gotten the ball rolling on this way earlier in the session, instead of waiting until after the (Schumer-Booker-Wyden bill) was introduced."

While the more comprehensive measure stalled, advocates hoped packaging in a year-end bill the bipartisan banking measure with a bill to provide \$20 million in grants to help states process expungements would suffice.

That bill, a bipartisan effort, was introduced in the U.S. House this year by Ohio Republican David Joyce. New York Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, late Alaska Republican Don Young, Oregon Democrat Earl Blumenauer, Maryland Democrat David Trone and Perlmutter were cosponsors.

Congress on track to scrap Pentagon's COVID-19 vaccine mandate in defense bill

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 7, 2022 2:13 PM

WASHINGTON — Members of the U.S. military would no longer be required to get the COVID-19 vaccine under a proposal Congress could pass as soon as this week.

The provision eliminating the vaccine mandate is tucked into the massive National Defense Authorization Act, the annual defense policy bill that Congress has passed each year for more than 60 years. Lawmakers released this year's version late Tuesday following months of negotiations.

Erasing the COVID-19 vaccine mandate is seen as a significant victory for Republicans, especially amid unified Democratic control of Washington.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, during a floor speech Wednesday thanked Tennessee Sen. Marsha Blackburn for pushing to eliminate the COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

"Thanks to the leadership from our colleague, Sen. Blackburn, among others, this NDAA will repeal the president's military vaccine mandate, a policy which this Democratic administration had stubbornly clung to — even as it had clearly undermined readiness and hurt retention," McConnell said.

That coalition of Republican senators also included Indiana Sen. Mike Braun, Idaho Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, Montana Sen. Steve Daines, Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst, Nebraska Sen. Deb Fischer, North Dakota Sen. John Hoeven, Kansas Sen. Roger Marshall, Mississippi Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith and Alabama Sen. Tommy Tuberville.

The group released a statement following the NDAA's release, saying they were "pleased that the final conferenced bill includes language mirroring our amendments' efforts to protect troops from being fired due to Biden's COVID vaccine mandate without fair appeal and to the harm of service readiness."

Pentagon backed mandate

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin originally ordered the armed services to put the COVID-19 vaccine mandate in place last year and has since said he thinks it should continue.

"Mandatory vaccinations are familiar to all of our Service members, and mission-critical inoculation is almost as old as the U.S. military itself," Austin wrote in the two-page memo released in August 2021. "Our administration of safe, effective COVID-19 vaccines has produced admirable results to date, and I know the Department of Defense will come together to finish the job, with urgency, professionalism, and compassion."

The Defense Department has administered just under 8.9 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. It also had more than 735,000 people within the military, its civilian population, dependents and contractors diagnosed with COVID-19 and nearly 700 people within those classifications died of the virus, according to DoD.

More than 8,400 service members have separated for refusing to get the COVID-19 vaccine, according to a spokesperson for the DoD.

The U.S. Marine Corps holds the most separations with 3,717; followed by the U.S. Army with 1,841 soldiers, all of whom were active duty; 1,631 active sailors and 401 reservists within the U.S. Navy; and



Lalain Reyeg administers a COVID-19 booster vaccine and an influenza vaccine to Army veteran Gary Nasakaitis at the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital on Sept. 24, 2021, in Hines, Illinois.

(Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 16 of 88

834 airmen from the U.S. Air Force.

The Pentagon requires service members to get a range of vaccinations as part of entering the military, including Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Influenza, Measles, Poliovirus, Tetanus-Diphtheria-Pertussis and Varicella.

The Defense Department requires troops to get additional vaccinations based on service-related circumstances and assignments, according to a Pentagon spokesperson.

Vaccine safety

The COVID-19 vaccines have been shown safe in clinical trials as well as real-world application since health care workers began administering the shots in late 2020 following FDA emergency use authorization.

But conservative criticism of vaccine mandates as well as false information about the vaccine itself has simmered in the background for much of the 117th Congress.

The 4,408-page NDAA released this week, which would rescind the Pentagon's COVID-19 mandate, sets policy for the U.S. Department of Defense for the upcoming year. It also authorizes \$857.9 billion in defense funding, though Congress must pass the separate defense appropriations bill to actually provide that money to the Pentagon.

Congress has not yet reached an agreement on total spending for the federal government for the current fiscal year, meaning U.S. lawmakers might need to pass another short-term government funding bill when the current law funding the Pentagon and the rest of the government expires on Dec. 16.

The so-called four corners of the Armed Services committees — Senate Chair Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, Senate ranking member Jim Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican, House Chair Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat, and House ranking member Mike Rogers, an Alabama Republican — released text of the NDAA as well as a summary of the defense policy bill late Tuesday night.

The four said in a statement the legislation would continue "the Armed Services Committees' 62-year tradition of working together to support our troops and strengthen America's national security."

"We urge Congress to pass the NDAA quickly and the President to sign it when it reaches his desk," they added.

Montana Democratic Sen. Jon Tester, chair of the Defense Appropriations subcommittee, which actually funds the Pentagon, said Wednesday that if eliminating the COVID-19 vaccine mandate "has an impact on readiness, it's a huge mistake."

"Let's base it on science, let's not base it on Donald Trump's deal," Tester said.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a California Republican, declared victory over the provision repealing the COVID-19 vaccine mandate, saying in a statement "it is a victory for our military and for common sense."

He also said the Pentagon must "correct service records and not stand in the way of re-enlisting any service member discharged simply for not taking the COVID vaccine."



JENNIFER SHUTT



Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

Talks over protecting Dreamers pick up in Congress, but agreement still elusive

South Dakota Sen. Rounds skeptical, says deal must include border security

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - DECEMBER 7, 2022 9:17 AM

WASHINGTON — In a last-minute push, U.S. senators are working on a bipartisan agreement to create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented people who were brought to the United States as children.

But the success of any major immigration deal appears unlikely, as a lame-duck session of Congress dwindles into its last days. Democrats are set to lose control of the House come January, making the prospects of an agreement next year much more difficult.

U.S. Sens. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona Democrat, and Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican, are still in talks on a draft proposal that would create a pathway to citizenship for up to 2 million undocumented people, often referred to as Dreamers, who are either enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program or would qualify for it. There is no legislative text and no deal has been finalized, Tillis told States Newsroom.

The possible agreement would also extend the controversial Title 42 policy, which allows the United States to turn away noncitizens seeking asylum during a health crisis, and allocate funding for border security. The outline would also include a pathway to citizenship for those under Temporary Protected Status, which is more than 350,000 people.

"We hope that those talks come to fruition," U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, told reporters at the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday.

Court ruling

More than 600,000 currently enrolled DACA recipients are in limbo, as a recent 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruling upheld a lower court decision that determined the DACA program to be unlawful — though current recipients are not yet affected — and blocked the government from accepting new applications.

Many immigration advocates have argued that it's clear that DACA will be deemed illegal by the courts, leaving uncertainty for hundreds of thousands of Dreamers.

U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin of Illinois has said for weeks that he knows of roughly four or five Senate Republicans who are interested in striking a deal to pass legislation to create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented people enrolled in DACA. But Senate Democrats would need 10 Republican votes to overcome the filibuster threshold to pass such legislation.

On Twitter, Durbin said he was interested in reviewing the draft proposal between Tillis and Sinema.

"I am determined to do everything in my power to help deliver a Christmas miracle for Dreamers," Durbin wrote on Twitter.

Tillis said that he and Sinema have been talking for months about a possible immigration deal, and felt that they have made progress. He said the framework for creating a pathway to citizenship for those under DACA "is more or less settled," and that the sticking point is "getting the final bricks of the foundation for border security — that's still up in the air."



U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, speaks during a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing on Jan. 27, 2021, in Washington, D.C. (Photo Sarah Silbiger-Pool/Getty Images)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 18 of 88

As for timing of the proposal, Tillis did not say if a deal could be finished by the end of Congress' lame-duck session.

"It's gonna take a little while to get a draft that we would be comfortable with publishing," Tillis said.

U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who has been pushing for a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients, told States Newsroom that he has some concerns with the framework.

The extension of Title 42, and how asylum is treated were among his concerns, he said.

"Magical things can happen," Menendez said. "But by the same token, you know, the clock is ticking."

No details circulated

Many senators said they are aware of the Sinema-Tillis framework, but have yet to see any written specifics.

Republican Sen. Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania told reporters at the Capitol Monday that he knew of the Tillis-Sinema agreement, "but I have not seen the details."

Republican Sen. Mike Rounds of South Dakota told reporters at the Capitol Monday that he was skeptical an immigration deal could be passed before the end of the lame-duck session. He said any deal on immigration would have to include border security.

"It's not something you can airdrop," he said, a term commonly used in Washington about proposals that have not seen any committee or floor action. He added that his office has not received any bill text of the proposal.

In 2018, Rounds and independent Sen. Angus King of Maine tried to pass an immigration proposal that would create a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers and provide \$25 billion to the Trump administration to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing Monday that the administration was aware of a proposal, but had not seen details.

"The president has repeatedly called on Congress to permanently protect Dreamers, farmworkers, essential workers, and others and to provide them with the pathway to citizenship," she said. "So, that is certainly a priority for the president. But we haven't seen the detailed proposal, so I can't comment ... about that from here."

Advocates want 'real solutions'

Immigration advocates have lobbied Democrats for weeks to pass a last-effort piece of legislation to give DACA recipients a permanent pathway to citizenship.

Greisa Martinez Rosas, the CEO of United We Dream, the largest youth immigration advocacy group, said in a statement that time to pass any DACA-related legislation is running out.

"We've heard of many leaked memos, conversations and 'deals' over the last 40 years," Martinez Rosas said. "We don't need DC gossip, we need real solutions, we need a pathway to citizenship now."

Similarly, more than 70 mayors signed a bipartisan letter, urging Congress to "enact permanent protections for Dreamers during the lame duck session."



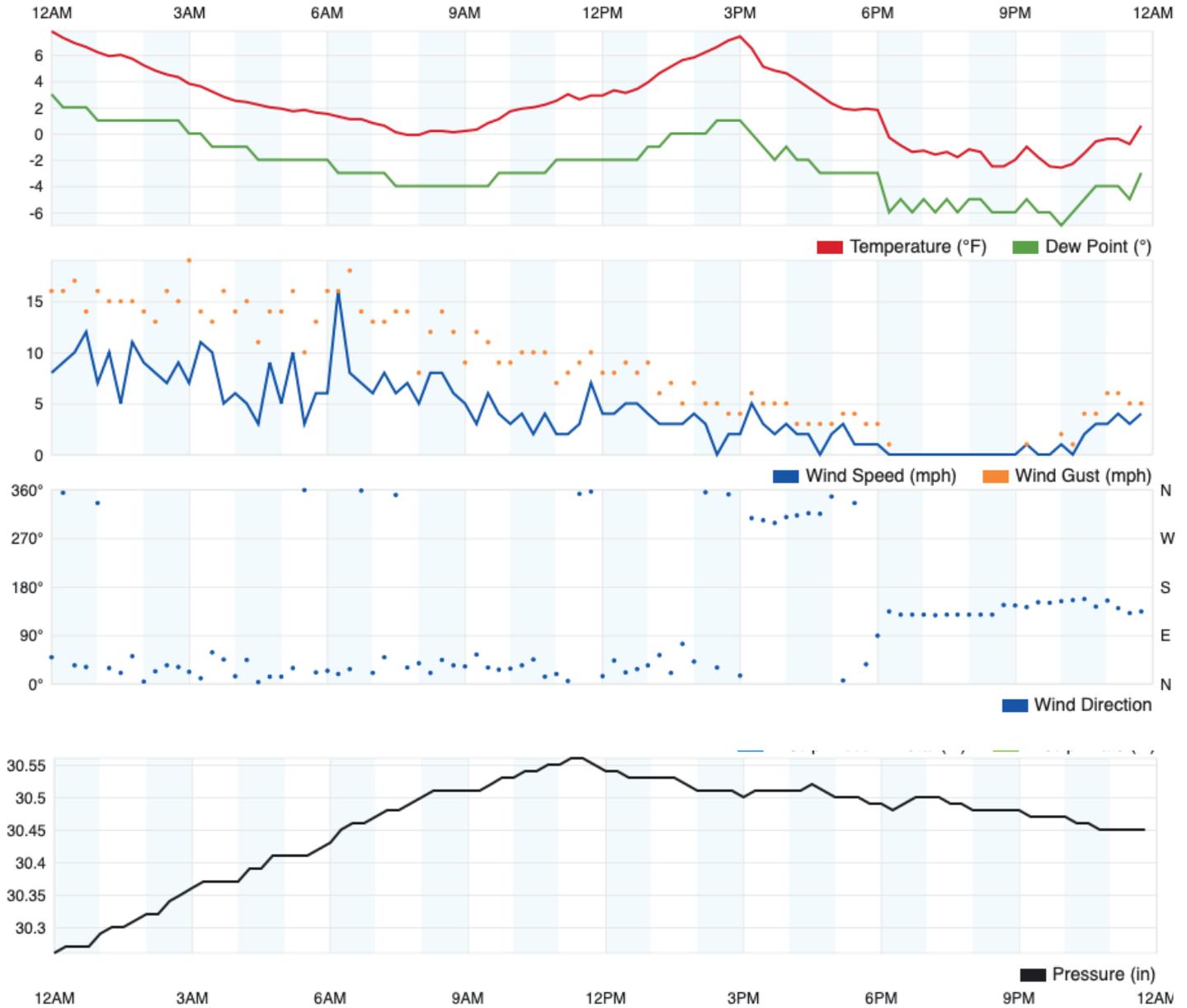
ARIANA FIGUEROA  

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 19 of 88

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

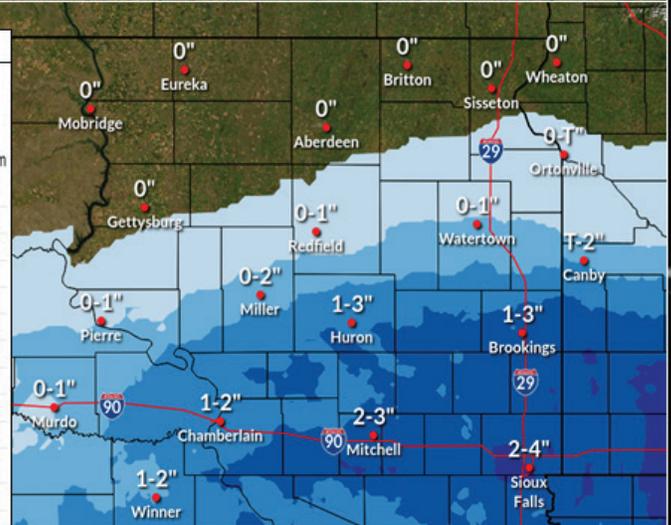
Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 20 of 88

Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
						
Mostly Sunny	Chance Snow 40%	Slight Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy 20%	Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 29 °F	Low: 16 °F	High: 33 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 33 °F	Low: 14 °F	High: 35 °F

Another Round of Snow This Afternoon Thru Early Friday Mainly Affecting Eastern South Dakota and Western Minnesota

Expected Snowfall - Official NWS Forecast
Valid Thu 12:00PM through Fri 12:00PM CST
Weather Forecast Office Aberdeen, SD
Issued Dec 08, 2022 2:07 AM CST

	Timing Snow																							
	Probability of Precipitation Forecast																							
	12/8 Thu												12/9 Fri											
	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am		
Aberdeen	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	3	4	9	18	29	30	27	24	21	17	13	5	3	0	0		
Britton	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	4	9	17	23	27	26	25	25	24	18	9	0	0		
Eagle Butte	1	1	1	3	5	6	9	8	9	10	8	3	3	1	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0		
Eureka						1	1	1	2	3	3	3	4	2	2	3	2	2	0	0	0	0		
Gettysburg	1	1	1	2	3	4	8	10	12	19	27	26	16	9	6	2	2	1	1	0	0	0		
Kennebec	3	13	23	34	44	56	73	72	71	60	52	44	39	12	7	4	5	1	0	0	0	0		
Milbank	1	2	2	1	1	2	6	7	9	21	33	40	46	44	44	60	61	60	31	15	0	0		
Miller	2	2	3	4	5	17	36	47	59	60	62	63	53	33	24	18	13	5	5	3	0	0		
Mobridge						1	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	0	0	0	0		
Murdo	7	15	23	40	56	60	68	64	61	46	40	30	12	2	2	2	3	1	0	0	0	0		
Pierre	2	7	11	16	22	35	51	55	60	56	50	39	27	3	3	3	3	1	0	0	0	0		
Redfield	2	2	1	1	2	4	12	25	37	50	52	56	52	44	37	30	19	13	3	1	0	0		
Sisseton	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	5	13	21	31	36	34	36	37	33	18	9	0	0		
Watertown	3	2	2	2	2	3	9	19	29	53	61	67	63	60	54	56	49	41	13	6	0	0		
Webster	1	1	2	1	1	2	5	6	8	26	39	45	46	43	42	43	38	33	13	6	0	0		
Wheaton			1	1	0	1	2	3	3	5	10	10	21	29	25	22	25	26	24	12	0	0		

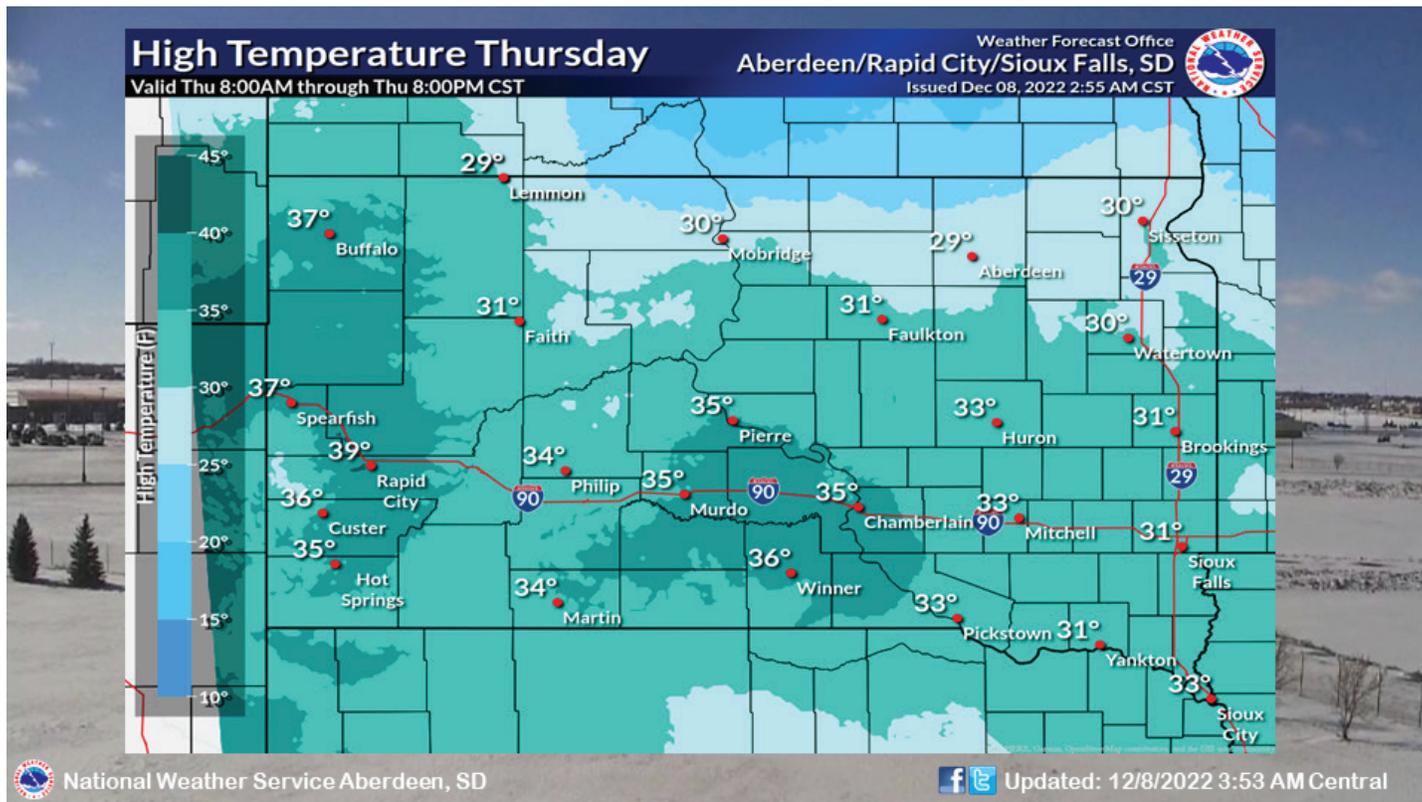


National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD
Updated: 12/8/2022 3:52 AM Central

A weak system will bring generally light snowfall to eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota. Snow will start in south central South Dakota later this afternoon and proceed northeast, departing western Minnesota during the early morning hours Friday.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 21 of 88



We will see the cold air erode somewhat today with light winds and increasing clouds. Mild temperatures are expected Friday and into the weekend.

Potential Winter Storm Ahead

Increasing Likelihood of a High Impact Winter System

Track Confidence
High (Green) to Low (Red)

What's the Concern?
Growing forecast confidence in a VERY impactful winter storm next week, with several weather hazards possible

What's Uncertain?
The exact **track** of the storm
The exact **timing** of the storm
The exact **strength** of the storm
The exact **amounts** and **locations** of the heaviest precipitation

What Should You Do?

- * Monitor the forecast
- * Prepare... Is your car ready? Plenty of food? Snowblower fueled up?
- * Make alternate arrangements for activities & travel

NOAA
Updated: 12/8/2022 3:55 AM Central

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 22 of 88

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 8 °F at 12:00 AM

Low Temp: -3 °F at 8:36 PM

Wind: 19 mph at 2:58 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 53 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 2020

Record Low: -27 in 1927

Average High: 32°F

Average Low: 10°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.16

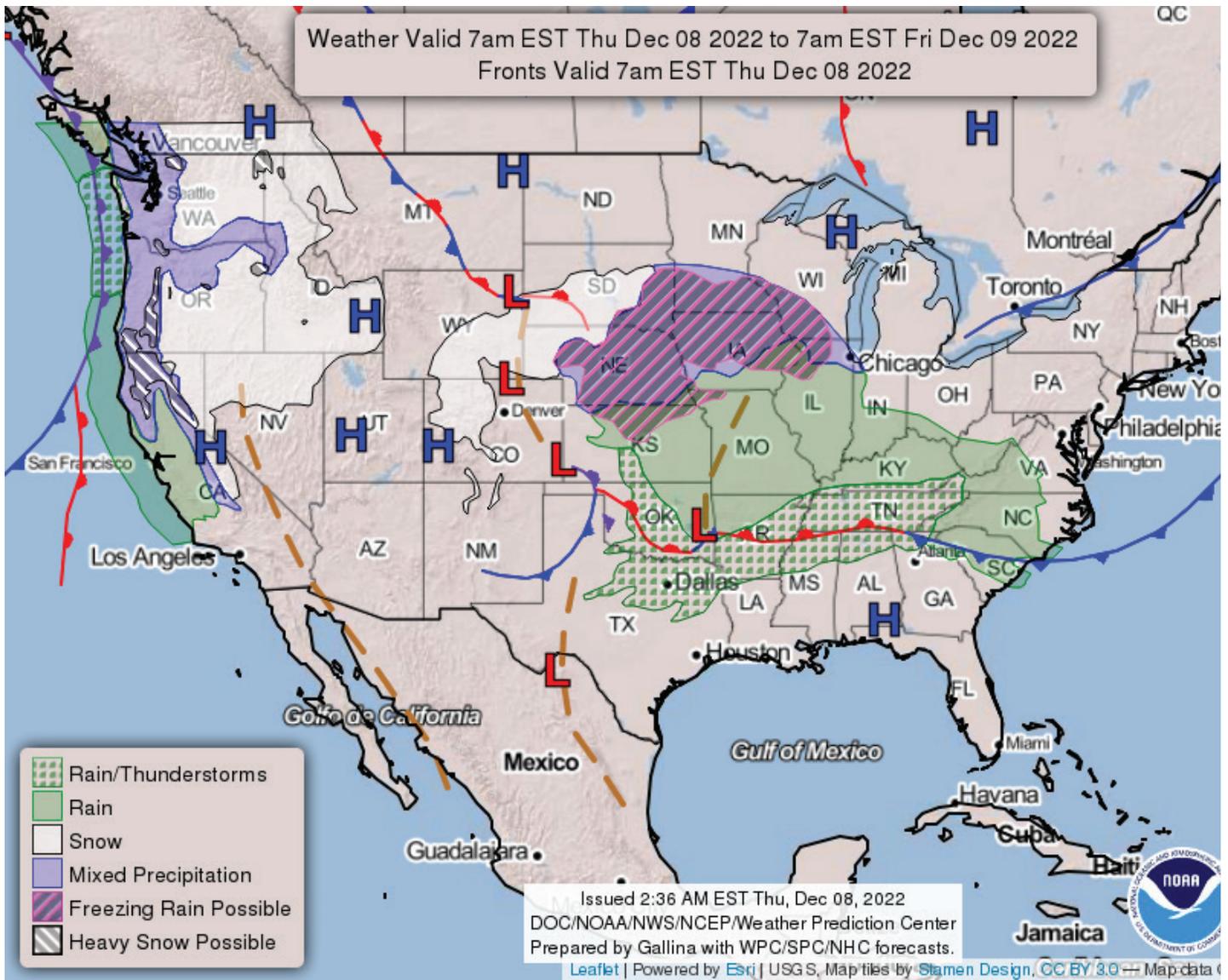
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.37

Precip Year to Date: 16.50

Sunset Tonight: 4:50:56 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:58:46 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 23 of 88

Today in Weather History

December 8, 1995: A powerful Arctic front moved across west central Minnesota and central, north central, and northeast South Dakota throughout the day with winds of 30 to 60 mph. With temperatures falling and one to four inches of snowfall in the morning and afternoon, the high winds produced blizzard conditions with blowing snow and extreme wind chills of 40 to 70 below zero. Many schools, college classes, and activities were canceled for the day. Travel was also significantly affected.

December 8, 1935: From the Monthly Weather Review for December 1935, "The outstanding flood of December 1935 was the record-breaking overflow of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous at Houston, Texas on the 8 and 9th. This destructive flood was caused by excessive rainfall over Harris County, Texas during a 42 hour period on the 6th, 7th, 8th, with amounts ranging from 5.50 inches at Houston" to 16.49 inches at the Humble Oil Company in the northwestern part of Harris County.

1892 - A tremendous ice fall occurred at Gay Hill, TX. Ice averaged four to six inches in diameter. (David Ludlum)

1938 - The temperature at La Mesa, CA, soared to 108 degrees to set a U.S. record for the month of December. (The Weather Channel)

1963 - Lightning caused the crash of a jet airliner killing 81 persons at Elkton, MD. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - A cold front crossing the northwestern U.S. continued to produce high winds along the coast, and heavy snow blanketed parts of the western U.S. Snowfall totals in the mountains of western Nevada ranged up to 18 inches at Heavenly Valley, and near the Boreal Ski Resort, and winds at Reno NV gusted to 56 mph. Thunderstorms over southern Florida deluged the Florida Keys with up to five inches of rain. Strong winds, gusting to 48 mph at Gage OK, ushered wintry weather into the Central High Plains. Goodland KS, which one day earlier was 63 degrees, was blanketed with two inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Santa Ana winds buffeted southern California, with gusts to 92 mph reported at Laguna Peak. The high winds unroofed buildings, and downed trees and power lines, igniting five major fires, and numerous smaller ones. Damage was estimated at 15 to 20 million dollars. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A winter storm spread snow and freezing rain across much of the Atlantic Coast Region, from Georgia to New Jersey. Snowfall totals ranged up to seven inches, at Stanton VA and Tobacco MD. Up to six inches of snow blanketed the mountains of northern Georgia. More than one hundred auto accidents were reported in Gwinnett County GA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

CAN YOU SEE HIM NOW?

It was the very first Christmas that Jo Ann's church had a Nativity scene on the front lawn. Working anxiously, she kept arranging, then rearranging, the figures to make certain they could all be seen.

Finally, she sent her friend, Alice, to the edge of the lawn and asked, "How do they look?"

"Fine, they are all O.K.," came the answer.

Suddenly Jo Ann began to rearrange them once again. "What are you doing? I said they were fine," said Alice grumpily.

"Yes, I heard what you said," responded Jo Ann. "But I just want to make sure that Jesus is visible so all of the people can see Him!"

Often Santa gets more attention than our Savior does during these Holy Days. Children anxiously stand in line waiting their turn to ask for gifts and have their picture taken with him. Rarely, however, do children pose at the manger to have a picture taken with the Baby Jesus. Could it be that He is not visible to most people at Christmas? Do we make any effort at all to make Him visible? Is He lost in the pile of gifts? Is He hidden behind the tree?

Matthew wrote about a group of shepherds who said, "Let's go to Bethlehem...and see this wonderful thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about."

This "wonderful thing," Jesus, is what the world needs to see. Let's be certain He is always visible – especially in our lives!

Prayer: Lord, may we not allow Your Son to be hidden or to be placed behind the "false idols" that so many worship at Christmas. May we make Him visible! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us."



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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 25 of 88

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)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 26 of 88

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 27 of 88

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

01-14-18-22-31

(one, fourteen, eighteen, twenty-two, thirty-one)

Estimated jackpot: \$223,000

Lotto America

02-19-22-47-48, Star Ball: 5, ASB: 2

(two, nineteen, twenty-two, forty-seven, forty-eight; Star Ball: five; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$30,840,000

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: 379,000,000

Powerball

06-28-44-59-61, Powerball: 21, Power Play: 2

(six, twenty-eight, forty-four, fifty-nine, sixty-one; Powerball: twenty-one; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$116,000,000

Former Yankton Sioux Tribe's police chief charged with fraud

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The former police chief of the Yankton Sioux Tribe in South Dakota has been charged by federal prosecutors with wire fraud and theft from the tribe.

Federal prosecutors allege that Chris Saunsoci sought wages both from the tribe and a local ministry that was providing flood relief. He allegedly held both positions between September 2020 and 2021 and sought wages for overlapping hours on 139 days. He was paid about \$30,500 for both jobs on those days, according to court documents.

Saunsoci is also being charged with misusing an SUV that belonged to the tribe this year, the U.S. Attorney's office for South Dakota said.

Saunsoci pleaded not guilty to the charges in November after he was indicted by a federal grand jury. An attorney appointed to represent him did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

He faces 18 counts of wire fraud and two counts of theft from the tribe. The wire fraud charges carry a maximum sentence of 20 years in federal custody, while the theft charges carry a maximum sentence of five years in custody.

On the money: Yellen's next milestone is name on US currency

By FATIMA HUSSEIN and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — Faith in the U.S. dollar has often hinged in part on what Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen says. On Thursday, the focus will be on what she writes, as the government churns out its first currency bearing her signature.

Yellen loops her capital "J" and "Y," with the rest of her name flowing in a haste that suggests handwriting might not have been the top priority for this pathbreaking economist.

She made her reputation as a stoic chair of the Federal Reserve and a shrewd forecaster, and now she's at the forefront of far-flung efforts to use economic levers to help stop Russia's war in Ukraine, employ tax policy to protect the planet from climate change and oversee a massive effort to strengthen the beleaguered IRS.

That puts her at the center of domestic and global politics, inviting new levels of pressure and second-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 28 of 88

guessing by friends and foes. She is tackling this challenge as the United States is suffering from inflation that hit a 40-year high this summer and sowed fears of a coming recession.

Even as Yellen plans to watch the fresh bills carrying her signature roll out at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing's Western currency facility in Fort Worth, Texas, her celebratory remarks were to dwell on Biden administration policy accomplishments rather than her status as the first woman to serve as treasury secretary.

On the Ukraine conflict instigated last February by Russian President Vladimir Putin, she said in prepared remarks, "Together with over 30 countries, we have denied Russia revenue and resources it needs to fight its war."

As for the domestic economy, she said, pandemic relief and a new law to boost production of semi-conductors have positioned the U.S. "to capitalize on a wave of economic opportunities for the American people, including in communities often overlooked."

Now, two years into Joe Biden's presidency, Yellen has put to rest rumors she might be ready to leave the administration early and is strapping in for more economic — as well as political — battles ahead.

Along with managing Treasury's role in the Ukraine war, she faces the Herculean task of revitalizing an IRS that is getting a \$80 billion funding boost, and enforcing an anti-money laundering effort that requires documenting the beneficial owners of tens of millions of U.S. businesses in hopes of crushing corruption around the world.

She occupies an increasingly politicized role in which Congress and foreign governments matter as much as the financial markets.

Her Treasury Department is seeking to hobble the Russian economy with an oil price cap, as Republican House leader Kevin McCarthy of California is questioning the level of U.S. support for Ukraine. The Treasury is also putting together tens of billions in tax incentives, to address climate change, that have rankled some European allies and proved controversial with Republicans. And the wage gains in the most recent U.S. jobs report suggest the economy might have to endure more pain than expected to bring inflation back to the Fed's target of 2% annually.

Along the way, Yellen has not shied away from controversy or speaking her mind on issues that many Americans look at solely through a cultural lens.

When Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., at a May congressional hearing told Yellen she was "harsh" for speaking about the positive economic impacts of abortion access for women, she replied, "This is not harsh, this is the truth." She also has challenged the view that havens for hidden cash lie outside the U.S., instead arguing that the U.S. has become the "best place" to hide illicitly obtained money.

Yellen generated some tension with the White House this year when she veered somewhat from Biden's insistence that his \$1.9 trillion in coronavirus aid package did not contribute to inflation. Republican lawmakers have drawn on analyses by major economists such as Harvard University's Larry Summers to say that the sum was excessive and sparked inflation. Breakages in the global supply chain and a jump in food and energy costs after Russia invaded Ukraine also have contributed to boosting prices to uncomfortable levels, putting the economy at heightened risk of a recession.

Yellen acknowledged on CNN in May that she had been "wrong then about the path that inflation would take." Biden said he had been apprised of the possible risks of inflation when putting together the relief package, but he told The Associated Press in an interview that "the idea that it caused inflation is bizarre."

Yellen's predictions at the Treasury about financial markets on other points have been proved accurate.

Her warnings about the risks of a deregulated cryptocurrency market foresaw the recent chaos. Crypto markets have seen at least two major crashes, dozens of scams, Ponzi schemes and hundreds of billions of dollars made and evaporated overnight.

Yellen has also used her platform as a top government official to warn that despite women's advancements in the workplace, a glass ceiling prevents many from advancing to the very top positions.

Yellen, who is the only person ever to lead the Treasury Department, the Federal Reserve and White House Council of Economic Advisers, still gets flak from members of both political parties for not being more dynamic and politically savvy at times and for being too direct at other times.

Anusha Chari, an economist who chairs the American Economic Association's Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession, calls Yellen's signature on U.S. currency "a huge milestone, but it also shows us how far we have to go."

The Treasury Department was created in 1789, and until Yellen only white men had led it.

Chari said "it's an occasion we should celebrate — seeing Janet Yellen's name on currency — but I wish it weren't such a unique event for women."

Yellen's signature will appear alongside the name of U.S. Treasurer Lynn Malerba, the first Native American in the role. The bills are expected to be delivered to the Federal Reserve in December and will be in circulation next year.

Yellen says of the moment: "This is really not about me or Treasurer Malerba. To me, these notes represent the hard, ongoing work of the Treasury Department to strengthen our economy and advance our economic standing around the world."

Trump blowback could carry less bite in 2024 for some in GOP

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Donald Trump's attacks on fellow Republican David McCormick contributed to the former hedge fund manager's loss in Pennsylvania's Senate primary. Now, as McCormick considers running again for the Senate, Trump's derision may not be such a liability.

While McCormick, 57, has not said whether he will challenge three-term Democratic Sen. Bob Casey in 2024, he is taking steps signaling a campaign may be in the works, including attending recent receptions with influential GOP strategists and donors. McCormick also plans to publish a book in March — "Superpower in Peril: A Battle Plan to Renew America" — that could raise his profile.

He would be running in what could be a much different political environment.

Trump dominated the GOP primaries this year, wielding the power of his endorsement to lift his preferred candidates to the party nomination. But many of those contenders, including Mehmet Oz in Pennsylvania, lost in the general election. The latest was Herschel Walker, whose defeat on Tuesday in Georgia gave Democrats 51 of the Senate's 100 seats.

Trump is now facing blame from some Republicans for contributing to the party's midterm shortcomings, and that could open room for McCormick and others without worrying about blowback from the former president.

McCormick "hasn't come to any definitive conclusion even though we've tried to encourage him to run," said Christine Toretta, the GOP's national committeewoman from Pennsylvania. "I think he's a fabulous candidate and I would love to see him run."

McCormick did not respond to a request for an interview.

Flipping a Senate seat in one of the most competitive states won't be easy.

Casey, 62, has not said whether he will seek reelection. He has never won a race for Senate by fewer than 9 percentage points and, as the son of a former two-term governor and someone who has run statewide seven times, is an institution in Pennsylvania politics.

The 2024 race in the closely contested state also could be influenced by the parties' choice of presidential nominees that year.

Some Republicans expect that the Senate field will be frozen until McCormick makes up his mind. He was the establishment favorite in the party's seven-way primary in May that he lost by fewer than 1,000 votes to Oz.

McCormick is a West Point graduate who was awarded a Bronze Star for service in the Gulf War, got a doctorate from Princeton University, became a tech entrepreneur and served at the highest levels in President George W. Bush's administration before running the world's largest hedge fund.

And he's worth nine figures.

"With his resources, the party would be foolish to actively recruit someone to go against him," said Vince Galko, a Republican campaign strategist based in northeastern Pennsylvania. "He checks most boxes

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 30 of 88

Republicans care about.”

Over the weekend, McCormick was seemingly everywhere at the Pennsylvania Society, an annual cluster of dinners, receptions, fundraisers and get-togethers for Pennsylvania’s social and political elite in New York City. McCormick attended a reception hosted by Toretta and several events held by prominent donors and organizations.

One other name coming up in Republican circles as a potential Senate candidate is the elected state treasurer, Stacy Garrity, who campaigned hard for fellow Republicans on the ticket in 2022. Garrity didn’t return a request for comment.

Perhaps an equally big problem as Casey for McCormick — or any other Republican candidate — is the GOP’s embarrassing performance in this past election.

Finger-pointing is following GOP defeats in the races for senator, governor and three toss-up congressional districts, and its loss of the state House majority. Oz lost by 5 percentage points to Democrat John Fetterman, while the party’s nominee for governor, Doug Mastriano, lost by 15 points to Democrat Josh Shapiro.

Party leaders now are warning that the GOP must end an aversion among its voters to voting by mail, fueled by Trump’s baseless claims that such voting is rife with fraud.

They also say the party must be firm about endorsing in primaries to weed out weak general election candidates and avoid bruising primaries — a prospect sure to benefit McCormick.

And after GOP candidates once again lost vast swaths of Pennsylvania’s heavily populated suburbs, there is talk anew that the party must do a better job countering Democrats’ ideas and communicating their own to moderate voters.

That must be fixed before 2024 if a GOP candidate is to be successful, said Sam DeMarco, a McCormick supporter and GOP chairman in heavily populated Allegheny County.

Still, it’s not clear that McCormick can capture the GOP’s primary electorate.

In this year’s primary campaign, McCormick tapped deep connections across the world of finance, politics and government to get support for his campaign and was the choice of many in the establishment. He was wealthy enough to pay for his own TV ads, spending \$14 million of his own money, and was backed by a super political action committee spending millions more.

To try to endear himself to working-class primary voters, his campaign put up ads of McCormick shooting guns, riding a motorcycle and reminiscing in a bar about scoring touchdowns as a high school athlete.

But McCormick was attacked by primary rivals that he was a carpetbagging political opportunist trying to buy the seat after living the previous 12 years in Connecticut. He also drew criticism for being weak on China after running a hedge fund notable for its sizable portfolio that catered to Chinese investors investing in China.

In the end, McCormick was not the choice of many of the party’s farthest-right voters.

And he was not the choice of Trump, who endorsed Oz and attacked McCormick as the “candidate of special interests and globalists and the Washington establishment.”

If Trump is on the ballot in 2024, McCormick will have to share the campaign trail with a fellow Republican who tried to defeat him and who continues to peddle baseless claims about how the 2020 election was stolen from him — claims that party leaders want to put behind them.

For a party that just went through a difficult election year in Pennsylvania, it’s certainly not too early to start talking about 2024, said Keith Rothfus, a former congressman who spoke with McCormick recently. He said candidates, even ones as wealthy as McCormick, should start talking to donors now and building a network of people who will give to their campaign and support them.

It’s also important for Republicans to start early in Pennsylvania, where Democrats have been winning most statewide races and hold a slight voter registration advantage.

“Pennsylvania is not a purple-red state, it’s purple at best for Republicans,” Rothfus said. “A Republican can win, but you pretty much have to run a flawless campaign and you pretty much have to do everything right.”

China's looser anti-COVID measures met with relief, caution

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — People across China reacted with relief and caution Thursday to the dramatic government decision to loosen some of the world's most severe COVID-19 restrictions.

For the first time in months, Jenny Jian hit the gym in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou without being required to scan the "health code" on her smartphone, part of a nationwide system that tracks where hundreds of millions of people go.

Elsewhere, virus tests no longer were required to enter many public places under changes announced Wednesday that followed nationwide protests against restrictions that have confined millions of families to their homes. Schools in areas without outbreaks were ordered to reopen.

"It was implemented very quickly," said Jian, a 28-year-old resident of the southern city of Guangzhou. "But policy is one thing. The main thing is to see what the experience is when I step out the door."

The changes are in line with the government's promise to make restrictions less burdensome while still trying to contain the virus. While it's not clear if the new rules are a direct response to the protests, they address some of the most pressing issues that drove people on the streets.

The state crackdown on the demonstrations was swift, if largely out of sight, and the flash of public anger faded from view even before the changes were announced. For now, it's unclear whether more protests will flare given a quickly changing situation.

Among the most significant changes announced was that people who test positive for COVID-19 but show mild or no symptoms can now stay at home — a 180-degree turn from the previous policy, which sent all infected people to government field hospitals that became notorious for overcrowding and poor food and hygiene.

Chinese officials who spent three years warning the public about COVID-19's dangers have also begun to talk about it as less threatening — a possible effort to prepare for living with the virus, as many other nations have done. On Thursday, official messaging particularly emphasized the point, with several state media outlets sharing a lengthy explainer that noted the virus is here to stay.

"The past three years have made us not want to come in contact with the virus ... but actually in human society, there are thousands of microorganisms," a team working for prominent government doctor Zhang Wenhong wrote. "Inadvertently, every year we will get sick briefly because we've been infected by several of these."

Still, experts were careful to underscore this was not the end of COVID-19 containment.

"It is not that we are going to lie flat. Precision prevention must be still adhered to," said Yu Changping, a doctor in the department of respiratory medicine at the People's Hospital of Wuhan University. "The opening is an irreversible trend in the future because most people have been vaccinated and there has been a lower number of serious illnesses."

While outside experts have increasingly criticized China's containment policy as unsustainable, they have also warned that the country will now face a challenging first wave, as the loosened measures will no doubt fuel an increase of cases. That could be particularly difficult because many elderly people are not vaccinated and the country's strict policies have meant few people have natural immunity against the virus.

"Every country in experiencing their first wave will face chaos, especially in medical capacity, and a squeeze on medical resources," said Wang Pi-sheng, Taiwan's head of COVID-19 response. Wang said Taiwanese living in China could come home for medical treatment, especially if they're elderly or at high risk.

Bracing for the possibility of getting infected, people in the southwestern city of Chongqing rushed to buy cold and fever medicine, in line with government advice. In Beijing, some pharmacies ran out of the drugs.

Even the possibility of buying such medicine was remarkable, as the new rules relaxed restrictions on them. During the height of the pandemic, such over-the-counter medications could only be purchased through a lengthy application process and just visiting a pharmacy risked triggering the health code smartphone app.

But after three years of continually changing restrictions, many were cautious about rejoicing too early,

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 32 of 88

wondering how the new measures would be carried out.

"All the policies are there, but when it gets to the local level, when it gets to the sub-district level, your neighborhood, it's a complete mess," said 65-year-old Yang Guangwei, a retiree who lives in Beijing.

The new measures also mandate fewer PCR tests, noting they must be targeted at those in high-risk industries and not entire districts. At the height of some lockdowns, many cities carried out daily tests. In recent months, Beijing and Shanghai residents had to take one every two or three days just to be able to move around the city.

One Beijing resident who gave only his family name, Qian, out of concern for discussing government policy, noted that testing is still required to access some places.

"They say don't test, but the workplace still requires it. That's contradictory," Qian said of his own experience.

Underneath the official announcement of rollbacks posted on social media by state broadcaster CCTV, users expressed skepticism and noted that uncertainties abound.

One user asked if universities, many of which had prevented students from entering and leaving freely in the past few years, would return to normal. Others wondered whether certain cities would get rid of their quarantine-upon-arrival measures, as mandated in the national policies announced Wednesday.

But some expressed hope that the measures would open up new possibilities, like travel, which has been severely curtailed.

New York Times journalists, other workers on 24-hour strike

By ALEXANDRA OLSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Hundreds of journalists and other employees at The New York Times began a 24-hour walkout Thursday, the first strike of its kind at the newspaper in more than 40 years.

Newsroom employees and other members of The NewsGuild of New York say they are fed up with bargaining that has dragged on since their last contract expired in March 2021. The union announced last week that more than 1,100 employees would stage a 24-hour work stoppage starting at 12:01 a.m. Thursday unless the two sides reach a contract deal.

The NewsGuild tweeted Thursday morning that workers, "are now officially on work stoppage, the first of this scale at the company in 4 decades. It's never an easy decision to refuse to do work you love, but our members are willing to do what it takes to win a better newsroom for all."

Negotiations took place Tuesday and some of Wednesday, but the sides remained far apart on issues including wage increases and remote-work policies.

On Wednesday evening the union said via Twitter that a deal had not been reached and the walkout was happening. "We were ready to work for as long as it took to reach a fair deal," it said, "but management walked away from the table with five hours to go."

"We know what we're worth," the union added.

But New York Times spokesperson Danielle Rhoades Ha said in a statement that they were still in negotiations when they were told that the strike was happening.

"It is disappointing that they are taking such an extreme action when we are not at an impasse," she said.

It was unclear how Thursday's coverage would be affected, but the strike's supporters include members of the fast-paced live-news desk, which covers breaking news for the digital paper. Employees were planning a rally for that afternoon outside the newspaper's offices near Times Square.

Rhoades Ha told The Associated Press the company has "solid plans in place" to continue producing content, including relying on international reporters and other journalists who are not union members.

In a note sent to guild-represented staff Tuesday night, Deputy Managing Editor Cliff Levy called the planned strike "puzzling" and "an unsettling moment in negotiations over a new contract." He said it would be the first strike by the bargaining unit since 1981 and "comes despite intensifying efforts by the company to make progress."

But in a letter signed by more than 1,000 employees, the NewsGuild said management has been "drag-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 33 of 88

ging its feet" bargaining for nearly two years and "time is running out to reach a fair contract" by the end of the year.

The NewsGuild also said the company told employees planning to strike they would not get paid for the duration of the walkout. Members were also asked to work extra hours get work done ahead of the strike, according to the union.

The New York Times has seen other, shorter walkouts in recent years, including a half-day protest in August by a new union representing technology workers who claimed unfair labor practices.

In one breakthrough that both sides called significant, the company backed off its proposal to replace the existing adjustable pension plan with an enhanced 401 (k) retirement plan. The Times offered instead to let the union choose between the two. The company also agreed to expand fertility treatment benefits.

Levy said the company has also offered to raise wages by 5.5% upon ratification of the contract, followed by 3% hikes in 2023 and 2024. That would be an increase from the 2.2% annual increases in the expired contract.

Stacy Cowley, a finance reporter and union representative, said the union is seeking 10% pay raises at ratification, which she said would make up for raises not received over the past two years.

She also said the union wants the contract to guarantee employees the option to work remotely some of the time, if their roles allow for it, but the company wants the right to recall workers to the office full time. Cowley said the Times has required its staff to be in office three days a week but many have been showing up less often in an informal protest.

UK royals brace as Harry-Meghan doc promises 'full truth'

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's monarchy braced for more bombshells to be lobbed over the palace gates Thursday as Netflix released the first three episodes of a series that promises to tell the "full truth" about Prince Harry and Meghan's estrangement from the royal family.

Promoted with two dramatically edited trailers that hinted at racism and a "war against Meghan," the series "Harry & Meghan" is the couple's latest effort to tell the world why they walked away from royal life and moved to Southern California almost three years ago. It is expected to expand on criticism of the royal family and British media delivered in a series of interviews over the past 18 months.

Netflix released the first three hour-long episodes on Thursday, with three more due Dec. 15. The documentary includes video diaries recorded by Meghan and Harry — apparently on their phones — in March 2020, amid the couple's acrimonious split from the royal family and move to the United States.

Harry says in the footage that it's "my duty to uncover the exploitation and bribery" that happens in British media.

"No one knows the full truth," Harry adds. "We know the full truth."

In the documentary, Harry recalls the intense media interest in his late mother, Princess Diana, that clouded his childhood, and says: "To see another woman in my life who I loved go through this feeding frenzy — that's hard."

Harry and Meghan recount how they initially tried to follow palace advice to maintain silence about media coverage, even when they saw the treatment of the biracial Meghan as racist.

Harry said that other members of the royal family thought "everything that she was being put through, they had been put through as well," and questioned why Meghan should be protected.

"I said 'the difference here is the race element,'" Harry said.

A title at the beginning of the series says the royal family declined to comment.

The series comes at a crucial moment for the monarchy as King Charles III tries to show that the institution still has a role to play after the death of Queen Elizabeth II, whose personal popularity dampened criticism of the crown during her 70-year reign. Charles is making the case that the House of Windsor can help unite an increasingly diverse nation by using the early days of his reign to meet with many of the ethnic groups and faiths that make up modern Britain.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 34 of 88

Harry's 2018 marriage to the former Meghan Markle, a biracial American actress, was once seen as boosting the royal family's effort to move into the 21st century, making it more representative of a multicultural nation. But the fairy tale, which began with a star-studded ceremony at Windsor Castle, soon soured amid stories that Meghan was self-centered and bullied her staff.

Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, stepped back from royal duties and moved to California, alleging racist attacks by Britain's tabloid media. Harry's criticism of the media was tinged with anger over the way the press treated his mother, Princess Diana, who died in a car accident in 1997 while being followed by photographers. The couple's new life in America has been funded by lucrative contracts with Netflix and Spotify.

Race became a central issue for the monarchy following Harry and Meghan's interview with American talk show host Oprah Winfrey in March 2021. Meghan alleged that before their first child was born, a member of the royal family commented on how dark the baby's skin might be.

Prince William, the heir to the throne and Harry's older brother, defended the royal family after the interview, telling reporters, "We're very much not a racist family."

But Buckingham Palace faced renewed allegations of racism only last week when a Black advocate for survivors of domestic abuse said a senior member of the royal household interrogated her about her origins during a reception at the palace. Coverage of the issue filled British media, overshadowing William and his wife Kate's much-anticipated visit to Boston, which the palace had hoped would highlight their environmental credentials.

Media attention was also diverted by Netflix's decision to release the first trailer for "Harry & Meghan" in the middle of the trip.

The streaming giant has promised an "unprecedented and in-depth documentary series" in which Harry and Meghan "share the other side of their high-profile love story."

The program will be watched carefully in the U.K., where even the teasers were criticized for offering misleading images to back up the emotive narration alleging misogyny, unfair media treatment and racism.

In one section of the footage, clips of paparazzi are spliced together with old footage of Princess Diana being followed by the media as Harry says in a voiceover: "The pain and suffering of women marrying into this institution, this feeding frenzy. ... I was terrified, I didn't want history to repeat itself."

However, one of the clips used to illustrate his words appears to show reporters and photographers waiting for TV star Katie Price arriving outside Crawley Magistrates Court, Sky News reported.

The second trailer also includes an indictment of the way palace officials use the press, which Harry described as a "dirty game."

"There's a hierarchy of the family," Harry says, over an image of the royal family standing on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. "You know, there's leaking, but there's also planting of stories."

That is followed by a picture of a photographer perched on another balcony as Harry and Meghan walk with their young son Archie down below. While the scene suggests the photographer was covertly snapping pictures of a private moment, the photo actually shows an accredited press photographer who was covering the couple's meeting with Desmond Tutu in 2019.

Whatever the series reveals, palace officials hope to deflect the storm by portraying William and Kate as forward-looking young royals who are tackling difficult issues such as climate change and early childhood education, in contrast to Harry and Meghan, who are described by critics as merely celebrities selling their story to the media.

The BBC and the Daily Telegraph, one of Britain's most influential newspapers, picked up on this theme in their coverage of William and Kate's three-day trip to Boston, where they handed out environmental prizes, met with anti-violence campaigners and went to a basketball game.

"While Prince Harry and Meghan continued to paint themselves as victims, heads in hands, tearing their hair out at the unfairness of it all, the Prince and Princess were simply getting on with the job," the Telegraph wrote.

Iran executes first known prisoner arrested in protests

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran said Thursday it executed a prisoner convicted for a crime allegedly committed during the country's ongoing nationwide protests, the first such death penalty carried out by Tehran.

The execution comes as other detainees also face the possibility of the death penalty for their involvement in the protests, which began in mid-September, first as an outcry against Iran's morality police. The protests have since expanded into one of the most serious challenges to Iran's theocracy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Activists warn that others could also be put to death in the near future, saying that at least a dozen people so far have received death sentences over their involvement in the demonstrations.

The "execution of #MohsenShekari must be met with STRONG reactions otherwise we will be facing daily executions of protesters," wrote Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, the director of the Oslo-based activist group Iran Human Rights. "This execution must have rapid practical consequences internationally."

Iran's Mizan news agency reported the execution of the man, identified as Mohsen Shekari. It accused the man of blocking a street in Tehran and attacking a member of the security forces with a machete. The member of the forces required stitches for his wounds, the agency said.

The Mizan report also alleged that Shekari said he had been offered money by an acquaintance to attack the security forces. Iran's government for months has been trying to allege — without offering evidence — that foreign countries have fomented the unrest in the country, rather than Iranian citizens angry over the collapse of the country's finances, heavy-handed policing and the nation's other woes.

Mizan said Shekari had been arrested on Sept. 25, then convicted on Nov. 20 on the charge of "moharebeh," a Farsi word meaning "waging war against God." That charge has been levied against others in the decades since 1979 and carries the death penalty. Mizan said an appeal by Shekari's lawyer against the sentence had failed before his execution.

The Mizan news agency, run by the country's judiciary, said Shekari had been convicted in Tehran's Revolutionary Court, which typically holds closed-door cases that have been internationally criticized for not allowing those on trial to pick their own lawyers or even see the evidence against them.

After his execution, Iranian state television aired a heavily edited package showing the courtroom and parts of Shekari's trial, presided over by Judge Abolghassem Salavati.

Salavati faces U.S. sanctions for overseeing cases "in which journalists, attorneys, political activists and members of Iran's ethnic and religious minority groups were penalized for exercising their freedom of expression and assembly and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, lashes and even execution," according to the U.S. Treasury.

Iran has been rocked by protests since the Sept. 16 death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who died after being detained by the country's morality police. At least 475 people have been killed in the demonstrations amid a heavy-handed security crackdown, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran, a group that's been monitoring the protests since they began. Over 18,000 have been detained by authorities.

Iran is one of the world's top executioners. It typically executes prisoners by hanging. Already, Amnesty International said it obtained a document signed by one senior Iranian police commander asking an execution for one prisoner be "completed 'in the shortest possible time' and that his death sentence be carried out in public as 'a heart-warming gesture towards the security forces.'"

'God's plan': Family flees amid catastrophic Nigeria floods

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

TABAWA, Nigeria (AP) — When the floodwaters reached Aisha Ali's hut made of woven straw mats and raffia palms, she packed up what belongings she could and set off on foot with her eight youngest children.

Ali, 40, knew she and her family might never see their home again. In this remote village—in the Gashua

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 36 of 88

part of Yobe state, a largely agricultural area in northeast Nigeria — poor infrastructure means annual flooding of excess water from the local river. Most villagers pay little attention to warning signs as the water rises. Dealing with floods is a way of life.

But this year, heavy rains inundated Nigeria and neighboring countries in flooding the region hadn't seen in at least a decade, due in large part to climate change. Ali and her husband knew this time was different. The water reached their home and started rising in the hut.

Ali and the children walked down a narrow, water-logged road. Her brother's cart, pulled by cows, came up behind them. He agreed to take some of the children. Not all would fit.

Ali made a quick calculation. She figured the cart could get some of them to safety faster. She told five of her kids to get onboard. She and the others would follow by foot.

Nine-year-old twins Hassana and Husseina climbed in, with their headscarf and traditional green dresses flowing to their toes. Younger sisters Hauwa, 8, and Amina, 5, followed. So did 7-year-old brother Gambo.

They chattered with excitement — a cart ride was a rare outing, and they were too young to understand the dangers of the water around them. Hassana smiled, glad Husseina was beside her. The twins were inseparable, even sharing a sleeping mat each night. Hassana was more reserved, and Husseina always stuck up for her.

Ali assured her family they'd all be reunited soon. They said their farewells, and Ali continued down the road with three of her kids, ages 15, 6 and 3. The cart passed them and eventually disappeared from sight.

The flooding that began in June has become the deadliest in more than a decade, according to authorities of this West African nation. More than 600 have been killed. Thousands of homes are destroyed, along with farmland. More than 1.3 million people have been displaced. Lives and livelihoods are upended.

The environmental crisis has unfolded alongside a humanitarian one: a decade-long conflict with roots in an extremist-pushed insurgency against the government. Violent attacks are common, especially in the north where the Islamic State-backed extremists now collaborate with armed groups of former herds-men fighting communities over access to water and land. Flooding has made delivery of aid and supplies increasingly difficult.

Officials blame the floods on the release of excess water from Lagdo dam in Cameroon and higher-than-normal rainfall. No matter the cause, the effect in villages such as Tabawa has been widespread.

Families here already struggled. Ali, her husband and children received scant food aid from the local government. Power, potable water and passable roads were luxuries.

Authorities report that they've distributed relief items to affected families and have tried to evacuate some to displacement camps. But no such camps or efforts exist in Tabawa, population 1,000, or its surrounding towns. Those who flee must do so on their own, to displacement camps tens of miles away.

For Ali, it meant taking her family from the only home they've ever known.

"While the flood was trying to destroy things, we were trying to save ourselves," she said.

Buba Mobe, 25, navigated his cart gingerly. The water had been waist-high when the children left Tabawa and was getting higher. Stretches of low-lying road deepened the water in some pockets. More than 2 miles (4 kilometers) after passing Mobe picked them up, the cows came upon the deepest stretch yet.

The cart tumbled and toppled over, spilling the children onto road and into the floodwaters.

They struggled to keep their heads above water. Mobe tried to save those closest to him, first plucking up Husseina and dropping her into a shallower area. He rushed back to get the others, but they'd disappeared underwater. He searched frantically but couldn't see any movement in the water to trace them.

Mobe feared the worst — that four of the five kids his sister had entrusted him with were gone. Still, he rushed to find other villagers to aid in his search. By the time he returned with help, it was too late.

"When we found their bodies, they were already swollen," Buba said.

Eventually Ali and her other children reached the scene. Husseina ran and clung to her mother. Ali found herself in shock, and all broke down in tears.

"I went to the dead bodies and touched their heads," Ali remembers. "I rubbed their heads and thanked

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 37 of 88

God for his mercies.”

She never imagined that the children in the cart would be in more danger than those walking on the road. But she took it as God’s will. “There was nothing I could do,” she said.

The villagers carried the bodies of Hassana, Hauwa, Amina and Gambo back to Tabawa.

The funeral was solemn and quick. Dozens of villagers gathered at the farmland where the children’s bodies were buried in small graves. Days of praying at the mosque followed.

In the weeks after her children’s deaths, Ali was not able to visit their graves, following the rules of the village’s 40-day mourning period.

“I try to remember them, especially at night, but there’s nothing much left,” she said, with their clothes and most belongings also taken by floodwaters.

The family’s hut was destroyed, so they no longer live in Tabawa, where the children are buried. Their new home is in Darayami village, 7 miles (11 kilometers) away. Like many families scattered across new lands in search of better living conditions, Ali and her relatives have no connection to this place — it’s simply where they could find room to start over. They hope to return to Tabawa someday, but for now they focus on survival.

Ali’s husband suffers from hypertension; he can’t stand for long, and his body shakes. He’s unable to work, and Ali believes his health has taken a turn for the worse since his children died.

The lives of their six surviving children are also forever changed. Husseina and her twin were once the life of their home. Without Hassana, she spends her days in a somber mood, with no desire to play. Nights can be harder, as she tries to sleep alone.

Husseina has only her brothers at home most of the time — 6-year-old Muhammad and 3-year-old Umaru. The family’s three eldest children still live at home but spend much of their days working in the fields and on farmlands, for a daily wage of \$2 or less.

The eldest sister, a 17-year-old who once taught her younger siblings their Islamic lessons, is divorced and back at home after a short-lived marriage to a man she barely knew. Still, Ali hopes her 15-year-old daughter will marry soon — there are too many mouths to feed, and early marriage is a widely accepted part of their religion and culture.

The family’s new hut is barely furnished. The children play barefoot on thick brown soil. The older ones pick leftovers from the farms where they work so the family can get by.

“No food, no shelter, no place to even sleep well,” Ali said.

But she clings to her faith. She holds Husseina tightly to her belly. “It is all God’s plan,” Ali tells her as they begin yet again to cry.

Lebanese banks battered by meltdown struggle to survive

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Lebanon’s once burgeoning banking sector has been hard hit by the country’s historic economic meltdown. It has suffered staggering losses worth tens of billions of dollars and many of the small nation’s lenders now face possible closures or mergers.

Yet bankers have been resisting attempts to make their shareholders assume responsibility for those losses and instead have been trying to shift the burden to the government or even their own depositors. The country’s political class, blamed for decades of corruption and mismanagement that led to the meltdown, has also resisted reforms.

Restructuring the banking sector is a key demand of the International Monetary Fund to start getting Lebanon out of its paralyzing financial crisis. The proposed IMF reforms will likely force most of the country’s 46 banks — a huge number for a nation of 5 million people — to close down or merge.

In the years after Lebanon’s 15-year civil war ended in 1990, the banking sector was the crown jewel of the country’s economy, offering high interest rates that lured in investments and deposits from around the world.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 38 of 88

Most of those depositors have now lost access to their savings after the country's lenders for years made risky investments by buying Lebanese treasury bills despite widespread corruption and overspending by the country's political class. These practices helped lead to the economic crisis that started in October 2019.

Today, banks in Lebanon neither give loans nor take new deposits, and they return to people a small fraction of their savings in U.S. dollars at an exchange rate that is far lower than market value.

"They have become zombie banks," says financial adviser Michel Kozah, who writes a financial column for a Lebanese newspaper.

Despite the banks' informal capital controls, billions of dollars are estimated to have been laundered out of the country by major political and financial officials, according to local reports.

In recent months, angry depositors have been storming bank branches around Lebanon to get their trapped savings by force, leading to confrontations with bank employees, who have also been victims of the meltdown.

Since the crisis began, the number of bank employees dropped by one-third, to just under 16,500 and one in five branches has closed.

Jinane Hayek, who lost her job as a branch manager at one of the largest banks in the country two years ago, said she understands the pain of the depositors, but that the bank branches are constrained by the current economic conditions.

"There are some people who cannot afford to eat because their money is stuck in the bank," she said at the bakery she opened after her layoff in the mountain town of Bekfaya, adding that she is happy to be far from the fray.

The future of banks is unclear. A tentative agreement between the IMF and the Lebanese government, reached in April, called for an "externally assisted bank-by-bank evaluation for the 14 largest banks."

But so far nothing has been done by either the government or the lenders. The banking sector has mounted a vigorous opposition to proposed measures that would put the system's losses on the shoulders of shareholders rather than ordinary depositors.

A proposed government economic recovery plan released in September values the financial sector's losses at about \$72 billion, mostly at the central bank. The plan noted that the huge scale of the losses means that the central bank cannot give back the banks most of their money and the banks cannot return most of the money to depositors.

The World Bank said in a recent report that the losses are more than three times the GDP of 2021, making a bailout impossible because there aren't enough public funds. The best solution is "a bail-in (that) makes large creditors and shareholders bear the main cost of bank restructuring" rather than small depositors, the report said.

Banks have been opposed to a bail-in solution, suggesting that state assets should be sold or invested to make up for the losses on the long-term.

Nassib Ghobril, chief economist at Byblos Bank, one of Lebanon's largest lenders, accused the government of a "complete abdication of responsibility."

He said that while the banking sector was attracting foreign currency from around the world, the government failed to implement any structural reforms and squandered the funds. He said a 2017 decision to increase civil service salaries, initially estimated at \$800 million, ended up costing three times as much. It doubled the fiscal deficit in one year and contributed to the financial crisis, he said.

The banks were also negatively affected by the government's decision to default on its foreign debt in March 2020, he said.

Kozah, the financial columnist, said that a solution to covering the losses is still possible by having an auditing firm look into accounts and return the money that was illicitly transferred outside the country by influential people after the crisis began, as well as attempting to separate good banks from bad ones.

Meanwhile, there has been little progress in talks with the IMF over the proposed reforms.

In October, Lebanon's parliament approved amendments to a banking secrecy law, another IMF demand, but advocacy groups say the amendments are not enough. The central bank still uses several exchange

rates at a time when the IMF has been pressing for unifying them to one rate.

Progress on other proposed measures is now on hold amid a power vacuum in the presidency and the Cabinet.

Deputy Prime Minister Saadeh Shami, who is leading the talks with the IMF, said recently that all deposits worth \$100,000 and less will be returned to depositors while those with larger amounts will be compensated in the long term through a sovereign fund.

"There is no fair plan for all depositors," Shami acknowledged.

Caretaker Economy Minister Amin Salam said that whenever the government is discussing the distribution of losses and responsibilities, there is a push back from the banks.

The government is aware that it "needs to save the banking sector, because ... without a banking sector, we will not be able to get the economy standing back on its feet."

Scrutiny of Ukraine church draws praise, fear of overreach

By PETER SMITH and VASILISA STEPANENKO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — After its searches of holy sites belonging to Ukraine's historic Orthodox church, the nation's security agency posted photos of evidence it recovered — including rubles, Russian passports and leaflets with messages from the Moscow patriarch.

Supporters and detractors of the church debate whether such items are innocuous — or increase suspicions the church is a nest of pro-Russian propaganda and intelligence-gathering.

What's unambiguous are other photos shared by the agency, known as the SBU, posted as recently as Wednesday — some showing an armed Ukrainian officer standing outside a church building, others showing brawny, camouflaged officers questioning clerics in long beards and cassocks.

They illustrate the increased pressure the Ukrainian government is putting on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, with its centuries-old ties to Moscow, as the brutal Russian invasion slogs into the 10th month of a war that has had religious dimensions from the start.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday announced measures primarily targeting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is one of two major Orthodox churches in Ukraine following a 2019 schism. Even though the UOC declared independence from Moscow in May, such a declaration is easier spoken than accomplished amid the complexities of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Besides, many Ukrainians don't believe it's really free from Moscow.

Zelenskyy called for legislation that would forbid "religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation to operate in Ukraine."

He also wants a review of the "canonical" connection between the UOC and the Moscow Patriarchate — the center of the Russian Orthodox Church — and of the status of the revered, millennium-old Pechersk-Lavra monastery in Kyiv, now government-owned but largely used by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The government also placed sanctions on its abbot, another wealthy churchman and several bishops in Russia or Russian-held parts of Ukraine.

"We will ensure, in particular, spiritual independence," Zelenskyy said. "We will never allow anyone to build an empire inside the Ukrainian soul."

The matter is testing whether the young republic can survive Russia's attacks -- and as a pluralistic state respecting freedom of conscience. It also raises the stakes as the two rival Orthodox churches vie for the loyalties of the nation's majority Orthodox population and for church properties.

Prominent Ukrainian Orthodox Church leaders say it has loyally supported Ukraine from the start of the war and that a government crackdown will only hand a propaganda coup to the Russians, who claim to be defending Ukraine's Orthodox against persecution.

"It is national suicide when they slander and try to 'ban' a part of their own people," said the Rev. Mykolay Danylevich, who has often served as a Ukrainian Orthodox Church spokesman.

But a bishop in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine — the similarly named rival church, with no ties to Moscow — supported Zelensky's measures.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 40 of 88

"Maybe it is hard psychologically that this is happening now in monasteries and temples," said Metropolitan Oleksandr of the Transfiguration of Jesus Orthodox Cathedral in Kyiv. He spoke to The Associated Press by candlelight as portraits of church elders looked on, amid controlled power outages.

"But I think it is better that there will be searches than some people who help guide enemy missiles."

The Biden administration says it supports Ukraine's self-defense while expecting it to comply with international law on protecting freedom of religion.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been loyal to the Moscow patriarch since the 17th century.

In 2019, the rival Orthodox Church of Ukraine received recognition from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. But Moscow's and most other Orthodox patriarchs refused to accept that designation.

Russia's February invasion underscored the alliance between President Vladimir Putin and Moscow Patriarch Kirill, who said Russia was defending Ukrainians from Western liberalism and its "gay parades."

From the start, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church denounced the invasion and such justifications, backing Ukraine. In May, the church declared its own "self-sufficiency and independence" from Moscow.

While that sounds definitive, the church didn't declare itself "autocephalous" -- the Orthodox gold standard of independence. That was in part to maintain ties with other countries' Orthodox churches that hadn't agreed to such a status. The UOC did give Moscow a liturgical cold shoulder by dropping the commemoration of Kirill as its leader in public worship and blessing its own sacramental oil rather than use Moscow's supply.

These acts represent "an enormous step" in the Orthodox world even if they seem arcane, said Elizabeth Prodromou, a fellow for Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center.

Even so, some see the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as still aligned with Moscow and the "Russian world" concept of political and spiritual unity of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians.

"What the people want is for the church to make very clear who they are, who they are for," said Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, a Ukraine native and professor of ecclesiology, international relations and ecumenism at Sankt Ignatios College, University College Stockholm.

Ukraine's counter-intelligence service, known as the SBU, searched the landmark Pechersk Lavra complex last month, citing an incident in which "songs praising the 'Russian world' were sung."

The SBU said it searched 350 religious sites across Ukraine last month and more this week. It alleged the searches yielded pro-Russian materials, and accused a bishop of pro-Russia messaging. On Wednesday, it reported that a UOC priest from Lysychansk was sentenced to 12 years for tipping off Russian invaders to Ukrainian troop positions.

While the evidence shows some within the UOC remain pro-Moscow, the church also has publicly disagreed with Kirill's position, Prodromou said.

Any enforcement actions need to be transparent and respect the religious liberty guaranteed in Ukraine's constitution, said Prodromou, a former vice chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Even if there are pro-Russian elements in the church, "it still raises the question of what is to be done and whether this is a prudent step by the Ukrainian government," she said, noting that in pluralistic Ukraine, a reduction of religious liberty for one group would be worrying for others.

"This is not only an Orthodox question. Other communities will be watching: Protestants, Greek Catholics, Jews, Muslims" as well as the OCU.

The UOC is being squeezed by all sides -- from Russians claiming the church as their own to Ukrainians who see the OCU as Ukraine's true church, said John Burgess, a Pittsburgh Theological Seminary professor and author of "Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia."

Zelenskyy, too, is in a tight spot, Burgess said: "There's such anti-Russian sentiment that (with) anything that can be tainted as somehow pro-Russian, he gets a lot of pressure to do something about it."

But Prodromou says treating the entire UOC as disloyal "would be a mistake based on the empirical evidence and would also be imprudent because it would undermine the possibility of full reconciliation" between the two Orthodox churches.

EXPLAINER: China's relaxed 'zero-COVID' brings big changes

BEIJING (AP) — In a move that caught many by surprise, China announced a potentially major easing of its rigid "zero-COVID" restrictions, without formally abandoning the policy altogether.

It's not clear what exactly prompted the move, although it follows the largest show of public dissent against the ruling Communist Party in more than 30 years by residents fed up with constant testing, quarantines, travel restrictions, rolling lockdowns and business closures.

Here's a look at the changes known as the "New Ten Requirements" announced on Wednesday.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHANGES?

Among the most significant changes is one that allows people who test positive for COVID-19 but show no or only mild symptoms to recuperate at home rather than being forced into one of the government field hospitals that have become notorious for overcrowding, lights that stay on 24 hours and poor food and hygiene.

Where cases are discovered, lockdowns will be limited to specific apartment floors or buildings. Before, such lockdowns would encompass entire communities, districts and even cities. Widespread lockdowns were a significant factor behind protests in the spring in Shanghai and other cities.

Authorities have reduced the requirement to produce a "health code" on a smartphone app that tracks virus testing and the user's proximity to areas deemed at high risk of infection and shows test results.

Health codes will still be required for "special places," including schools, hospitals and nursing homes. That leaves considerable ambiguity. Restaurants in Shanghai and Beijing were still requiring a negative test within the last 48 hours for indoor dining Thursday.

One problem with the change: Centers that provided immediate, free PCR testing with results available overnight are becoming harder and harder to find.

WHAT ELSE CHANGED?

Other relaxations are more subtle but still significant, like the length of lockdowns, which can only last five days if no new cases are detected. That's a major change from the open-ended lockdowns that could drag on for weeks and leave residents with no information or ability to plan ahead.

Restrictions on the sale of cold and cough medicine are also being lifted. During the height of the pandemic, such over-the-counter medications could only be purchased through a lengthy application process. While never clearly explained, the rules were thought to be aimed at those trying to cover up COVID-19 symptoms to avoid being tested and sent to quarantine. Just visiting a pharmacy risked triggering the health code smartphone app, resulting in a visit from hazmat-attired health authorities and police.

More emphasis is also being placed on providing the elderly with vaccines and booster shots, and a greater focus will be placed on members of the population who suffer from cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and other underlying factors that can increase vulnerability to COVID-19.

Local governments are also barred from suspending business and public transportation in areas not considered at risk. They are also forbidden from blocking fire exits — an apparent reference to the apartment fire in the western city of Urumqi last month that helped set off the street protests. In theory, that would prevent some of the more extreme measures taken to block people into their homes, like locking their doors from the outside, welding steel bars across passages and fencing in entire communities.

Schools without cases will be required to return to in-person classes, and emergency patients who do not have a recent negative test can no longer be barred from hospitals.

WHAT'S THE EFFECT ON CHINA'S SOCIETY, ECONOMY, POLITICS?

The new measures will likely take some time to be implemented and leave considerable wiggle room to keep some restrictions in place. Communities whose health care resources are barely adequate at the best of times will likely be the last to drop what they see as the last line of defense against potentially overwhelming outbreaks.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 42 of 88

In the cities, the effect appears to have been more immediate. Subways and busses in Beijing, Shanghai and other major cities are packed with commuters returning to the office.

But the new requirements don't address international travel. China's borders remain largely closed while the rest of the world opens up, although it did reduce the quarantine time for international arrivals from seven to five days at a designated location, followed by three days of isolation at their place of residence.

Politically, the easing of regulations may take some pressure off the regime of President Xi Jinping, who is considered China's most authoritarian leader since Mao Zedong and recently awarded himself a third five-year term in power. Xi faces no term limits and has packed the top party ranks with loyalists, but the street protests were a reminder of the limits of public patience.

WHITHER 'ZERO-COVID?'

"Zero-COVID" has been touted as Xi's success, and the party is averse to backtracking or admitting mistakes, so some have put forward the notion that China will gradually adopt an approach of "zero-COVID in name only." That would give China the authority to reimpose controls as it sees fit and punish opponents and critics from among the general public, intellectuals, the business community and even athletes.

In an editorial on the latest regulations — the ninth set released by China since the Pandemic began in late 2019 — the Communist Party newspaper Global Times struck a victorious tone and conceded no errors or overreach.

"We can say that we have come through the most difficult times," the paper said. "Nearly three years of an exceptionally difficult 'national fight against the epidemic,' countless people have made sacrifices, endured hardships and paid an effort to win this battle."

Zelenskyy quip, Trump conspiracy top 2022 notable quote list

NEW HAVEN, Conn. (AP) — A tart retort by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to a U.S. offer of help and a call by former U.S. President Donald Trump for the "termination" of parts of the Constitution top a Yale Law School librarian's list of the most notable quotations of 2022.

In February, only days after Russia invaded Ukraine, the U.S. offered to transport Zelenskyy to safety. That appeared not to sit well with him. "I need ammunition, not a ride," he shot back, a senior American intelligence official with direct knowledge of the conversation told The Associated Press.

Trump's comment in a Dec. 3 post on his Truth Social media platform was a late addition to the list compiled each year by Fred Shapiro, an associate director at the library. The former president was again repeating his lie that the 2020 election was stolen.

"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 not condone, False & Fraudulent Elections!"

The list assembled by Shapiro is a supplement to The New Yale Book of Quotations, which is edited by Shapiro and published by Yale University Press.

"The items on this list are not necessarily eloquent or admirable quotations, rather they have been picked because they are famous or important or particularly revealing of the spirit of our times," Shapiro said.

THE LIST

1. "I need ammunition, not a ride." — Zelenskyy, response to U.S. offer to transport him to safety, Feb. 26.
2. "Massive Fraud of this type and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution." — Trump, post on Truth Social network, Dec. 3.
3. "Roe was egregiously wrong from the start." — U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, writing in the court's opinion that overturned Roe v. Wade and took away women's constitutional protections for abortion, June 24.
4. "The Court reverses course today for one reason and one reason only: because the composition of this Court has changed." — U.S. Supreme Court Justices Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan,

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 43 of 88

writing in the dissenting opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*, June 24.

5. "Will Smith just smacked the s--- out of me." — Comedian Chris Rock at the Academy Awards ceremony, March 27.

6. "Jackie, are you here? Where's Jackie?" — U.S. President Joe Biden, calling out for deceased Congresswoman Jackie Walorski, White House conference on ending hunger, Sept. 28.

7. "FTX is fine. Assets are fine." — Sam Bankman-Fried, a Twitter post shortly before his cryptocurrency exchange FTX declared bankruptcy, Nov. 7.

8. "If you're the President of the United States, you can declassify just by saying 'It's declassified,' even by thinking about it." — Trump, Fox News interview, Sept. 21.

9. "The U.S. News rankings are profoundly flawed ... As a result, we will no longer participate." — Heather Gerken, Yale Law School statement on U.S. News & World Report law school rankings, Nov. 16.

10. "African American voters are voting at just as high a percentage as Americans." — U.S. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, remarks at news conference, Jan. 19.

Rapid fall from power, arrest for embattled Peru president

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO and CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — In just three tumultuous hours, President Pedro Castillo went from decreeing the dissolution of Peru's Congress to being replaced by his vice president, but the threats against his government had been building throughout his nearly 17-month presidency.

The former school teacher and center-left political novice, who won a runoff election in June 2021 by just 44,000 votes, stepped onto a no-holds-barred political battlefield in Peru, the South American country now on its sixth president in six years. By nightfall Wednesday, after a day of high political drama, prosecutors had announced Castillo was under arrest, facing charges of rebellion.

From the start, Castillo's presidency seemed destined to be short-lived, said Flavia Freidenberg, a political scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a member of the university's Latin America Political Reform Observatory.

"He is a president who took office with a very low level of support, he didn't have a political party, he had a hard time putting together a Cabinet, the Cabinet has changed constantly and there has been a constant power struggle with Congress," she said.

Castillo, a rural school teacher from an impoverished district high in the Andes, was considered a clear underdog when he joined the race to replace President Francisco Sagasti, who had been appointed by Congress in November 2020. Sagasti was the last of three heads of state Peru cycled through in one week that November.

Castillo campaigned on promises to nationalize Peru's key mining industry and rewrite the constitution, gaining support in rural Peru. But upon taking office in July 2021, Castillo immediately struggled with his Cabinet choices, a number of whom have been accused of wrongdoing.

"He didn't unify the country," said Eric Farnsworth, vice president of the Council of the Americas. "He doesn't even seem to make much of an effort along those lines."

"He didn't have much of a mandate, and so he did not promote policies somehow that were easily identifiable as for the good of the majority of the people," Farnsworth said. "Instead, he became embroiled in intrigues, corruption and battles with Congress."

The first attempt to impeach Castillo came last December. At the time, a relatively small group of opposition lawmakers cited an investigation by prosecutors into illicit financing of the governing party. To remove the president requires two-thirds of the 130 lawmakers to vote in favor. Only 46 voted in favor.

Congress tried to impeach Castillo again in March for "permanent moral incapacity," a term incorporated into Peruvian constitutional law that experts say lacks an objective definition and that Congress has used more than a half dozen times since 2017 to try to remove presidents. The effort failed, this time with only 55 votes in favor.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 44 of 88

Each time, Castillo defended himself, arguing he had done nothing wrong.

"I salute that common sense, responsibility and democracy prevailed," Castillo tweeted after the second attempt.

He benefited from the fact that the unicameral Congress was deeply divided. Castillo's party had the most seats, but with only 37, it alone could not protect him.

On Wednesday, Peru was girding itself for a third impeachment vote. Perhaps Castillo feared this time there would be enough votes to oust him.

The night before, the president said in an unusual midnight address on state television ahead of the vote that a certain sector of Congress had it out for him and that he was paying for mistakes made due to inexperience.

Shortly before noon Wednesday, Castillo went on state television and announced the dissolution of Congress. He said elections would be held to choose new lawmakers and a new constitution would be written.

Various members of his Cabinet resigned immediately. Vice President Dina Boluarte said via Twitter that the move only contributed to Peru's political crisis. The Supreme Court, Constitutional Tribunal and national ombudsman rejected it as an attempted coup.

Castillo was driven from the presidential palace through Lima's historic downtown to a police station. Hours later prosecutors announced that Castillo had been arrested on a charge of rebellion.

Two hours after his announcement, lawmakers who had ignored Castillo's decree voted to remove him. This time they had the votes: 101 in favor, six against and 10 abstentions.

At 3 p.m., Dina Boluarte, a 60-year-old lawyer, was sworn in as Peru's first female president.

Boluarte said her first order of business would be to address government corruption, ostensibly what led to Castillo's downfall. She had been expelled in January from the Marxist Free Peru party, which Castillo rode to power, for what she said was not sharing the ideas of its secretary general.

"There has been an attempted coup ... that has not found an echo in the institutions, nor in the street," Boluarte said. She called for a political truce to install a national unity government.

"What I ask for is a space, a time to rescue the country," she said.

Freidenberg, the political scientist, said Boluarte's swearing in was a hopeful sign. "It is a singular opportunity to show Peruvians women's abilities in a country that is chauvinist, misogynist, discriminatory and where women have had so much trouble trying to access government."

But Boluarte also takes office with a weak mandate and no party.

"She has to begin to govern in a way that outreaches to political opponents and also seeks to unify a coalition of supporters," said Farnsworth of the Council of the Americas. "In order to have a working government, you have to have a coalition big enough to advance policies and legislators behind you."

Hanging over the early days of her administration will be the question of what to do with Castillo. Prosecutors vowed to investigate the ex-president for allegedly rebelling against Peru's constitutional order.

In the streets, despite the tumult, only small-scale clashes erupted between protesters and riot police — outside a police station where Castillo was taken.

Farnsworth wondered whether Castillo would be put on trial or allowed to seek asylum in another country.

"What do the Peruvian people want? Will they go to the streets and protest and riot or will they give things a chance to calm down and return to some kind of normalcy?" he said. "So I don't know what's going to happen in the immediate term, but there are some big questions about this."

EXPLAINER: Pronouns, nonbinary people and the Club Q attack

By JEFF McMILLAN Associated Press

The Colorado Springs gay bar shooting suspect's assertion of being nonbinary has put gender identity and pronouns — and some sensitive questions around them — back in the spotlight.

Respecting Anderson Lee Aldrich's request to be referenced with they/them pronouns does not amount to placating someone accused of a heinous act, nonbinary people and advocates say.

But they do worry that Aldrich's high profile as a crime suspect could lead to negative assumptions about

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 45 of 88

all nonbinary people. And they stress that any skepticism about Aldrich's gender identity shouldn't be used as an excuse to doubt all nonbinary people or cast aspersions on how they use pronouns.

Critics of nontraditional gender identities — that is, of people who do not identify strictly as man or woman, boy or girl — often ridicule the use of gender-neutral pronouns such as they/them, and the notion that Aldrich may be using them as some sort of stunt or potential legal defense has been an undercurrent in the legal handling and media coverage of the case.

Here's a look at nonbinary people, along with the pronouns they may use and how those words figure into the Aldrich case:

WHAT DOES NONBINARY MEAN?

"Binary" refers to thinking of gender as two categories of "man" and "woman." "Nonbinary" refers to people who identify or express their gender outside those two categories and acknowledges — as do the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association — that gender is a range or spectrum.

Some nonbinary people may think of themselves as a mix of genders, or of no gender at all. Some people's experience of gender can shift over time.

A person can still identify as a man or woman and be nonbinary if their experience extends, even if only at times, beyond the binary experience of being a man, for instance. Some nonbinary people consider themselves transgender, and nonbinary people are generally grouped under the umbrella of LGBTQ people.

In short, being nonbinary, as with any gender identity, including feeling like a man or woman, is a sense of self. But unlike sex — the quality of being male, female or intersex, all of which can be medically identified and documented — gender is a social construct and so is an unprovable quality, something to be taken at a person's word.

PRONOUNS

Pronouns continue to evolve, as they always have.

Some nonbinary people are fine using traditional, gendered he/him or she/her pronouns. Some people — nonbinary or not — use only they/them pronouns, rejecting an association with or making a statement about the gender binary. Some people use multiple sets of pronouns, mixing he/him with they/them, for instance. When and how those pronouns are used may depend on what gender a person feels like at any given time.

Some people use what are often called neopronouns — coined words such as "ze" and "zim." They are not widely used and are unfamiliar to many people, but they do offer the benefit of grammatical clarity; unlike "they" as a singular personal pronoun, observers probably wouldn't confuse a neopronoun with references to other people or things in verbal or written passages.

The AP Stylebook, the journalism industry's standard word usage guide, advises that "as much as possible, AP also uses they/them/their as a way of accurately describing and representing a person who uses those pronouns for themself."

Other word usage guides, including those produced by NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists and the advocacy group GLAAD, also advise journalists to use the pronouns that people request.

IS ALDRICH GENUINELY NONBINARY?

Aldrich, who is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns, according to defense court filings, was arrested at the club and has been charged with over 300 counts, including hate crimes. They have not entered a plea or spoken about the events or a motive.

There have been no indications, in what's known of Aldrich's social media engagement or interactions with other people, that Aldrich publicly identified as nonbinary before the shooting. The bar where the attack was carried out is a longtime gathering spot for LGBTQ people in Colorado Springs, and no one has said they remember Aldrich being there before.

When Aldrich requested a name change in Texas in 2016, at age 15, the petition used he/him pronouns, and there was no option on the form for a nonbinary gender marker. But it's not unusual for people to reach self-discovery about their gender later in life.

ARE ALDRICH'S PRONOUNS RELEVANT TO THE CASE?

The defense team has said in court filings that the suspect is nonbinary, referring to "Mx. Aldrich" — employing a gender-neutral courtesy title equivalent to "Ms." or "Mr." and pronounced "mix" — in documents and in open court, and saying Aldrich uses gender-neutral they/them pronouns.

Prosecutors, however, have repeatedly used "he" and "his" pronouns. The judge presiding over the case also referred to Aldrich as "he" in court.

Xavier Kraus, a friend of the suspect, says he never heard Aldrich protest when referred to as "he" or "him" or claim a nonbinary identity until after being arrested.

Asked how Aldrich identifying as nonbinary affected prosecutors' decision on pursuing hate crime charges, District Attorney Michael Allen told reporters it "was part of the picture" but didn't elaborate.

Someone who is nonbinary can be charged with a hate crime for targeting peers, because hate crime laws are focused on the victims, not the perpetrator, experts say. But bringing a hate crime case to conviction can be difficult, because prosecutors must prove what motivated the defendant, a higher standard than usually required in court.

There is no indication that any of those slain at Club Q in Colorado Springs — Daniel Aston, 28; Derrick Rump, 38; Kelly Loving, 40; Raymond Green Vance, 22; and Ashley Paugh, 35 — identified as nonbinary or used gender-neutral pronouns. Aston and Loving have been identified by family and friends as transgender.

SHOULD ALDRICH'S PRONOUNS BE HONORED?

"I will probably never refer to him as such," Kraus says. "It's disrespectful for him to claim that."

Matthew Haynes, co-owner of Club Q, says he doesn't know Aldrich and can't be sure of the shooter's motives in identifying as nonbinary.

"Would I be surprised that it's a tactic? Of course I wouldn't be surprised," he says. "The man has already demonstrated basically pure evil."

Haynes notes that authorities in Colorado Springs have been meticulous in their use of pronouns and names when identifying victims.

"Twenty years ago they never would have cared about pronouns," Haynes says.

Carl Charles, a senior attorney with the LGBTQ legal advocacy group Lambda Legal, said his organization trains court staff, including bailiffs, court officers and lawyers, to respect the asserted identity of all the people in a courtroom. And, Charles says, "this is no exception."

No one would question it if a woman entered a courtroom wanting to be addressed as Ms. and using she/her pronouns, Charles says, and respecting those wishes does not bear on how seriously the court treats her crime. Aldrich's case should be handled no differently.

"Understandably, people have some questions about this," Charles says. "We can respect this person's asserted identity, we can provide them with the same decorum we provide all defendants in a court of law, and we can also recognize that that in no way condones their reprehensible actions."

Georgia vote gives Harris reprieve as Senate tiebreaker

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris needed to get to the U.S. Senate to break a tie. But first she had to avoid causing a traffic jam.

One more senator had to vote before Harris could end the impasse, and he was in Georgetown, on the opposite side of Washington. If Harris left in her motorcade, street closures would likely cut off his route to Capitol Hill.

So she waited.

"I was on the phone with the senator's staff telling them, you have to tell me when he's in the car and when he's crossed the threshold through downtown," Kristine Lucius, former director of legislative affairs for Harris, recalled about the vote on an administration nominee last year.

Such has been the delicate balancing act for Harris, whose role as president of the Senate has been a defining feature of her first two years in office. With the help of careful scheduling — and even an eye on

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 47 of 88

traffic patterns when necessary — she's swiftly outpaced her predecessors when it comes to breaking ties.

Now the pressure will be off. Sen. Raphael Warnock's victory in the Georgia runoff means Democrats will expand their majority to 51 seats. Although Harris may still get called upon, such as when senators are absent, the party will have a little more breathing room on close votes.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Wednesday that his caucus "has been deeply grateful" for Harris' "constant schedule juggling."

"It's part of her job. But I think she's done a lot of other good things," he said. "And now she's going to have a little more time to do those things. Because the need for her to be here will be less."

Vice presidents have an infamously sparse job description under the Constitution, and one of their only responsibilities is serving as president of the Senate. It's been a mostly ceremonial role in recent administrations. President Joe Biden didn't have to break a single tie in his eight years as vice president.

Harris, a former senator from California, has had a much more hands-on experience because the chamber has been evenly divided in an era of sharp partisanship.

A dozen nominees would not have been confirmed without her vote. She also helped nudge the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief measure, and the Inflation Reduction Act, the centerpiece of Biden's domestic agenda, over the finish line.

All told, she's cast 26 tiebreaking votes. John C. Calhoun, who served as vice president under John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, has the record for 31 — but that's over the course of nearly eight years, rather than Harris' two.

"Floating holds" limiting travel were built into Harris' schedule weeks in advance when there was a chance she would be needed on Capitol Hill, preventing her from straying far from Washington.

When she did travel, she tended to go on Mondays, Thursdays or Fridays because most Senate votes were on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. And short hops to Baltimore or Richmond were preferable to flights around the country, which would make rushing back for a vote logistically complicated.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said, "Any time we were here, she had to be ready, because even things that might have seemed noncontroversial, appointments and stuff, could deadlock." Harris was "never completely free to make other plans," he said.

One of the exceptions was the Munich Security Conference in February, which Harris attended shortly before Russia invaded Ukraine.

"As soon as that was booked, the first person I talked to was not my husband about child care coverage, it was the majority leader's chief of staff," Lucius said. She had to make sure that Schumer knew he couldn't schedule any tight votes then, "because that's not something that you can fly home from."

Sometimes there's a scheduling conflict. Harris was in Los Angeles for the Summit of the Americas when the Senate held a confirmation vote for a Labor Department official.

The nomination unexpectedly stalled without Harris available to break a tie, so Democrats tried again in September. They were successful, and Harris wasn't even needed as a tiebreaker.

"She's been here when we need her," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. "We've accommodated her when it didn't work out."

Murray appreciates Harris' trips to Capitol Hill for another reason besides tiebreakers. They're opportunities to chat policy, from school buses to maternal health, with someone who is a heartbeat away from the presidency.

"It's a connection you don't often get with a vice president," she said.

Joel K. Goldstein, a historian of the vice presidency, said Harris' responsibility can be rewarding and frustrating.

"The upside is, she gets to be there when there's something that's important, and she casts a decisive vote," he said. "The downside is, she has to be there."

After all, the vice presidency can be a political springboard, and remaining tethered to Senate procedure is not usually an ambitious leader's idea of a plum assignment.

But the perils of not being available have been apparent before, such as when the Senate was considering President Calvin Coolidge's nominee for attorney general in 1925.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 48 of 88

Believing he wasn't needed, Vice President Charles G. Dawes went to his hotel room for a nap. When he woke up, it was too late to rescue the nomination with a tiebreaking vote.

Although vice presidents have functioned as extensions of the presidency in recent history, they used to operate more independently from the White House, embracing their legislative role by regularly presiding over the Senate.

Sometimes they even voted against the president's interests. In 1832, when Jackson chose Van Buren to be ambassador to Great Britain, Calhoun ensured the nomination failed by casting a tiebreaking vote against him.

Harris knew she would be called upon to break ties when she took office, and she didn't seem to be looking forward to it.

Shortly before the inauguration, she wrote in the San Francisco Chronicle that there had been only 268 such votes since the country's founding.

"I intend to work tirelessly as your vice president, including, if necessary, fulfilling this constitutional duty," Harris wrote. "At the same time, it is my hope that rather than come to the point of a tie, the Senate will instead find common ground and do the work of the American people."

Harris cast her first tiebreaking votes only two weeks after taking office. They took place before dawn at the end of a marathon voting session on the American Rescue Plan.

"All right, should I do this?" she said, tapping the ivory gavel a single time on the desk in front of her.

"The Senate being equally divided, the vice president votes in the affirmative and the concurrent resolution as amended is adopted," she said, ensuring passage of the bill and drawing applause from Democrats.

As her number of votes ticked higher and higher, she has publicly embraced her role.

In a September speech at South Carolina State University, Harris noted she had cast more tiebreaking votes in a single term than any of her predecessors. The record was previously held by John Adams, the country's first vice president.

"I think we should all fully appreciate how history can take a turn," she said.

Bill protecting same-sex, interracial unions set for passage

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House is set to give final approval Thursday to legislation protecting same-sex marriages in federal law, a monumental step in a decadeslong battle for nationwide recognition of such unions that reflects a stunning turnaround in societal attitudes.

A law requiring all states to recognize same-sex marriages would come as a relief for hundreds of thousands of couples who have married since the Supreme Court's 2015 decision that legalized those marriages nationwide. The bipartisan legislation would also protect interracial unions by requiring states to recognize legal marriages regardless of "sex, race, ethnicity, or national origin."

President Joe Biden backs the bill and said he will "promptly and proudly" sign it into law.

Democrats have moved the bill quickly through the House and Senate since the Supreme Court's June decision that overturned the federal right to an abortion. That ruling included a concurring opinion from Justice Clarence Thomas that suggested same-sex marriage should also be reconsidered.

Roused to action by the court, the House passed a bill to protect the same-sex unions in July with the support of 47 Republicans, a robust and unexpected show of support that kick-started serious negotiations in the Senate. After months of talks, the Senate passed the legislation last week with 12 Republican votes.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., has said she is happy that the marriage legislation will be one of her last acts in leadership before stepping aside in January. "I'm so excited," she said of the legislation, which she said will ensure that "the federal government will never again stand in the way of marrying the person you love."

The legislation would not require states to allow same-sex couples to marry, as the Obergefell ruling now does. But it would require states to recognize all marriages that were legal where they were performed and it would protect current same-sex unions if the court's 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision were to

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 49 of 88

be overturned.

While it's not everything advocates may have wanted, passage of the legislation represents a watershed moment. Just a decade ago, many Republicans openly campaigned on blocking same-sex marriages; today more than two-thirds of the public support them.

Democrats in the Senate, led by Wisconsin's Tammy Baldwin and Arizona's Kyrsten Sinema, slowly won over key Republican votes by negotiating an amendment that would clarify that the legislation does not affect the rights of private individuals or businesses that are already enshrined in current law. The amended bill would also make clear that a marriage is between two people, an effort to ward off some far-right criticism that the legislation could endorse polygamy.

In the end, several religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, came out in support of the bill. The Mormon church said it would support rights for same-sex couples as long as they didn't infringe upon religious groups' right to believe as they choose.

Still, most Republicans opposed the legislation and some conservative advocacy groups lobbied aggressively against it in recent weeks, arguing that it doesn't do enough to protect those who want to refuse services for same-sex couples.

"Marriage is the exclusive, lifelong, conjugal union between one man and one woman, and any departure from that design hurts the indispensable goal of having every child raised in a stable home by the mom and dad who conceived him," the Heritage Foundation's Roger Severino, vice president of domestic policy, wrote in a recent blog post arguing against the bill.

In Congress, as public sentiment has shifted, Republicans have largely shied away from making that argument. On the House floor Wednesday night, a handful of Republicans voiced opposition over the legislation for process reasons — saying that it hadn't gotten a full hearing in the House — or by arguing that the religious liberty provisions added by the Senate weren't enough.

The bill's supporters will be watching to see whether the 47 Republicans who previously backed the legislation will stick with it, and whether they could gain more votes especially now that it includes the additional religious liberty provisions negotiated by Senate Republicans. Heritage and other groups have been pushing Republicans who support the bill to switch their position.

The almost four dozen Republicans who supported the bill this summer represented a wide range of the GOP caucus — from more moderate members to Pennsylvania Rep. Scott Perry, the chair of the conservative hard-right House Freedom Caucus, and New York Rep. Elise Stefanik, the No. 3 House Republican. All four Republican members of Utah's congressional delegation also supported the legislation. House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy voted against the measure.

The votes come as the LGBTQ community has faced violent attacks, such as the shooting earlier this month at a gay nightclub in Colorado that killed five people and injured at least 17.

"We have been through a lot," said Kelley Robinson, the incoming president of the advocacy group Human Rights Campaign. But Robinson says the votes show "in such an important way" that the country values LGBTQ people.

"We are part of the full story of what it means to be an American," said Robinson, who was inside the Senate chamber for last week's vote with her wife and young son. "It really speaks to them validating our love."

The vote was personal for many senators, too. The day the bill passed their chamber, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer was wearing the tie he wore at his daughter's wedding to another woman. He recalled that day as "one of the happiest moments of my life."

Baldwin, the first openly gay senator who has been working on gay rights issues for almost four decades, tearfully hugged Schumer as the final vote was underway. She tweeted thanks to the same-sex and interracial couples who she said made the moment possible.

"By living as your true selves, you changed the hearts and minds of people around you," she wrote.

Biden approval, views of economy steady, sour: AP-NORC poll

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 50 of 88

By HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fresh off his party's better-than-anticipated performance in the midterm elections, President Joe Biden is facing consistent but critical assessments of his leadership and the national economy.

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds 43% of U.S. adults say they approve of the way Biden is handling his job as president, while 55% disapprove. That's similar to October, just weeks before the Nov. 8 elections that most Americans considered pivotal for the country's future.

Only about a quarter say the nation is headed in the right direction or the economy is in good condition. Both measures have been largely negative over the course of the year as inflation tightened its grip, but were more positive through much of Biden's first year in office.

Mishana Conlee said she tries to be optimistic about the coming year, but she thinks things are going to the gutter because "our president is incompetent" and not mentally fit for the White House. The 44-year-old in South Bend, Indiana, said she's frustrated about rising expenses when she's living paycheck to paycheck as a dietary aide at a nursing home.

"The more I work, I just can't get ahead," Conlee said. "That's just all there is to it."

She doesn't blame Biden for the state of inflation, but "I feel like he's not doing anything to change it," said Conlee, an independent who voted for former President Donald Trump. Biden's "not doing us any good."

The Biden administration in its second year in the White House relished economic growth, a series of legislative wins and relative success for the president's party in the midterms. But that has yet to translate to glowing reviews from a pessimistic public.

"I don't understand why his approval ratings are so low," said 56-year-old Sarah Apwisch, highlighting the administration's investments in infrastructure and computer chip technology.

Apwisch recognizes that it's been "a tough year" and that prices are higher, but she's hopeful because of the midterm results as a Republican-turned-Democrat who worries about the "Make America Great Again" movement's influence on the GOP.

"We're headed in the right direction," said the Three Rivers, Michigan, resident who works for a market research company's finance department. She is eager to see Democrats press forward on a wide-ranging agenda, including codifying abortion rights.

Even as Republicans took control of the House, Democrats defied historical precedent to stunt GOP gains and even improve their Senate majority, which was cemented with this week's runoff win for Sen. Raphael Warnock, the lone Democrat in Georgia this year to be elected statewide.

Glen McDaniel of Atlanta, who twice voted for Warnock, thinks the Biden administration has moved the country forward and weathered the economic storm as well as possible.

"I think that this administration has done as much as they can" to fight inflation, the Democrat said.

But McDaniel, a 70-year-old medical research scientist, also thinks the nation faces "social headwinds" that he wants Biden and the party to prioritize.

"I think that the Democrats can be a little bit more aggressive" in legislating on things like marriage equality, reproductive rights and voting reform, he said.

The poll shows majorities of Democrats and Republicans alike think things in the country are on the wrong track, likely for different reasons.

But Democrats have shown renewed faith in Biden, boosting his overall job approval rating from a summer slump. Even so, the 43% who approve in the new survey remains somewhat depressed from 48% a year ago and much lower than 60% nearly two years ago, a month after he took office.

Seventy-seven percent of Democrats, but only 10% of Republicans, approve of Biden.

While many Americans don't entirely blame Biden for high inflation, AP-NORC polling this year showed Biden consistently hit for his handling of the economy.

As in recent months, the new poll shows only a quarter of U.S. adults say economic conditions are good, while three-quarters call them bad. Nine in 10 Republicans, along with about 6 in 10 Democrats, say the economy is in bad shape. Ratings of the economy have soured amid record-high inflation, even as Biden touts falling gas prices and a low unemployment rate at 3.7%.

Joshua Steffens doubts that the job market is as good as indicators show. The 47-year-old in St. Augustine, Florida, said he has been unemployed and struggling to find an information technology job since September.

"Even though they're trying to claim that things are looking good," Steffens said, "in the trenches, it definitely does not appear that it's so accurate."

Biden's shopping and vacationing, captured on broadcast news, is "tone deaf," said the Republican, who called the president "a habitual liar."

Steffens said he and his wife are experiencing rising expenses for electricity and groceries, and relying on his wife's income has "put a strain" on their holiday shopping. He doesn't think Biden is handling high inflation well.

"If he has policies that he's trying to push through, then they're not working currently," Steffens said.

The poll of 1,124 adults was conducted Dec. 1-5 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.8 percentage points.

Officials talk biodiversity as drought stunts Kenya wildlife

By WANJOHI KABUKURU, BRIAN INGANGA and DESMOND TIRO Associated Press

ARCHERS POST, Kenya (AP) — In Kenya's sweltering northern Samburu county, a destructive drought exacerbated by climate change is wreaking havoc on people and wildlife.

After four consecutive years of failed rains causing some of the worst conditions in 40 years, wild animals have become commonplace in the county's villages as they search for food. Many don't survive, providing herders an unfortunate lifeline as they cut chunks of meat from their carcasses.

"I have suffered from hunger for a long time," said 37-year-old Samburu resident Frank Aule. "If I run into such a carcass I would not think twice about eating it as I have to eat to survive."

Kenyan authorities count that the drought has killed over 200 elephants, nearly 400 common zebras and more than 500 wildebeests among several other species in the past nine months. Many of those that survive are starving, weak and frequently coming into contact with people.

How to better protect fragile ecosystems from a warming climate, including Kenya's savannah grasslands, will form part of discussions at this week's United Nations biodiversity conference — known as COP15 — in Montreal in Canada. Governments are working to come up with a framework of how the world should protect nature and aim to set goals for the next decade. Conservation groups say current programs aren't working.

The Kenyan government has provided some relief supplies like water, forage, hay and salt licks for wildlife in the region, but animals are still forced to travel further into residential areas in their search for food and water.

"Elephants tend to be attracted to the trees that I planted in my homestead," David Lepeanoi, a 54-year-old resident of Samburu, told The Associated Press. "The trees and water points are the main source of conflict between elephants and the community."

Climate change and poor conservation practices have degraded protected rangelands, reserves, and national parks in recent years.

"Where we have reported cases of wildlife dying, it is not actually within the parks," said Jim Nyamu, who helps run the Elephant Neighbors Center. "That tells you they were actually looking for where they used to forage: the corridors, migratory routes that have been blocked by the human interface."

Records from conservation charity BirdLife Africa show that dozens of birds are also dying in northern Kenya, most likely from starvation.

"Carcasses of migratory birds, such the European Roller, could be seen in the expansive dry landscapes," said the charity's Alex Ngari. Over 300 bird species on the continent are already classed as globally threatened or critically endangered.

The drought has also devastated communities and is leading to the loss of livelihoods, livestock deaths

and failed crops. Farmers are instead felling dried trees to produce and sell charcoal to make ends meet leading to even more biodiversity loss in the region, said Paul Gacheru from the conservation group Nature Kenya.

"A concerted call toward supporting local communities to cope with the impacts of climate change is needed," said Gacheru, adding that local people need less destructive ways to adapt to the warmer, drier climate.

Communities across the continent are facing similar losses. The Okavango Basin in southern Africa, which provides water for one million people and half the world's elephant population, has suffered as climate change, urban development and deforestation depletes its resources.

"Putting important ecosystems and wildlife at risk is negatively impacting people's lives and livelihoods," said Vladimir Russo, an advisor for National Geographic's Okavango Wilderness Project. He said that poorly preserved ecosystems cause more human-wildlife conflict and can lead to rise in poaching.

But "local community members and policymakers are now engaging in discussions to safeguard this ecosystem," said Bogolo Kenewendo, a U.N. high-level climate champion.

More of that participation is needed at the summit in Montreal, policy and nature experts say, to preserve the continent's biodiversity.

Protection of nature needs to "make it onto the policy agendas of heads of state as has increasingly become the norm with climate," said Linda Kreuger, who heads biodiversity policy at The Nature Conservancy.

In Samburu, conservation charities say they are doing what they can as natural resources dry up. At one elephant sanctuary in Samburu, staff say about 30 of 40 calves were rescued because of the prolonged lack of rain.

As well as the risk of starvation, drought "is a form of stress that makes the animals' immunity to be lowered and this contributes to infections," said vet Isaiah Alolo, who works at the Reteti Elephant Sanctuary. "In most cases, you find that the animal will die," leading to many orphaned animals that need rescue.

"That brings a lot of pressure" for those working to conserve species, he said.

Staff at the Reteti sanctuary bring food and supplements from some 50 kilometers (30 miles) away from grasslands around Mount Kenya, said sanctuary caregiver Dorothy Lowakutuk. Those grasslands are also at risk of degrading if the drought continues.

"At least we ensure our elephants are recovering what they don't get in their natural habitat," said Lowakutuk.

FBI got earlier tip about Colorado Springs gay bar shooter

By COLLEEN SLEVIN AND JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Authorities said the person who would later kill five at a Colorado gay nightclub was on the FBI's radar a day before being arrested for threatening to kill family members, but agents closed out the case just weeks later.

The FBI's disclosure about the tip, provided in a statement to The Associated Press, creates a new timeline for when law enforcement was first alerted to Anderson Lee Aldrich as a potential danger. The FBI did not say who gave the tip on June 17, 2021, or anything about the information that was provided.

The next day, law enforcement was alerted when Aldrich's grandparents ran from their Colorado Springs home and called 911, saying Aldrich was building a bomb in the basement and had threatened to kill them. Details of the case remain sealed, but an arrest affidavit verified by the AP detailed how Aldrich was upset the grandparents were moving to Florida because it would get in the way of Aldrich's plans to conduct a mass shooting and bombing.

The grandparents were concerned about Aldrich even before the 911 call, according to the document, with the grandmother telling authorities she and her husband had been "living in fear" because of Aldrich's "recent homicidal threats toward them and others."

In a story Sunday, The Denver Gazette cited an unidentified family member saying the grandfather called the FBI the day before the bomb threat. The shooting is the latest crime to raise questions about whether

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 53 of 88

the FBI moves too soon to close cases involving people who have shown violent tendencies.

As part of the FBI's probe, the agency said it coordinated with the El Paso County Sheriff's Office, which had responded to the June 18, 2021, call from Aldrich's grandparents and arrested Aldrich, now 22, on felony menacing and kidnapping charges. But about a month after getting the tip, the FBI closed its assessment of Aldrich, who is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns.

"With state charges pending, the FBI closed its assessment on July 15, 2021," the FBI said.

Those charges were later dropped for unknown reasons. Under Colorado law, cases that are dismissed by either prosecutors or a judge are automatically sealed to prevent people from having their lives ruined if they do not end up being prosecuted. Authorities have cited the law in refusing to answer questions about the case but a coalition of media organizations, including the AP, has asked the court to unseal the records. A hearing is planned for Thursday.

A spokesperson for the sheriff's office, Sgt. Jason Garrett, declined to comment on the FBI's statement or on whether his agency had any tips about Aldrich before their 2021 arrest, citing the sealing law.

The shooting at Club Q occurred more than a year later, just before midnight on Nov. 19, when Aldrich opened fire as soon as they entered the club, firing indiscriminately with an AR-15-style rifle while wearing a ballistic vest, according to an arrest affidavit that was written the day after the shooting but not unsealed until Wednesday evening. Aldrich killed five people and wounded 17 others before an Army veteran wrestled the attacker to the ground.

The affidavit does not provide any new information about what motivated Aldrich, but says they expressed remorse to medical staff shortly after the shooting and said they had been awake for four days, according to police officers guarding their room at the hospital. It doesn't include anything more about what Aldrich may have told investigators.

The document also includes an image from the club's surveillance video showing a blast coming out of the rifle barrel as Aldrich entered the club.

Aldrich's mother told police that they were supposed to go to a movie at 10 p.m. that night, about two hours before the attack, but said Aldrich had left before then, saying they had to do a quick errand.

The FBI is now helping to investigate the shooting. Xavier Kraus, a former neighbor of Aldrich and their mother, told the AP Wednesday that agents have interviewed him in recent days about a free speech website Aldrich created that has featured a series of violent posts, glorifying violence and racism.

"It was meant for people to go and pretty much say whatever they want with the exception of the two rules: No spamming and no child pornography," Kraus said. "If I would have known what it was going to turn into, that would have struck a different chord with me."

Kraus said that after the bomb threat charges were dropped, Aldrich began boasting about recovering the guns, and once showed Kraus two assault-style rifles, body armor and incendiary rounds.

Kraus said Aldrich "was talking about bullets that could pierce through police-grade armor." He said it seemed like Aldrich hoped someone would break into their home.

An FBI assessment is the lowest level, least intrusive, and most elementary stage of an FBI inquiry. Such assessments are routinely opened after agents receive a tip, and investigators routinely face the challenge of sifting through which of the tens of thousands of tips received every year could yield a viable threat.

There have been several high-profile examples of the FBI having received information about a gunman before a mass shooting. A month before Nikolas Cruz killed 17 people at a Florida high school, the bureau received a warning that he had been talking about committing a mass shooting. A man who massacred 49 people at an Orlando nightclub in 2016 and another who set off bombs in the streets of New York City the same year had each been looked at by federal agents but officials later determined they did not warrant continued law enforcement scrutiny.

FBI guidelines meant to balance national security with civil liberties protections impose restrictions on the steps agents may take during the assessment phase. Agents, for instance, may analyze information from government databases and open-source internet searches, and can conduct interviews during an assessment. But they cannot turn to more intrusive techniques, such as requesting a wiretap or internet

communications, without higher levels of approval and a more solid basis to suspect a crime.

More than 10,000 assessments are opened each year. Many are closed within days or weeks when the FBI concludes there's no criminal or national security threat, or basis for continued scrutiny. The system is meant to ensure that a person who has not broken the law does not remain under perpetual scrutiny on a mere hunch — and that the FBI can reserve its resources for true threats.

Emboldened athletes push back on old-school coaching methods

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Sports Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Some of Geoff Bond's rowers loved and appreciated his demanding style. They thrived on how the coach at the University of California-San Diego pushed them to the limit while preparing them to take on the real world.

But for others, Bond was a nightmare, with over-the-top intensity, an unpredictable temper and rage they abhorred. They say he regularly threatened to harm or kill team members. One heartbroken couple insists Bond's behavior was to blame for their son's suicide.

Bond left his post earlier this year without any explanation from the school, and his employment status is unclear. In his wake, a debate now rages in college sports and athletics at every level: What constitutes bullying, and what is merely good, hard-nosed coaching that aims to get the most out of young adult athletes?

"There absolutely is a fine line between those two things, and it actually allows for somebody to behave in a more bullying manner under the guise of 'I'm pushing you to be the best that you can be.' And then the victim is kind of forced to accept that," said Deidre Abrons, a licensed marriage and family psychotherapist in Oakland, California, with extensive trauma and PTSD experience.

Sports programs across the county are weighing whether such tough coaching styles have a place in a world where student-athletes demand more sensitive treatment and more individualized training. Athletes of this younger generation also wield greater personal power over their career paths, which can force coaches to accommodate them or risk losing top talent.

There is evidence that coaching has become less autocratic, less brutal — that Bond was just a throwback from the days when legends such as Bear Bryant pushed football players to the brink and Bobby Knight erupted in volcanic outbursts at his basketball teams.

These days, athletes are speaking up about their experiences on and off the playing field, regardless of whether they are on high-profile teams or in smaller, non-revenue sports. As transfer rules have eased, students have also acquired more freedom to change schools, along with the ability to capitalize financially on their fame.

Many coaches have changed too, tailoring their dealings with each athlete based on that person's individual needs, rather than applying the one-size-fits-all approach of the past.

Still, Bond is far from the only coach whose practices have come under attack. The complaints extend beyond colleges and into Olympic events.

Abrons said it's often hard for athletes "to recognize the abuse and call it abuse."

"That's really hard to come to terms with, especially when it's somebody in your life who is such a mentor, who's guiding you, who's supposed to be on your side. And so they often blame themselves, like: 'Oh, this is me. This person has it all together. I'm the problem.'"

Bond's career in San Diego ended Jan. 13, when the school announced that he would no longer be coach, but it offered no details. Bond, who previously coached at the University of California-Berkeley and the University of Pennsylvania, has challenged his dismissal in court, and the legal battle is ongoing.

Some rowers said his rage regularly went beyond intense coaching.

"He would make up the worst kinds of insults to people," said Dameon Engblom, a former assistant coach under Bond at Penn and in San Diego who also rowed for him as a high school athlete in the Bay Area.

"He never pushed or shoved anybody or made any physical contact, but he would get up in people's

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 55 of 88

faces. He'd threaten to kill people," one ex-Penn rower said on condition of anonymity because he feared retribution in the tight-knit rowing community.

In a letter obtained by The Associated Press, a group of nine rowers from the 2016 Penn team wrote to more than 60 parents of fellow student-athletes expressing fears that the program was "unsafe" under Bond. The rowers were unsatisfied with what one called the university's "neutral response" to concerns shared during exit interviews.

Bond "has shown a disregard for responsible oversight of the mental health of our team in a way that is counterproductive to Penn Rowing's performance," the athletes wrote.

The rowers said Bond had "created an abusive environment by the repeated use of belittling nicknames and hostile language like, 'Talk to me again, I swear I will f----- cap you. I will f----- kill you,' and 'I will break through you.'"

They also alleged that he "stigmatized the use of appropriate resources for managing stress by publicly shaming teammates" who utilized Penn's psychological services.

When reached for comment about Bond's tenure, Penn said only that he stepped down at the end of his contract in 2019. A second request for details received no response.

Some rowers who competed for him at UC San Diego have shared similar experiences, describing a culture in which Bond used crass and offensive language among other put-downs regularly uttered in front of athletes.

Through an attorney, several of Bond's former collegiate rowers from Cal, Penn and UCSD reached out to the AP in support of the coach.

Former Cal rower Vaclav Vochoska of the Czech Republic crossed an ocean for college and experienced severe isolation and depression from language and cultural barriers. He recalled how Bond checked on him one Thanksgiving when Vochoska was alone in the dorms. He calls his experience in Berkeley only "positive."

"My time with Geoff Bond was nothing but special," Vochoska said by phone from Europe. "The challenge never came in a hurtful way ... It doesn't sound right he would be threatening anybody at practice."

Gary Champagne, who rowed for Bond at Cal as a freshman in 2002-03, said via email: "I absolutely loved his style of coaching and feel it is a great fit for young college kids."

"I give him tons of credit for turning many of us coddled young boys like myself into great, young, independent men with qualities and attributes that helped us so much in business and life. I always felt comfortable with Geoff as a coach and loved the man he was."

But the parents of Brian Lilly Jr. are adamant that their son was verbally abused by Bond, leading to his suicide in January 2021. Brenda and Brian Lilly Sr. filed a wrongful-death suit against Bond, alleging that the coach mistreated their son largely because he challenged Bond's decision to allow a rower to remain on the team despite allegations of sexual assault against the athlete.

Bond's defense said the coach hadn't seen Lilly in person for the nine months prior to his suicide and that the coach reached out during the pandemic lockdown period to inquire whether Lilly would return to school in San Diego from the East Coast where he had been living.

A spokesman for UCSD, which is named in the suit, declined to comment, citing the pending litigation.

Olympic coaches have come under fire, too.

Longtime U.S. national team swimming coach Teri McKeever faces allegations from former athletes at the University of California-Berkeley who described a culture of abuse.

Former U.S. Olympic rowing coach Mike Teti resigned last fall after the Tokyo Games amid accusations of abusive behavior that spanned decades, including allegations that he physically threatened athletes or verbally attacked them if challenged. Most of the U.S. national team members who made the accusations spoke anonymously because they still fear the coach.

That the athletes spoke out at all represents a sea change in the balance of power between athletes and the coaches who once held almost unquestioned authority over their teams.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 56 of 88

Now college athletes can use the NCAA transfer portal to change schools and teams if they are unhappy with their playing time or treatment. They can also make money in ways that were unimaginable until recently with new rules allowing compensation through endorsements and sponsorships. And with the rise of social media, student-athletes can share their opinions and experiences directly with the wider world.

Some coaches are struggling to adjust with athletes who are newly emboldened.

"It is making it a little more challenging," said Wayne Tinkle, Oregon State men's basketball coach, referencing the flexibility that students have "to leave if things get tough or if you get pushed too hard, or if somebody's telling you they can give you more."

But Tinkle said any pressure on coaches to be educators, not autocrats, is a good thing: "We've got to look ourselves in the mirror and show these young men that the biggest part of our job is taking them from late adolescence into early adulthood."

Tinkle will be rooting for Gianni Hunt, a junior guard at Sacramento State who left Oregon State's program earlier this year. Hunt sought a fresh start after his playing time failed to develop as he had hoped. He took a leave of absence from the Beavers last season when his "love for the game had deteriorated," he said.

The change worked out for Hunt, who is thrilled to get a new chance under first-year Sacramento State coach David Patrick, an Australian who previously served as coach at the University of California-Riverside and was a longtime assistant for several Division I programs.

Patrick believes coaching now demands more personal relationships with players.

"Some of the coaches I've played for didn't know if I had a mother, father, brother, sister, what my upbringing was," Patrick said. Now it's more important "to have a relational piece there before you can dive into coaching them hard and coaching them in life ... because they do know their rights, unlike we did when I was coming out."

Kerry Keating, the former head men's basketball coach at Santa Clara who also worked as an assistant at UCLA and Tennessee, hopes more coaches focus on each individual's needs — a drastic change from coaching an entire team as one.

Looking back on it, Keating said, he "wasn't raised that way" and "didn't do a great job" of coaching players individually. "It's one self-criticism I have."

Hall of Fame Stanford women's basketball coach Tara VanDerveer tries to consider the needs of each woman on her roster, and she has demonstrated over decades how to be successful without extreme tactics. She agrees that practices that were more prevalent in the past are no longer acceptable.

"In some ways, some people you can maybe be harder on and others not," said VanDerveer, the all-time winningest women's basketball coach. "Now there is a lot of talk among coaches of almost like, 'Don't even try to coach,' because a lot of players — they don't really want to be coached."

Sometimes, VanDerveer said, coaches will say or do something 10 times without drawing any complaints, but the 11th occasion might be considered by someone to be "over the line."

"I think it's always been challenging," she said, "but maybe now with social media, the portal, I think things are even more challenging for coaches."

Holmes' former partner gets nearly 13 years in Theranos case

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Former Theranos executive Ramesh "Sunny" Balwani was sentenced Wednesday to nearly 13 years in prison for his role in the company's blood-testing hoax — a sentence slightly longer than that given to the CEO, who was his lover and accomplice in one of Silicon Valley's biggest scandals.

Balwani was convicted in July of fraud and conspiracy connected to the company's bogus medical technology that duped investors and endangered patients. His sentencing came less than three weeks after Elizabeth Holmes, the company's founder and CEO, received more than 11 years in prison for her part in the scheme, which has been dissected in a book, HBO documentary and award-winning TV series.

Balwani's sentence was less than the 15 years sought by federal prosecutors, who depicted him as a ruthless, power-hungry figure. But it is substantially longer than the four to 10 months sought by his lawyers.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 57 of 88

The scandal revolved around the company's false claims to have developed a device that could scan for hundreds of diseases and other potential problems with just a few drops of blood taken with a finger prick.

After years of promoting the technology, Holmes and Balwani were warned that the blood tests were inaccurate, but they continued to raise money from investors, including from billionaires such as software magnate Larry Ellison and media magnate Rupert Murdoch, and deployed the technology in some Walgreens stores.

U.S. District Judge Edward Davila said the financial statements drawn up by Balwani "weren't just projections, they were lies" and "a true flight from honest business practices."

The case threw a bright light on Silicon Valley's dark side, exposing how its culture of hype and boundless ambition could veer into lies.

Both Holmes, 38, and Balwani, 57, could have gotten up to 20 years in prison. Balwani spent six years as Theranos' chief operating officer while remaining romantically involved with Holmes until a bitter split in 2016.

Former federal prosecutor Amanda Kramer said the harsher sentence seemed appropriate, given that the jury in Balwani's trial convicted him on every count while jurors in Holmes' separate case acquitted her on some charges and deadlocked on others.

"It's not surprising that he got a more severe sentence because his misconduct was more severe," Kramer said.

While on the witness stand in her trial, Holmes accused Balwani of manipulating her through years of emotional and sexual abuse. Balwani's attorney has denied the allegations.

Federal prosecutors also want the judge to order Balwani to pay \$804 million in restitution to defrauded investors — the same amount sought from Holmes. Davila deferred a decision on restitution to a later hearing, just as he did during Holmes' Nov. 18 sentencing, when she received 11 1/4 years in prison.

In court documents, Balwani's lawyers painted him as a hardworking immigrant who moved from India to the U.S. during the 1980s to become the first member of his family to attend college. He graduated from the University of Texas in 1990 with a degree in information systems.

He later moved to Silicon Valley, where he first worked as a computer programmer for Microsoft before founding an online startup that he sold for millions of dollars during the dot-com boom of the 1990s.

Balwani and Holmes met around the same time she dropped out of Stanford University to start Theranos in 2003. He became enthralled with her and her quest to revolutionize health care.

Balwani's lawyers said he eventually invested about \$5 million in a stake in Theranos that eventually became worth about \$500 million on paper — a fraction of Holmes' one-time fortune of \$4.5 billion.

That wealth evaporated after Theranos began to unravel in 2015 amid revelations that its blood-testing technology never worked as Holmes had boasted in glowing magazine articles that likened her to Silicon Valley visionaries such as Apple co-founder Steve Jobs.

Before Theranos' downfall, Holmes teamed up with Balwani to raise nearly \$1 billion from deep-pocketed investors.

"Mr. Balwani is not the same as Elizabeth Holmes," his lawyers wrote in a memo to the judge. "He actually invested millions of dollars of his own money; he never sought fame or recognition; and he has a long history of quietly giving to those less fortunate." Balwani's lawyers also asserted that Holmes "was dramatically more culpable" for the Theranos fraud.

Echoing similar claims made by Holmes's lawyers before her sentencing, Balwani's attorneys also argued that he has been adequately punished by the intense media coverage of Theranos.

Balwani "has lost his career, his reputation and his ability to meaningfully work again," his lawyers wrote.

Federal prosecutors cast Balwani as a ruthless, power-hungry accomplice in crimes that ripped off investors and imperiled people who received flawed results. The blood tests were to be available in a partnership with Walgreen's that Balwani helped engineer.

"Balwani presented a fake story about Theranos' technology and financial stability day after day in meeting after meeting," the prosecutors wrote in their memo to the judge. "Balwani maintained this façade of

accomplishments, after making the calculated decision that honesty would destroy Theranos.”

Peru's president ousted by Congress in political crisis

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — The president of Peru was ousted by Congress and arrested on a charge of rebellion Wednesday after he sought to dissolve the legislative body and take unilateral control of the government, triggering a grave constitutional crisis.

Vice President Dina Boluarte replaced Pedro Castillo and became the first female leader in the history of the republic after hours of wrangling between the legislature and the departing president, who had tried to prevent an impeachment vote.

Boluarte, a 60-year-old lawyer, called for a political truce and the installation of a national unity government.

“What I ask for is a space, a time to rescue the country,” she said.

Lawmakers voted 101-6 with 10 abstentions to remove Castillo from office for reasons of “permanent moral incapacity.”

He left the presidential palace in an automobile that carried him through Lima's historic downtown. He entered a police station and hours later federal prosecutors announced that Castillo had been arrested on the rebellion charge for allegedly violating constitutional order. Witnesses saw some small-scale clashing between police and some protesters who had gathered near the station.

“We condemn the violation of constitutional order,” federal prosecutors said in a statement. “Peru's political constitution enshrines the separation of powers and establishes that Peru is a democratic and sovereign Republic ... No authority can put itself above the Constitution and must comply with constitutional mandates.”

Fluent in Spanish and Quechua, Boluarte was elected as vice president on the presidential ticket that brought the center-left Castillo to power July 28, 2021. During Castillo's brief administration, Boluarte was minister of development and social inclusion.

Shortly before the impeachment vote, Castillo announced that he was installing a new emergency government and would rule by decree. He ordered a nightly curfew starting Wednesday night. The head of Peru's army then resigned, along with four ministers, including those over foreign affairs and the economy.

The Ombudsman's Office, an autonomous government institution, said before the congressional vote that Castillo should turn himself in to judicial authorities.

After years of democracy, Peru is in the midst of a constitutional collapse “that can't be called anything but a coup,” the statement said.

International reaction was at times outpaced by events.

United States Amb. Lisa Kenna called on Castillo via Twitter to reverse his decree to dissolve Congress, saying the U.S. government rejected any “extra-constitutional” actions by the president to interfere with Congress.

A short time later the Congress voted to remove Castillo.

Mexico Foreign Affairs Secretary Marcelo Ebrard said via Twitter that given recent events in Peru, Mexico had decided to postpone the Pacific Alliance summit scheduled for Dec. 14 in Lima. He said he regretted the recent developments and called for democracy and human rights to be respected.

The administration of Chilean President Gabriel Boric lamented the political situation in Peru and trusted that the crisis would be resolved through democratic mechanisms. Spain's government strongly condemned the break in constitutional order and congratulated the country on righting itself democratically.

Castillo had said in an unusual midnight address on state television ahead of the vote that he would never stain “the good name of my honest and exemplary parents, who like millions of Peruvians, work every day to build honestly a future for their families.”

The peasant-turned-president said he's paying for mistakes made due to inexperience. But he said a certain sector of Congress “has as its only agenda item removing me from office because they never ac-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 59 of 88

cepted the results of an election that you, my dear Peruvians, determined with your votes.”

Castillo has denied allegations of corruption against him, saying they’re based on “hearsay statements by people who, seeking to lighten their own punishments for supposed crimes by abusing my confidence, are trying to involve me without evidence.”

Federal prosecutors are investigating six cases against Castillo, most of them for alleged corruption, under the theory that he had used his power to profit from public works.

The power struggle in Perú’s capital has continued as the Andes and its thousands of small farms struggle to survive the worst drought in a half-century. Without rain, farmers can’t plant potatoes, and the dying grass can no longer sustain herds of sheep, alpacas, vicuñas and llamas. Making matters worse, avian flu has killed at least 18,000 sea birds and infected at least one poultry producer, endangering the chicken and turkeys raised for traditional holiday meals.

The government also confirmed that in the past week, the country has suffered a fifth wave of COVID-19 infections. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 4.3 million Peruvians have been infected, and 217,000 of them have died.

The first president to come from a poor farming community in the nation’s history, Castillo arrived in the presidential palace last year without any political experience. He changed his cabinet five times during his year and a half in office, running through 60 different cabinet officials, leaving various government agencies paralyzed.

Although Castillo is the first president to be investigated while still in office, the probes are no surprise in a country where nearly every former president in the last 40 years have been charged with corruption linked to multinational corporations, such as the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht.

Since 2016, Perú has been entrenched in political crises, with congresses and presidents trying to eliminate each other in turn. President Martín Vizcarra (2018-2020) dissolved Congress in 2019 and ordered new elections. That new legislature removed Vizcarra the next year. Then came President Manuel Merino, who lasted less than a week before a crackdown killed two protesters and injured 200 more. His successor, Francisco Sagasti, lasted nine months before Castillo took over.

Castillo on Wednesday became the second ex-president currently in custody in the country. A former Peruvian president, Alberto Fujimori, is serving a 25-year sentence for murder and corruption charges dating to his 1990-2000 rule.

Idaho police seek car seen near site where 4 students killed

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Police are asking for help finding the occupant of a car that was seen near where four University of Idaho students were stabbed to death last month, saying that person could have “critical information” about the case.

The Moscow Police Department issued a statement Wednesday afternoon asking for the public’s help tracking down the person or people inside a white Hyundai Elantra made between 2011 and 2013 that was near the off-campus home in the early morning hours of Nov. 13. Investigators do not have the sedan’s license plate.

“Your information, whether you believe it is significant or not, might be the piece of the puzzle that helps investigators solve these murders,” the department wrote.

Relatively few details have been released about the slayings of Madison Mogen, Kaylee Goncalves, Xana Kernodle and Ethan Chapin. The police department has not yet named a suspect or made any arrests, and investigators have not yet found a weapon. Autopsies determined the four students were stabbed to death, the attack likely starting while they were sleeping.

“Tips and leads have led investigators to look for additional information about a vehicle being in the immediate area of the King Street residence during the early morning hours of November 13th. Investigators believe the occupant(s) of this vehicle may have critical information to share regarding this case,” the department wrote in a news release. “If you know of or own a vehicle matching this description, or know

of anyone who may have been driving this vehicle on the days preceding or the day of the murders, please forward that information to the Tip Line.”

The Moscow Police Department asked anyone with information to email or call its tip line at 208-883-7180. The FBI, which is assisting in the investigation, has created a website where people can upload security camera footage or other digital media from the area that was recorded around the time of the killings.

The four stabbing victims were friends and members of the university’s Greek system. The killings have left the close-knit community of Moscow stunned and grieving, shattering the sense of safety many had in the rural farming and university town. Mogen, Goncalves and Kernodle lived together with two other roommates in the rental home just across the street from campus, and Chapin — Kernodle’s boyfriend — was there visiting.

Moscow Police Chief James Fry was at the rental home with other law enforcement officers on Wednesday, collecting some of the things that belonged to the victims so they could be returned to their families. He’d announced the plan on Monday, saying that returning meaningful items to the families would hopefully help the families’ healing.

A lot of resources have been dedicated to solving the case, including six detectives with the Moscow department, 48 FBI investigators and more than a dozen Idaho State Police investigators.

“We’re going to do our job and we’re going to do this to the best of our ability,” Fry said outside the home on Wednesday. “We owe this to the families, we owe this to the victims, we owe this to our community, so we’re going to continue on.”

Could trawler cams help save world’s dwindling fish stocks?

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — For years, Mark Hager’s job as an observer aboard New England fishing boats made him a marked man, seen as a meddling cop on the ocean, counting and scrutinizing every cod, haddock and flounder to enforce rules and help set crucial quotas.

On one particularly perilous voyage, he spent 12 days at sea and no crew member uttered even a single word to him.

Now Hager is working to replace such federally-mandated observers with high-definition cameras affixed to fishing boat masts. From the safety of his office, Hager uses a laptop to watch hours of footage of crew members hauling the day’s catch aboard and measuring it with long sticks marked with thick black lines. And he’s able to zoom in on every fish to verify its size and species, noting whether it is kept or flung overboard in accordance with the law.

“Once you’ve seen hundreds of thousands of pounds of these species it becomes second nature,” said Hager as he toggled from one fish to another.

Hager’s Maine-based start-up, New England Maritime Monitoring, is one of several companies seeking to help commercial vessels comply with new U.S. mandates aimed at protecting dwindling fish stocks. It’s a brisk business as demand for sustainably caught seafood and around-the-clock monitoring has exploded from the Gulf of Alaska to the Straits of Florida.

But taking the technology overseas, where the vast majority of seafood consumed in the U.S. is caught, is a steep challenge. Only a few countries can match the U.S.’s strict regulatory oversight. And China -- the world’s biggest seafood supplier with a record of illegal fishing -- appears unlikely to embrace the fishing equivalent of a police bodycam.

The result, scientists fear, could be that well-intended initiatives to replenish fish stocks and reduce unintentional bycatch of threatened species like sharks and sea turtles could backfire: By adding to the regulatory burdens already faced by America’s skippers, more fishing could be transferred overseas and further out of view of conservationists and consumers.

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 61 of 88

"The challenge now is getting the political will," said Jamie Gibbon, an environmental scientist at The Pew Charitable Trusts who is leading its efforts to promote electronic monitoring internationally. "We are getting close to the point where the technology is reliable enough that countries are going to have to show whether they are committed or not to transparency and responsible fisheries management."

To many advocates, electronic monitoring is something of a silver bullet.

Since 1970, the world's fish population has plummeted, to the point that today 35% of commercial stocks are overfished. Meanwhile, an estimated 11% of U.S. seafood imports come from illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission.

To sustainably manage what's left, scientists need reliable data on the activities of the tens of thousands of fishing vessels that ply the oceans every day, the vast majority with little supervision.

Traditional tools like captains' logbooks and dockside inspections provide limited information. Meanwhile, independent observers — a linchpin in the fight against illegal fishing — are scarce: barely 2,000 globally. In the U.S., the number of trained people willing to take underpaid jobs involving long stretches at sea in an often-dangerous fishing industry has been unable to keep pace with ever-growing demand for bait-to-plate traceability.

Even when observers are on deck, the data they collect is sometimes skewed.

A recent study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found that when an observer was on deck New England skippers changed their behavior in subtle but important ways that degraded the quality of fisheries data, a phenomenon known as "observer bias."

"The fact is human observers are annoying," Hager said. "Nobody wants them there, and when they aren't being threatened or bribed, the data they provide is deeply flawed because it's a proven fact that fishermen behave differently when they're being watched."

Enter electronic monitoring. For as little as \$10,000, vessels can be equipped with high-resolution cameras, sensors and other technology capable of providing a safe, reliable look at what was once a giant blind spot. Some setups allow the video to be transmitted by satellite or cellular data back to shore in real time — delivering the sort of transparency that was previously unthinkable.

"This isn't your grandfather's fishery anymore," said Captain Al Cottone, who recently had cameras installed on his 45-foot groundfish trawler, the Sabrina Maria. "If you're going to sail, you just turn the cameras on and you go."

Despite such advantages, video monitoring has been slow to catch on since its debut in the late 1990s as a pilot program to stop crab overfishing off British Columbia. Only about 1,500 of the world's 400,000 industrial fishing vessels have installed such monitoring systems. About 600 of those vessels are in the U.S., which has been driving innovation in the field.

"We're still in the infancy stages," said Brett Alger, an official at NOAA charged with rolling out electronic monitoring in the U.S.

The stakes are especially high in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean — home to the world's largest tuna fishery. Observer coverage of the Pacific's longline fleet, which numbers around 100,000 boats, is around 2% — well below the 20% minimum threshold scientists say they need to assess a fish stock's health. Also, observer coverage has been suspended altogether in the vast region since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, even though the roughly 1 billion hooks placed in the water each year has barely ebbed.

"Right now we're flying blind," said Mark Zimring, an environmental scientist for The Nature Conservancy focused on spreading video monitoring to large-scale fisheries around the world. "We don't even have the basic science to get the rules of the game right."

The lack of internationally-accepted protocols and technical standards has slowed progress for video monitoring, as have the high costs associated with reviewing abundant amounts of footage on shore. Hager says some of those costs will fall as machine learning and artificial intelligence — technology his company is experimenting with — ease the burden on analysts who have to sit through hours of repetitive video.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 62 of 88

Market pressure may also spur faster adoption. Recently, Bangkok-based Thai Union, owner of the Red Lobster restaurants and Chicken of the Sea tuna brand, committed to having 100% "on-the-water" monitoring of its vast tuna supply chain by 2025. Most of that is to come from electronic monitoring.

But by far the biggest obstacle to a faster rollout internationally is the lack of political will.

That's most dramatic on the high seas, the traditionally lawless waters that compromise nearly half the planet. There, the task of managing the public's resources is left to inter-governmental organizations where decisions are taken based on consensus, so that objections from any single country are tantamount to a veto.

Of the 13 regional fisheries management organizations in the world, only six require on-board monitoring — observers or cameras — to enforce rules on gear usage, unintentional catches and quotas, according to a 2019 study by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which advises nations on economic policy.

Among the worst offenders is China. Despite boasting the world's largest fishing fleet, with at least 3,000 industrial-sized vessels operating internationally, and tens of thousands closer to home, China has fewer than 100 observers. Electronic monitoring consists of just a few pilot programs.

Unlike in the U.S., where on-water monitoring is used to prepare stock assessments that drive policy, fisheries management in China is more primitive and enforcement of the rules spotty at best.

Last year, China deployed just two scientists to monitor a few hundred vessels that spent months fishing for squid near the Galapagos Islands. At the same time, it has blocked a widely backed proposal at the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization to boost observer requirements

"If they want to do something they definitely can," said Yong Chen, a fisheries scientist whose lab at Stony Brook University in New York hosts regular exchanges with China. "It's just a question of priorities."

Hazards faced by observers are highest outside U.S. waters, where electronic monitoring is used the least. Sixteen observers have died around the world since 2010, according to the U.S.-based Association for Professional Observers.

Many of the deaths involve observers from impoverished South Pacific islands working for low pay and with little training and support — even when placed on American-flagged vessels that are subject to federal safety regulations. Such working conditions expose observers to bribery and threats by unscrupulous captains who themselves are under pressure to make every voyage count.

"It's in our best interest to have really professional data collection, a safe environment and lots of support from the (U.S.) government," said Teresa Turk, a former observer who was part of a team of outside experts that in 2017 carried out a comprehensive safety review for NOAA in the aftermath of several observer fatalities.

Back in the U.S., those who make their living from commercial fishing still view cameras warily as something of a double-edged sword.

Just ask Scott Taylor.

His Day Boat Seafood in 2011 became one of the first longline companies in the world to carry an eco-label from the Marine Stewardship Council — the industry's gold standard. As part of that sustainability drive, the Fort Pierce, Florida, company blazed a trail for video monitoring that spread throughout the U.S.' Atlantic tuna fleet.

"I really believed in it. I thought it was a game changer," he said.

But his enthusiasm turned when NOAA used the videos to bring civil charges against him last year for what he says was an accidental case of illegal fishing.

The bust stems from trips made by four tuna boats managed by Day Boat to a tiny fishing hole bound on all sides by the Bahamas' exclusive economic zone and a U.S. conservation area off limits to commercial fishing. Evidence reviewed by the AP show that Taylor's boats were fishing legally inside U.S. waters when they dropped their hooks. But hours later some of the gear, carried by hard-to-predict underwater eddies, drifted a few miles over an invisible line into Bahamian waters.

Geolocated video footage was essential to proving the government's case, showing how the boats pulled up 48 fish — swordfish, tuna and mahi mahi — while retrieving their gear in Bahamian waters.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 63 of 88

As a result, NOAA levied a whopping \$300,000 fine that almost bankrupted Taylor's business and has had a chilling effect up and down the East Coast's tuna fleet.

When electronic monitoring was getting started a decade ago, it appealed to fishermen who thought that the more reliable data might help the government reopen coastal areas closed to commercial fishing since the 1980s, when the fleet was five times larger. Articles on NOAA's website promised the technology would be used to monitor tuna stocks with greater precision, not play Big Brother.

"They had everyone snowballed," said Martin Scanlon, a New York-based skipper who heads the Blue Water Fishermen's Association, which represents the fleet of around 90 longline vessels. "Never once did they mention it would be used as a compliance tool."

Meanwhile, for Taylor, his two-year fight with the federal government has cost him dearly. He's had to lay off workers, lease out boats and can no longer afford the licensing fee for the ecolabel he worked so hard to get. Most painful of all, he's abandoned his dream of one day passing the fishing business on to his children.

"The technology today is incredibly effective," Taylor said. "But until foreign competitors are held to the same high standards, the only impact from all this invasiveness will be to put the American commercial fishermen out of business."

Hawaii remembrance draws handful of Pearl Harbor survivors

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii (AP) — A handful of centenarian survivors of the attack on Pearl Harbor joined about 2,500 members of the public at the scene of the Japanese bombing on Wednesday to commemorate those who perished 81 years ago.

The audience sat quietly during a moment of silence at 7:55 a.m., the same time the attack began on Dec. 7, 1941.

Sailors aboard the USS Daniel Inouye stood along the rails of the guided missile destroyer while it passed both by the grassy shoreline where the ceremony was held and the USS Arizona Memorial to honor the survivors and those killed in the attack. Ken Stevens, a 100-year-old survivor from the USS Whitney, returned the salute.

"The ever-lasting legacy of Pearl Harbor will be shared at this site for all time, as we must never forget those who came before us so that we can chart a more just and peaceful path for those who follow," said Tom Leatherman, superintendent of the Pearl Harbor National Memorial.

About 2,400 servicemen were killed in the bombing, which launched the U.S. into World War II. The USS Arizona alone lost 1,177 sailors and Marines, nearly half the death toll. Most of the Arizona's fallen remained entombed in the ship, which sits on the harbor floor.

Ira Schab, 102, was on the USS Dobbin as a tuba player in the ship's band. He recalls seeing Japanese planes flying overhead and wondering what to do.

"We had no place to go and hoped they'd miss us," he said before the ceremony began.

He fed ammunition to machine gunners on the vessel, which wasn't hit.

He's now attended the remembrance ceremony four times.

"I wouldn't miss it because I got an awful lot of friends that are still here that are buried here. I come back out of respect for them," he said.

Schab stayed in the Navy during the war. After the war, he studied aerospace engineering and worked on the Apollo program. Today he lives in Portland, Oregon.

He wants people to remember those who served that day.

"Remember what they're here for. Remember and honor those that are left. They did a hell of a job. Those who are still here, dead or alive," he said.

Only six survivors attended, fewer than the dozen or more who have traveled to Hawaii from across the country for the annual remembrance ceremony in recent years.

Part of the decline reflects the dwindling number of survivors as they age. The youngest active-duty military personnel on Dec. 7, 1941, would have been about 17, making them 98 today. Many of those still

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 64 of 88

alive are at least 100.

Herb Elfring, 100, of Jackson, Michigan, said was great that many members of the public showed interest in the commemoration and attended the ceremony.

"So many people don't even know where Pearl Harbor is or what happened on that day," he said.

Elfring was in the Army, assigned to the 251st Coast Artillery, part of the California National Guard. He remembers hearing bombs explode a few miles down the coast at Pearl Harbor but thought it was part of an exercise.

But then he saw a red ball on the fuselage of a Japanese Zero fighter plane when it strafed the ground alongside him near his barracks at Camp Malakole.

"That was a rude awakening," he said. One soldier in his unit was injured by the bullets, but no one died, he said.

Robert John Lee recalls being a 20-year-old civilian living at his parent's home on the naval base where his father ran the water pumping station. The home was just about 1 mile (1.6 kilometers) across the harbor from where the USS Arizona was moored on battleship row.

The first explosions before 8 a.m. woke him up, making him think a door was slamming in the wind. He got up to yell for someone to shut the door only to look out the window at Japanese planes dropping torpedo bombs from the sky.

He saw the hull of the USS Arizona turn a deep orange-red after an aerial bomb hit it.

"Within a few seconds, that explosion then came out with huge tongues of flame right straight up over the ship itself — but hundreds of feet up," Lee said in an interview Monday after a boat tour of the harbor.

He still remembers the hissing sound of the fire.

Sailors jumped into the water to escape their burning ships and swam to the landing near Lee's house. Many were covered in the thick, heavy oil that coated the harbor. Lee and his mother used Fels-Naptha soap to help wash them. Sailors who were able to boarded small boats that shuttled them back to their vessels.

"Very heroic, I thought," Lee said of them.

Lee joined the Hawaii Territorial Guard the next day, and later the U.S. Navy. He worked for Pan American World Airways for 30 years after the war.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs doesn't have statistics for how many Pearl Harbor survivors are still living. But department data show that of the 16 million who served in World War II, only about 240,000 were alive as of August and some 230 die each day.

There were about 87,000 military personnel on Oahu at the time of the attack, according to a rough estimate compiled by military historian J. Michael Wenger.

Putin says Ukraine fight is taking longer than expected

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged Wednesday that his "special military operation" in Ukraine is taking longer than expected but said it has succeeded in seizing new territory and added that his country's nuclear weapons are deterring escalation of the conflict.

"Of course, it could be a lengthy process," Putin said of the more than 9-month-old war that began with Russia's invasion Feb. 24 and has displaced millions from their homes, and killed and wounded tens of thousands. Despite its length, he showed no signs of letting up, vowing to "consistently fight for our interests" and to "protect ourselves using all means available." He reiterated his claim that he had no choice but to send in troops, saying that for years, the West responded to Russia's security demands with "only spit in the face."

Speaking in a televised meeting in Russia with members of his Human Rights Council, Putin described the land gains as "a significant result for Russia," noting that the Sea of Azov "has become Russia's internal sea." In one of his frequent historic references to a Russian leader he admires, he added that "Peter the Great fought to get access" to that body of water.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 65 of 88

After failing to take Kyiv due to fierce Ukrainian resistance, Russia seized broad swaths of southern Ukraine at the start of the invasion and captured the key Sea of Azov port of Mariupol in May after a nearly three-month siege. In September, Putin illegally annexed four Ukrainian regions even though his forces didn't completely control them: Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in the south, and Donetsk and Luhansk in the east. In 2014, he had illegally annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

In response to an increasing influx of advanced Western weapons, economic, political and humanitarian aid to Kyiv and what he saw as Western leaders' inflammatory statements, Putin has periodically hinted at his potential use of nuclear weapons. When a member of the Human Rights Council asked him Wednesday to pledge that Russia would not be the first to use such weapons, Putin demurred. He said Russia would not be able to use nuclear weapons at all if it agreed not to use them first and then came under a nuclear strike.

"If it doesn't use it first under any circumstances, it means that it won't be the second to use it either, because the possibility of using it in case of a nuclear strike on our territory will be sharply limited," he said.

Putin rejected Western criticism that his previous nuclear weapons comments amounted to saber-rattling, claiming they were "not a factor provoking an escalation of conflicts, but a factor of deterrence."

"We haven't gone mad. We are fully aware of what nuclear weapons are," Putin said. He added, without elaborating: "We have them, and they are more advanced and state-of-the-art than what any other nuclear power has."

In his televised remarks, the Russian leader didn't address Russia's battlefield setbacks or its attempts to cement control over the seized regions but acknowledged problems with supplies, treatment of wounded soldiers and limited desertions.

Russian troops have withdrawn not only from the Kyiv area and around the country's largest city, Kharkiv, but from a large part of the Kherson region. Another problem for Putin are attacks this week against air force bases deep inside Russia. He put much of the country, especially border areas, on security alert recently, and fresh signs emerged Wednesday that Russian officials are strengthening border defensive positions.

In the Kursk region bordering Ukraine, the governor posted photos of new concrete anti-tank barriers — known as "dragon's teeth" — in open fields. On Tuesday, the governor had said a fire broke out at an airport in the region after a drone strike. In neighboring Belgorod, workers were expanding anti-tank barriers and officials were organizing "self-defense units." Belgorod has seen numerous fires and explosions, apparently from cross-border attacks, and its governor reported Wednesday that Russia's air defenses have shot down incoming rockets.

In brazen drone attacks, two strategic Russian air bases more than 500 kilometers (300 miles) from the Ukraine border were struck Monday. Moscow blamed Ukraine, which didn't claim responsibility.

Moscow responded with strikes by artillery, multiple rocket launchers, missiles, tanks and mortars at residential buildings and civilian infrastructure, worsening damage to the power grid. Private Ukrainian power utility Ukrenergo said temperatures in eastern areas where it was making repairs had dropped to as low as minus 17 degrees Celsius (near zero Fahrenheit).

At his meeting, Putin discussed the mobilization of 300,000 reservists that he ordered in September to bolster forces in Ukraine. He said only about 150,000 have been deployed so far to combat zones and the rest are still undergoing training. Addressing speculation that the Kremlin could be preparing another mobilization, Putin said: "There is no need for the Defense Ministry and the country to do that."

In other developments:

— Ukraine's presidential office said Russian forces overnight struck nine regions in the east and south, and resumed using Iranian-made Shahed drones after supply difficulties. First appearing in Ukraine in late August, the Shahed drones were Moscow's weapon of choice to cause power blackouts. Britain's Ministry of Defense said last month Russia was running out of the drones but would probably seek replacements.

— In the city of Kherson, a 43-year-old waterworks employee was killed when Russian shelling ignited a fire and damaged residential buildings, the presidential office said. In the Donetsk region, Moscow is

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 66 of 88

pressing an offensive near Bakhmut and Avdiivka, with some 20 towns and villages under fire, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine said. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said four Kherson police were killed dealing with mines Russian forces left behind when they retreated.

— The U.N.'s human rights office documented 441 killings by Russian forces in three regions, including the town of Bucha, early in the war. The head of the U.N.'s monitoring mission in Ukraine, Matilda Bogner, said it has no information that Russia has been investigating or prosecuting alleged crimes in Ukraine, while Ukrainian authorities are struggling to do so because of the "sheer volume of allegations and forensic challenges."

— NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Russia appears to be slowing its military activities in Ukraine for the winter to regroup and launch a new offensive when the weather warms. Stoltenberg said at a Financial Times event it's important for NATO and its partners to continue supporting Ukraine, especially with no sign of peace talks.

— An Orthodox priest from eastern Ukraine has been sentenced to 12 years in prison for passing military information to Russian forces, Ukraine's prosecutor general reported. Authorities have been searching sites tied to the Russian-backed wing of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

— Ukraine's top diplomat said its diplomatic missions have faced attacks in the past week, with more than 30 suspect packages, including some containing animal parts, sent to embassies and consulates in 15 countries. Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said the deliveries have occurred in Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Denmark, as well as a consulate in the Polish city of Gdańsk.

Warnock delivers 51-seat Senate for Democrats, and much more

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — For Senate Democrats, an oh-so-slim 51-49 majority never sounded so good.

Sen. Raphael Warnock's victory in swing-state Georgia gives Democrats a welcome "lift," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Wednesday at the Capitol -- newly confident of sidelining Trump-inspired Republicans in Congress and reaching across the aisle to other GOP lawmakers to deliver on bipartisan priorities with President Joe Biden.

"If we can get some bipartisan things done, it will of course be better for the country. And it will be better for the Republican Party," he said.

Tuesday's election was for just one seat, but Warnock's win in the tight runoff provides an unexpected capstone to the midterm election cycle for his party. It makes easier for Senate Democrats to organize and govern, and provides a crucial edge in a divided Congress as Republicans take hold of the House.

Gone is the especially intense political pressure of a 50-50 Senate that required all Democrats to toe the line -- and made it possible for a single senator, notably Joe Manchin, to buck party priorities.

When the new Congress assembles in January, the extra seat will give Senate Democrats a solid majority that provides greater control over not just floor votes but also the committees, which are the backbeat of legislating.

And mostly gone will be the days when Capitol Hill came to a standstill awaiting Vice President Kamala Harris' motorcade for her role of breaking tie votes -- particularly for Biden's nominees -- which she has had to do more often than any predecessor.

"Chuck Schumer's job is going to get a lot easier," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va.

After the longest evenly split Senate in modern times, the new dynamic ensures the chamber will serve as a barrier to legislation from the Republican House that Democrats disagree with — and a potential bridge for bipartisan deal making as Republicans assess the post-Trump landscape.

While it still takes 60 votes to overcome a filibuster and advance most bills in the Senate, there will be ample grounds for compromise, particularly if Republican leader Mitch McConnell is eager to show voters his party can deliver ahead of the 2024 presidential and congressional elections.

McConnell was silent Wednesday on Warnock's victory and the new political reality.

In January, for starters, Democrats will have an easier time using their 51-49 majority for simple tasks

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 67 of 88

of governing, including votes on Biden's nominees to judicial and executive positions, which Republicans have wielded as weapons.

The same goes for committee action. The Democrats will now have full power to send legislation to the Senate floor, overcoming Republican objections that can drag out the process. They also will have subpoena power, which they plan to use for investigating corporate America.

Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin, D-Ill., had kind words for the top Republicans on what has been his evenly divided panel.

"Chuck Grassley is a friend, we've been able to work together. And I'm confident we can do that again with Senator Graham," said Durbin, referring to Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who will take Grassley's place in the new Senate.

"But," said Durbin, "we're in a better position to bargain."

Key Republicans had regrets Wednesday over their failure to pick up that vital 51st seat, blaming their losses in large part on the party's focus on relitigating the 2020 election that Donald Trump, the former president, lost to Biden.

"That was a losing argument," said Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, the No. 2 Republican, about the stolen election claims.

His party lost the GOP-held seat in Pennsylvania that was open due to a retirement. Every Democratic incumbent won, an unexpected accomplishment and a first for a party in power in decades.

As Republicans struggle to emerge from the midterms, Democrats intend to capitalize on the GOP's Trump divisions and win over some Republicans for bipartisan projects -- much the way they did this session in passing a bipartisan infrastructure bill, a computer chips package and others.

"There are a good number of Republicans in the Senate and the House who are not MAGA," Schumer said, referring to Trump's campaign slogan, Make America Great Again.

"It is my intention to reach out to them" and see how both sides can work in a bipartisan way, he said.

"You say, 'Oh, that will never happen,'" Schumer said, answering likely skeptics. "Well look at what happened this summer with 50-50."

Schumer declined to outline the party's agenda for the new term, saying it's still a work in progress. Both parties are expected to take their annual retreats at the start of the year to assemble their priorities.

"It gives us just a lift — the fact that we got the 51 votes," Schumer said.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, the influential Vermont independent who caucuses with the Democrats, said the increased majority will make it "much easier to go forward in a progressive way."

Watchdog finds prison failures before Whitey Bulger killing

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The beating death of notorious gangster James "Whitey" Bulger at the hands of fellow inmates was the result of multiple layers of management failures, widespread incompetence and flawed policies at the Bureau of Prisons, the Justice Department's inspector general said in a report Wednesday.

At least six bureau workers should be disciplined, the watchdog concluded after the multiyear investigation into how the 89-year-old was killed in his cell hours after the FBI informant arrived at a troubled West Virginia prison.

The inspector general found no evidence of "malicious intent" by any bureau employees, but said a series of bureaucratic blunders left Bulger at the mercy of rival gangsters behind bars. The report did not find evidence of federal criminal violations, focusing instead on prison policies and workings.

Bureau officials tried several times to downgrade Bulger's medical status in order to move him to other prisons after he caused trouble at a Florida lockup, despite the fact that he used a wheelchair and had serious heart conditions.

News of Bulger's transfer to West Virginia's USP Hazelton was shared widely among agency officials and quickly spread among inmates before his arrival. Bureau officials failed to take into account or were unaware of Bulger's notoriety in their handling of his transfer despite his well-known history as an FBI asset.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 68 of 88

"In our view, no BOP inmate's transfer, whether they are a notorious offender or a non-violent offender, should be handled like Bulger's transfer was in this instance," the report said.

It's the latest black eye for the bureau, which has been under increasing scrutiny from Congress and the public after the deaths of several high-profile inmates, including Bulger and wealthy financier Jeffrey Epstein, who died in custody in 2019.

An Associated Press investigation has found myriad crises within the agency, including widespread criminal conduct by employees, rampant allegations of sexual assault and significant staffing shortages that have hampered responses to emergencies.

Since Bulger's death, prisons officials have improved communications regarding medical transfers and improved training and technology, the agency said in a statement in response to the report. The bureau said it may take more action, but did not comment on whether any employees were disciplined.

Bulger was portrayed by Johnny Depp in the 2015 film "Black Mass" and was the inspiration for Jack Nicholson's ruthless crime boss in the 2006 movie "The Departed." Bulger led a largely Irish mob that ran loan-sharking, gambling and drug rackets. He served as an FBI informant who provided information on the New England mob in an era when bringing down organized crime was a top national priority for the FBI.

He fled Boston in late 1994 after his FBI handler warned him he was about to be indicted and spent 16 years as one of America's most wanted figures before he was captured at age 81 in Santa Monica, California. He was convicted in 2013 in 11 slayings, as well as extortion, and money laundering.

Bulger's transfer to Hazelton, where workers had already been sounding the alarm about violence and understaffing, and placement in the general population instead of more protective housing were widely criticized by experts after his killing.

More than 100 Bureau of Prisons officials found out in advance that Bulger would be moving to Hazelton, and prison staff openly talked about the transfer in front of inmates, the inspector general's report said. So many prison employees knew that it was impossible for the inspector general to determine who disclosed it to the inmates, the report said.

Multiple inmates told bureau officials that everyone knew Bulger would be killed, the report said. One inmate said: "He was a rat. What would you think would happen to him?" Another said: "I heard he was a well-known government informant. ... Seems he shouldn't have walked the yard. He wouldn't have been OK anywhere."

There was no formal process for deciding which unit to house inmates at Hazelton. One case manager told investigators they "just choose them off the bus normally," according to the report. In Bulger's case, a unit manager volunteered to take him, believing his team was best-equipped to handle the high-profile inmate — even though there was at least one other inmate associated with organized crime in that unit.

Bulger's family accused prison officials in a lawsuit of failing to protect Bulger even though officials knew he was labeled a "snitch." A judge dismissed that case in January, concluding that federal law precludes the family's ability to sue over a decision to transfer Bulger.

Hank Brennan, a lawyer for Bulger's family who also defended Bulger at his trial, called the inspector general's report an attempt to "absolve numerous government agencies and employees of intentional wrongdoing."

"They tortured him, abused him, deprived him of any human dignity because they could. And when they were done ... they sent him to his death," Brennan said in an email.

The Justice Department only brought charges in the killing this year, nearly four years later, even though officials had identified suspects right away.

Fotios "Freddy" Geas, a former Mafia hitman, and Paul J. DeCologero, a Massachusetts gangster, are accused of striking Bulger in the head multiple times while a third man, Sean McKinnon, acted as a lookout. An inmate witness told authorities that DeCologero said he and Geas used a belt with a lock attached to it to beat Bulger to death, prosecutors say.

They could face up to life in prison if convicted of conspiracy to commit first-degree murder under a revised indictment filed Wednesday with a heftier potential sentence. They have pleaded not guilty and McKinnon has said denied involvement in the killing.

According to the watchdog's report, Bulger's medical and psychological health declined after he was housed alone in single cell in Florida for eight months — disciplined for threatening a nurse — and prison staff struggled to figure out how to get him transferred. Bulger told prison staff "he had lost the will to live," and that may have been a factor when he insisted that he wanted to be housed with the rest of the inmates in West Virginia rather than in a more protected unit.

Bulger never admitted to working with the FBI, although evidence presented at his trial showed Bulger secretly provided information on a variety of criminals. Court papers made public in his family's civil case showed that he was interviewed by staff after arriving at Hazelton. An intake screening form signed by Bulger said he answered "no" when asked whether he ever assisted law enforcement agents in any way and if he knew of any reason he should not be placed in the general population.

Justices skeptical of elections case that could alter voting

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday seemed skeptical of making a broad ruling that would leave state legislatures virtually unchecked in making rules for congressional and presidential elections.

In nearly three hours of arguments, liberal and conservative justices appeared to take issue with the main thrust of a challenge asking them to essentially eliminate the power of state courts to strike down legislature-drawn, gerrymandered congressional district maps on grounds that they violate state constitutions.

But it was harder to see exactly where the court would land. In particular, a trio of conservative justices who probably control the outcome, Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett, indicated they might be open to imposing restraints on state court power in limited circumstances.

The case has profound potential effects on elections and democracy, and it is also a fresh test for the court that increasingly has been criticized as having become politicized.

Republicans from North Carolina who brought the case to the high court argue that a provision of the U.S. Constitution known as the elections clause gives state lawmakers virtually total control over the "times, places and manner" of congressional elections, including redistricting. That means cutting state courts out of the process, they say.

The Republicans are advancing a concept called the "independent legislature theory," never adopted by the Supreme Court but previously cited approvingly by four conservative justices. In the courtroom Wednesday, Justice Elena Kagan, a liberal, branded it "a novel challenge" that "that gets rid of the normal checks and balances."

A broad ruling could threaten hundreds of election laws, require separate rules for federal and state elections on the same ballot and lead to new efforts to redraw congressional districts to maximize partisan advantage.

"This is a theory with big consequences," Kagan said, that would allow for the "most extreme forms of gerrymandering from legislatures." The other liberal justices, Sonia Sotomayor and Ketanji Brown Jackson, also appeared favorable to the role of state courts in the process.

David Thompson, the lawyer representing the North Carolina Republicans, said overly partisan redistricting was a problem that the framers of the Constitution thought should be addressed in the political arena, not state or federal courthouses.

On the other side, lawyers defending the role of state courts told the justices that major changes to elections could result from their decision.

Fully embracing what Thompson argued for "would wreak havoc in the administration of elections across the nation," Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar said, representing the Biden administration. Neal Katyal, representing North Carolina voters and voter advocacy groups, warned of a large "blast radius" from a ruling for the North Carolina Republicans.

If there seemed a lack of support for the broadest outcome, Roberts on several occasions talked about

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 70 of 88

the tension between federal and state judicial power.

"So you do accept the proposition that there is a role for this court in particular to assess ... how that conflict is worked out in a particular case?" Roberts asked Prelogar.

Barrett also asked questions suggesting that she believes state courts could go too far in trying to police federal elections in a way that could violate the U.S. Constitution.

The court's decision in the North Carolina case also might suggest how the justices would deal with another part of the Constitution — not at issue in the current case — that gives legislatures the authority to decide how presidential electors are appointed. That provision, the electors clause, was central to efforts to try to overturn the outcome of the 2020 presidential election in several closely contested states.

The North Carolina state Supreme Court struck down districts drawn by Republicans who control the legislature because they heavily favored Republicans in the highly competitive state. The court-drawn map used in last month's elections for Congress produced a 7-7 split between Democrats and Republicans.

North Carolina is among six states in recent years in which state courts have ruled that overly partisan redistricting for Congress violated their state constitutions. The others are Florida, Maryland, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

State courts have become the only legal forum for challenging partisan congressional maps since the Supreme Court ruled in 2019 that those lawsuits cannot be brought in federal court.

Roberts, writing then for the court and joined by four other conservative justices, noted that state courts remained able to act.

"Provisions in state statutes and state constitutions can provide standards and guidance for state courts to apply," Roberts wrote, in an opinion joined by Justices Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, Clarence Thomas and Kavanaugh.

But Alito, Gorsuch and Thomas seemed mostly to favor North Carolina's arguments Wednesday limiting state courts' authority.

"What is the source of the authority for the state of North Carolina's Supreme Court to be involved in a federal election?" Thomas asked.

Alito suggested that elected state court judges have no role to play in congressional redistricting.

"So there's been a lot of talk about the impact of this decision on democracy. Do you think that it furthers democracy to transfer the political controversy about districting from the legislature to elected supreme courts where the candidates are permitted by state law to campaign on the issue of districting?" he asked.

Gorsuch said that preserving the North Carolina court ruling might be politically popular because it was aimed at combating partisan line-drawing, but that the same logic might have led in earlier eras to upholding politically odious positions enshrined in state constitutions, including counting enslaved Black people as three-fifths of a person under Virginia's constitution.

"The political saliency point depends on whose ox is being gored at a particular point in time," Gorsuch said.

Donald Verrilli, representing North Carolina in defense of its court ruling, said the Supreme Court should not ignore what he described as rising opposition to partisan gerrymandering.

"It's more than whose ox is being gored. This is a very important issue in this country," said Verrilli, who previously served as the Obama administration's top Supreme Court lawyer.

Kavanaugh has separately written about a need for federal courts to police the actions of state courts when it comes to federal elections, citing an opinion by three conservatives in the Bush v. Gore case that settled the 2000 presidential election. Thomas was one of the three justices on that 22-year-old opinion, but the court decided the case on other grounds.

In North Carolina, Republican lawmakers won't have to wait for the high court's decision in Washington to produce a new congressional map that is expected to have more Republican districts.

Even as Democrats won half the state's 14 congressional seats, Republicans seized control of the state Supreme Court. Two newly elected Republican justices give them a 5-2 edge that makes it more likely the state court would uphold a map with more Republican districts.

Interracial marriages to get added protection under new law

By DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — One day in the 1970s, Paul Fleisher and his wife were walking through a department store parking lot when they noticed a group of people looking at them. Fleisher, who is white, and his wife, who is Black, were used to “the look.” But this time it was more intense.

“There was this white family who was just staring at us, just staring holes in us,” Fleisher recalled.

That fraught moment occurred even though any legal uncertainty about the validity of interracial marriage had ended a decade earlier — in 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down state laws banning marriages between people of different races.

In the more than half-century since, interracial marriage has become more common and far more accepted. So Fleisher was surprised that Congress felt the need to include an additional protection in the Respect for Marriage Act, which goes to the House for a final vote expected this week. It would ensure that not only same-sex marriages, but also interracial marriages, are enshrined in federal law.

The 74-year-old Fleisher, a retired teacher and children’s book author, attended segregated public schools in the 1950s in the then-Jim Crow South, and later saw what he called “token desegregation” in high school, when four Black students were in his senior class of about 400 students.

He and his wife, Debra Sims Fleisher, 73, live outside Richmond, about 50 miles from Caroline County, where Mildred Jeter, a Black woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, were arrested and charged in 1958 with marrying out of state and returning to Virginia, where interracial marriage was illegal. Their challenge to the law led to *Loving v. Virginia*, the landmark ruling that ended bans against interracial marriages.

The Respect for Marriage Act, which passed the Senate last week, has been picking up steam since June, when the Supreme Court overturned the federal right to an abortion. The ruling included a concurring opinion from Justice Clarence Thomas that suggested the high court should review other precedent-setting rulings, including the 2015 decision legalizing same-sex marriage.

While much of the attention has been focused on protections for same-sex marriages, interracial couples say they are glad Congress also included protections for their marriages, even though their right to marry was well-established decades ago.

“It’s a little unnerving that these things where we made such obvious progress are now being challenged or that we feel we have to really beef up the bulwark to keep them in place,” said Ana Edwards, a historian who lives in Richmond.

Edwards, 62, who is Black, and her husband, Phil Wilayto, 73, who is white, have been married since 2006. Both have been community activists for years and said they didn’t consider interracial marriage a potentially vulnerable institution until the Supreme Court overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling legalizing abortion.

“That reminds all of us that whatever rights we have in this society are conditional — they can be taken away,” said Wilayto. “The fact that Congress had to take up this issue in 2022 should be a stark reminder of that fact for us.”

For younger interracial couples, the thought that their right to marry could ever be threatened is a foreign concept.

“We never in our wildest dreams thought we would need to be protected as an interracial couple,” said Derek Mize, a 42-year-old white attorney who lives in an Atlanta suburb with his husband, Jonathan Gregg, 41, who is Black, and their two children.

As a same-sex couple, they were at the forefront of the long struggle for acceptance and felt the elation that followed the 2015 Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage across the country.

Still, they see the need for new protections for interracial marriages as well.

“We’re really relieved that there is this law,” Mize said. “Protections through the courts and protections through the legislation certainly helps us sleep better at night.”

Mize said he remembers studying *Loving v. Virginia* in law school and thought then that it was “ridiculous” that there had to be litigation over marriages between people of different races. But after he read the Supreme Court’s ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*, he said: “Who knows where it will stop?”

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 72 of 88

Gregg, a management consultant, said he sees the Respect for Marriage Act as “an added level of safety” for same-sex and interracial marriages — a federal law and Supreme Court rulings supporting their right to marry.

“You’ve got two ways to be OK,” he said. “They have to take down both of them in order for your marriage to fall apart.”

Angelo Villagomez, a 44-year-old senior fellow at the think tank Center for American Progress, said it was “unthinkable” that his marriage could become illegal. Villagomez, who is of mixed white and Indigenous Mariana Islands descent, and his wife, Eden Villagomez, 38, who is Filipina, live in Washington, D.C.

But after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, “it feels like some of those things that have just been taken for granted ... are under threat,” said Villagomez, whose parents, also a mixed-race couple, were married in the 1970s, not long after the *Loving* decision.

Villagomez worries about what could come next. “If we don’t put a stop to some of this backsliding, this country is gonna go to a very dark place,” he said.

“I’m worried about what else is on the chopping block.”

How Michelle Williams found the music of Mitzi Fabelman

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In both Steven Spielberg’s “The Fabelmans” and Kelly Reichardt’s upcoming “Showing Up,” Michelle Williams plays women where life — societal hurdles and daily nuisances — gets in the way of self-expression.

Mitzi Fabelman, the early-1960s matriarch based on Spielberg’s own mother, has given up her career as a talented concert pianist to raise a family. It’s a sacrifice that haunts her. It’s also a gift that radiates from her.

“I think of her as the piano that she loved so much,” Williams says. “That range was inside of her. That musicality. That emotional dexterity. That was her art. That music flowed through her, and it affected how deeply she could feel. She was the tornado that she drove into.”

As an actor, Williams has, herself, steered straight into some indelibly tempestuous characters: the romantic of “Blue Valentine,” Marilyn Monroe in “My Week with Marilyn,” the anguished ex-wife of “Manchester by the Sea.” But if there was ever a role that showed the extent of Williams’ remarkable range — her every-note-on-the-piano “emotional dexterity” — it’s Mitzi.

The fictionalized but autobiographical film, currently playing in theaters, centers on Spielberg’s coming of age as a filmmaker. But Mitzi is the film’s aching soul. At turns despondent, playful and ebullient, Mitzi’s moods swing with a quicksilver melancholy, caught between undying devotion to her children and a stifling of her dreams. In many ways, she gives them to her son. It’s Mitzi who gifts young Sammy/Spielberg his first movie camera. “Movies are dreams that you never forget,” she tells him at his first trip to the cinema.

How life filters into work is deeply embedded in Williams’ emotional life as an actor, one drawn from wellsprings of personal memory and illuminated by the kind of metamorphosis Mitzi was denied. How the two relate was on her mind as she spoke in a recent interview by Zoom from her home in Brooklyn. Occasionally, Williams’ newborn, her third child and second with her husband, the theater director Thomas Kail, stirred in the next room. Balancing a baby and a big new movie can be head-spinning. At the recent Gotham Awards where she received a tribute award, Williams stood stunned at the podium: “What is happening? I shouldn’t even be out of the house. I just had a baby.”

But it may be just the start. Williams’ performance in “The Fabelmans” — luminous, enthrallingly theatrical, delicately heartbreaking — is widely expected to land Williams her fifth Academy Award nomination. It’s an honor the 42-year-old is yet to win, a shutout that looks increasingly like some mistake.

But what pushes an actor like Williams -- one of such interior intensity that she hasn’t watched her work in more than a decade -- is closer to her character in “Showing Up.” In it, Williams plays a sculptor of modest human figures, with little hope of attracting a wide audience. The role is almost antithetical to Mitzi; Williams’ character, Lizzy, is solitary and less expressive. Her handmade artwork, crafted in between

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 73 of 88

endless interruptions, is about the opposite of something as big and glitzy as a Spielberg production. But she's compelled, regardless.

"I think it's that way for everybody," says Williams. "You never know if what you're doing is going to be of any interest to anybody but yourself."

Is it true for Williams, too?

"Ab-so-lutely," she answers.

MINING SPIELBERG'S MEMORIES

Spielberg's mother, Leah Adler, died at the age of 97 in 2017. His father, Arnold Spielberg, passed away in 2020 at 103. Making "The Fabelmans," which Tony Kushner and Spielberg wrote through the pandemic, became a way to memorialize the two most influential figures of his life.

In preparation, Spielberg — who had Williams cast in his mind a decade earlier after seeing "Blue Valentine" — gave her copious amounts of home movies and photographs of his mother to comb through. Williams' impressions thoroughly informed her interpretation of Mitzi.

"The resonant information that this woman transmitted through a photograph was enough for me to work with, to embody her," she says. "That's how strong her spirit was. You could catch it in a frozen image taken 60 years ago."

But there was also something that Spielberg, who grew up with three sisters, told Williams about his mom that struck her. He said: "We were more like playmates."

"They got into mischief together. They got into fun," Williams says. "And I'll tell you this: None of her children seem to resent her for it. I think they thought they had a pretty great childhood. They had fun together. How often do we let ourselves really play with our children? What do our children want to do with us? Play! She was Peter Pan."

It's an aspect of Mitzi that may not be terribly far from Williams, herself. It's how she hopes she raised her first daughter, from her relationship with Heath Ledger.

"I love, in that small window of time, to invest as much magic as possible. I do think that childhood is a place where we can generate creative work from for the rest of our lives," says Williams. "I've always felt very protective of my daughter's childhood. Now as I embark on two more childhoods, I can see that because I know what it meant for me.

"I grew up in Montana. I grew up riding horses bareback. I grew up adventuring. I grew up unsupervised. I grew up wandering through natural environments. That wilderness is maybe the best part of me," says Williams. "The desire to feel free and exploratory and like a natural being, like a human animal, is something that I seek out over and over again in my life."

MITZI'S CHOICE

The pivotal event of "The Fabelmans" comes when Mitzi reluctantly leaves her husband (played by Paul Dano) for his best friend (Seth Rogen). It's a defining moment for Sammy, wrapped up in his own dawning realization of the power of cinema to capture, shape and distort reality. For Mitzi, it's a desperate stab at self-preservation.

"I thought she already suffered a near-death experience. When she gave up her dream of being a concert pianist, she experienced what it's like for part of you to die," says Williams. "So when she's faced with another near-death experience — Do I stay in this marriage or do I allow myself to go where my heart is leading? — she knows that she can't die again. There will be nothing left of her."

For Kushner, whose plays fuse domestic life with political currents, Mitzi is a mid-century woman only fitfully experiencing more modern freedoms. He and Williams spoke about the uncertainty and pain of her choice.

"What is this thing in her that allows her to make this decision? Is it her artistry? Is it bravery? Is it how big her emotions are? What allowed this woman to stake a claim on her life like this?" says Williams. "I don't know but I do think it's what's allowed her children to do the same thing, to stake a claim on their own lives. That, I think, is one of the greatest gifts that you give to your kids, showing them how they can be a full person."

LETTING GO

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 74 of 88

Williams' favorite thing to hear on the set was Spielberg behind the monitor saying, "I have an idea." In one especially vivid scene during a campout, Mitzi dances in the headlights of a parked car, swaying to a melody seemingly just out of reach. Spielberg had many impromptu ideas shooting that scene. Williams, coming off Gwen Verdon in the miniseries "Fosse/Verdon," channeled a dancer's composure to give Spielberg as many options as possible. "Mitzi wasn't a dancer per se, but she carried herself like one," she says.

Such moments making "The Fabelmans," Williams says, were so intoxicating that she wanted to "eat the air" on set. When Williams was 12, she decided she wanted to be an actress after seeing not just a play on stage but "the whole beehive behind." "I wanted to be inside of a family," she says. After finding that on "The Fabelmans," letting go of Mitzi wasn't easy.

"It's hard to let them go. It's sad to let them go. You've spent so much time, to exclusion of other things and people in your life, with them," Williams says. "I can allow it to be a slow process of letting go of them. And I can try to cling to the couple or maybe many things that they have taught me. You can't help but be affected by their spirit as it's been residing with you. She certainly was a huge loss for me. I hit the floor when this movie was over. I cried in a way that caught me by surprise."

But there are parts of Mitzi living, still, with Williams.

"Coming up on the holidays, isn't a camera the perfect gift for every child this year?" she says, smiling. "That's what my kids are getting."

China eases anti-COVID measures following protests

By JOE McDONALD Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China rolled back rules on isolating people with COVID-19 and dropped virus test requirements for some public places Wednesday in a dramatic change to a strategy that confined millions of people to their homes and sparked protests and demands for President Xi Jinping to resign.

The move adds to earlier easing that fueled hopes Beijing was scrapping its "zero COVID" strategy, which is disrupting manufacturing and global trade. Experts warn, however, that restrictions can't be lifted completely until at least mid-2023 because millions of elderly people still must be vaccinated and the health care system strengthened.

China is the last major country still trying to stamp out transmission of the virus while many nations switch to trying to live with it. As they lift restrictions, Chinese officials have also shifted to talking about the virus as less threatening — a possible effort to prepare people for a similar switch.

People with mild cases will be allowed for the first time to isolate at home, the National Health Commission announced, instead of going to sometimes overcrowded or unsanitary quarantine centers. That addresses a major irritation that helped to drive protests that erupted Nov. 25 in Shanghai and other cities.

Public facilities except for "special places," such as schools, hospitals and nursing homes, will no longer require visitors to produce a "health code" on a smartphone app that tracks their virus tests and whether they have been to areas deemed at high risk of infection.

Local officials must "take strict and detailed measures to protect people's life, safety and health" but at the same time "minimize the impact of the epidemic on economic and social development," the statement said.

China's restrictions have helped to keep case numbers low, but that means few people have developed natural immunity, a factor that might set back reopening plans if cases surge and authorities feel compelled to reimpose restrictions.

Still, after three years spent warning the public about COVID-19's dangers, Chinese officials have begun to paint it as less threatening.

People with mild cases "can recover by themselves without special medical care," said Wu Zunyou, chief epidemiologist of the China Centers for Disease Control, on his social media account.

"The good news is that the data show the proportion of severe cases is low," said Wu.

The latest changes are "small steps" in a gradual process aimed at ending restrictions, said Liang Wannian, a member of an expert group advising the National Health Commission, at a news conference.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 75 of 88

The government's goal is "to return to the state before the epidemic, but the realization of the goal must have conditions," said Liang, one of China's most prominent anti-epidemic experts.

Ray Yip, a public health expert, also emphasized the gradual nature of the shift, calling it "the first 20-degree turn of a 180-degree turn."

"The challenge is how they will react when the case load goes way up, which will start to happen. Not sure they will hold the course of loosening up," said Yip, who founded the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's office in China.

The government announced a campaign last week to vaccinate the elderly that health experts say must be done before China can end restrictions on visitors coming from abroad. They say the ruling Communist Party also needs to build up China's hospital system to cope with a possible rise in cases.

But public frustration is rising now, as millions of people are repeatedly confined at home for uncertain periods, schools close abruptly and economic growth falls.

The changes have been rolled out despite a renewed spike in infections started in October. On Wednesday, the government reported 25,231 new cases, including 20,912 without symptoms.

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 is 5,235 since the start of the pandemic versus a U.S. count of 1.1 million.

Rules were left in place that warn apartment and office buildings might be sealed if infections are found. Complaints that families are confined for weeks at a time with uncertain access to food and medicine were a key driver of the protests.

The ruling party switched early this year to suspending access to neighborhoods or districts where infections were discovered instead of isolating whole cities.

On Wednesday, the government said the scope of closures will be narrowed still further to single apartment floors or buildings instead of neighborhoods.

It said schools in communities with no outbreaks must return to in-person teaching.

That appeared to be a response to complaints that local leaders, threatened with the loss of their jobs in the event of outbreaks, impose closures that are destructive, might be unnecessary and exceed what the central government allows.

The demonstrations in at least eight major cities and on dozens of university campuses were the most widespread display of public dissent in decades. In Shanghai, some protesters shouted the politically explosive demand for Xi, China's most influential figure in decades, to resign.

Microsoft strikes 10-year deal with Nintendo on Call of Duty

LONDON (AP) — Microsoft agreed Wednesday to make the hit video game Call of Duty available on Nintendo for 10 years should its \$69 billion purchase of game maker Activision Blizzard go through — an apparent attempt to fend off objections from rival Sony.

The blockbuster merger is facing close scrutiny from regulators in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere. Microsoft, maker of the Xbox game console, faces resistance from Sony, which makes the competing PlayStation console and has raised concerns with antitrust watchdogs about losing access to what it calls a "must-have" game title.

Phil Spencer, the head of Xbox, tweeted that Microsoft "entered into a 10-year commitment" to bring Call of Duty to Nintendo.

Microsoft President Brad Smith tweeted his thanks to Nintendo, which makes the Switch game console, saying the same offer was available for Sony.

"Any day @Sony wants to sit down and talk, we'll be happy to hammer out a 10-year deal for PlayStation as well," he said.

Smith said the agreement would bring Call of Duty to more gamers and more platforms, and "that's good for competition and good for consumers."

Sony's European press office didn't respond to a request for comment. Adding to the pressure on Sony,

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 76 of 88

Microsoft also said Wednesday it has committed to keeping Call of Duty on the platform Steam, a digital marketplace for PC games, in an agreement with Steam's operator Valve.

In an op-ed for The Wall Street Journal this week, Smith raised concerns about the possibility that the Federal Trade Commission could take Microsoft to court to stop the deal. Antitrust watchdogs in both Britain and the European Union also are investigating the transaction over concerns it would distort competition.

At the heart of the dispute is control over future releases of Activision Blizzard's most popular games, especially Call of Duty, a first-person military shooter franchise. Activision reported last month that the latest installment, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, had earned more than \$1 billion in sales since its Oct. 28 launch.

Oldest DNA reveals life in Greenland 2 million years ago

By MADDIE BURAKOFF AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Scientists discovered the oldest known DNA and used it to reveal what life was like 2 million years ago in the northern tip of Greenland. Today, it's a barren Arctic desert, but back then it was a lush landscape of trees and vegetation with an array of animals, even the now extinct mastodon.

"The study opens the door into a past that has basically been lost," said lead author Kurt Kjær, a geologist and glacier expert at the University of Copenhagen.

With animal fossils hard to come by, the researchers extracted environmental DNA, also known as eDNA, from soil samples. This is the genetic material that organisms shed into their surroundings — for example, through hair, waste, spit or decomposing carcasses.

Studying really old DNA can be a challenge because the genetic material breaks down over time, leaving scientists with only tiny fragments.

But with the latest technology, researchers were able to get genetic information out of the small, damaged bits of DNA, explained senior author Eske Willerslev, a geneticist at the University of Cambridge. In their study, published Wednesday in the journal Nature, they compared the DNA to that of different species, looking for matches.

The samples came from a sediment deposit called the Kap København formation in Peary Land. Today, the area is a polar desert, Kjær said.

But millions of years ago, this region was undergoing a period of intense climate change that sent temperatures up, Willerslev said. Sediment likely built up for tens of thousands of years at the site before the climate cooled and cemented the finds into permafrost.

The cold environment would help preserve the delicate bits of DNA — until scientists came along and drilled the samples out, beginning in 2006.

During the region's warm period, when average temperatures were 20 to 34 degrees Fahrenheit (11 to 19 degrees Celsius) higher than today, the area was filled with an unusual array of plant and animal life, the researchers reported. The DNA fragments suggest a mix of Arctic plants, like birch trees and willow shrubs, with ones that usually prefer warmer climates, like firs and cedars.

The DNA also showed traces of animals including geese, hares, reindeer and lemmings. Previously, a dung beetle and some hare remains had been the only signs of animal life at the site, Willerslev said.

One big surprise was finding DNA from the mastodon, an extinct species that looks like a mix between an elephant and a mammoth, Kjær said.

Many mastodon fossils have previously been found from temperate forests in North America. That's an ocean away from Greenland, and much farther south, Willerslev said.

"I wouldn't have, in a million years, expected to find mastodons in northern Greenland," said Love Dalen, a researcher in evolutionary genomics at Stockholm University who was not involved in the study.

Because the sediment built up in the mouth of a fjord, researchers were also able to get clues about marine life from this time period. The DNA suggests horseshoe crabs and green algae lived in the area — meaning the nearby waters were likely much warmer back then, Kjær said.

By pulling dozens of species out of just a few sediment samples, the study highlights some of eDNA's

advantages, said Benjamin Vernot, an ancient DNA researcher at Germany's Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology who was not involved in the study.

"You really get a broader picture of the ecosystem at a particular time," Vernot said. "You don't have to go and find this piece of wood to study this plant, and this bone to study this mammoth."

Based on the data available, it's hard to say for sure whether these species truly lived side by side, or if the DNA was mixed together from different parts of the landscape, said Laura Epp, an eDNA expert at Germany's University of Konstanz who was not involved in the study.

But Epp said this kind of DNA research is valuable to show "hidden diversity" in ancient landscapes.

Willerslev believes that because these plants and animals survived during a time of dramatic climate change, their DNA could offer a "genetic roadmap" to help us adapt to current warming.

Stockholm University's Dalen expects ancient DNA research to keep pushing deeper into the past. He worked on the study that previously held the "oldest DNA" record, from a mammoth tooth around a million years old.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you can go at least one or perhaps a few million years further back, assuming you can find the right samples," Dalen said.

Africa forum hails 'circular economy' solutions for climate

By WANJOHI KABUKURU Associated Press

MOMBASA, Kenya (AP) — Reducing waste while boosting recycling and reuse, known as the 'circular economy,' will be vital for halting the loss of nature by meeting growing demand with fewer resources and will make communities more resilient to climate change by encouraging more sustainable practices on the African continent, organizers of the World Circular Economy Forum said Wednesday.

The conference, which brings together climate and economic experts as well businesses and think tanks, is being held in the Rwandan capital Kigali — the first ever in the global south.

"It is much easier to adapt now than the costs that we will incur if we wait," said Wanjira Maathai of the World Resources Institute at the forum. As climate change makes weather more extreme, the costs incurred from the damages are increasing. "It is time we look at it (circular economy) as a driver of Africa's development."

The three-day forum, which ends Thursday, encourages a shift to an economic model that promotes less material consumption and promotes what's known as regenerative agriculture practices like rotating crops or using fewer chemical fertilizers or pesticides. The talks will also push nature-based solutions to boost natural resources such as rewilding. Many on the continent are already exploring how to use waste in new ways.

At the opening ceremony Tuesday, Rwandan environment minister Jeanne d'Arc Mujawamariya said the continent should galvanize local knowledge from its youth, innovators and entrepreneurs to fast track the continent's development progress "without repeating the same mistakes made by the industrialized nations."

The challenge for developing nations is to improve standards of living without using fossil fuels like nations in the global north, climate experts say. Many on the continent have already looked to reducing waste and boosting recycling as a way to improve living standards.

Mtamu Kililo, a Kenyan architect and member of the African Circular Economy Network, says he uses new construction materials made out of agriculture waste, such as bagasse, or sugar cane waste, coconuts and rice husks for high-quality soundproofing and insulation.

"Altering perceptions is the major challenge we are facing. But we are making headway as people are beginning to see the qualities of our product and are also keen to reduce waste," Kililo said.

Other businesses use the same model for agriculture, textiles and plastic, but greater investment and a more concerted effort by governments to shift to this kind of economy is needed for these ideas to scale up, many at the forum said.

Investing in the circular economy "is actual investment in climate action and environmental conservation," Jyrki Katainen, who's president of the Finnish innovation fund Sitra, told The Associated Press.

Finding new uses for waste “will boost both governments and businesses responses to the major challenges of our time which are sustainable economic development, climate change and environmental conservation,” said the U.N. Environment Programme’s Adriana Zacarias Farah.

US Jews fear collision with expected Israeli government

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel’s ties to the Jewish American community, one of its closest and most important allies, are about to be put to the test, with Israel’s emerging far-right government on a collision course with Jews in the United States.

Major Jewish American organizations, traditionally a bedrock of support for Israel, have expressed alarm over the far-right character of the presumptive government led by conservative Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu. Given American Jews’ predominantly liberal political views and affinity for the Democratic Party, these misgivings could have a ripple effect in Washington and further widen what has become a partisan divide over support for Israel.

“This is a very significant crossroads,” said Jeremy Ben-Ami, president of J Street, a liberal, pro-Israel group in Washington. “The potential for specific actions that could be taken by this government, these are the moments when the relationship between the bulk of American Jews and the state of Israel begins to really fray. So I’m very afraid.”

Jewish-American leaders appear especially worried about the prominent role expected to be played by a trio of hard-line, religious lawmakers. The three have made racist anti-Arab statements, denigrated the LGBTQ community, attacked Israel’s legal system and demonized the liberal, non-Orthodox streams of Judaism popular in the U.S. All vehemently oppose Palestinian independence.

“These are among the most extreme voices in Israeli politics,” said Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, the largest Jewish movement in the U.S. “What will be the trajectory of a new Israeli government with such voices in such key leadership roles is of deep, deep concern.”

More centrist organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation League, which fights antisemitism and other forms of hatred, and the Jewish Federations of North America, an umbrella group that supports hundreds of Jewish communities, have also spoken out.

Though these groups, like J Street and the Reform movement, support a two-state solution with the Palestinians, their recent statements have focused on Israel’s democratic ideals. The Anti-Defamation League said that including the three far-right lawmakers in a government “runs counter to Israel’s founding principles.” The Federations called for “inclusive and pluralistic” policies.

For decades, American Jews have played a key role in promoting close ties between the U.S. and Israel. They have raised millions of dollars for Israeli causes, spoken out in Israel’s defense and strengthened strong bipartisan support for Israel in Washington.

But this longstanding relationship has come under strain in recent years — especially during Netanyahu’s 2009-2021 rule.

Netanyahu’s hard-line policies toward the Palestinians, his public spats with Barack Obama over peace-making and the Iranian nuclear issue and his close ties with Donald Trump put him at odds with many in the American Jewish community.

Opinion polls show that roughly three-quarters of American Jews lean toward the Democratic Party. They tend to be more critical of the Israeli government and more sympathetic to the Palestinians than their Republican counterparts, with these divisions even wider among younger Jews in their 20s.

These trends appear set to go into hyper-drive as Netanyahu prepares to return to power after a year and a half as opposition leader, this time flanked by some of the country’s most extremist politicians.

After winning elections last month, Netanyahu and his allies are still forming their coalition. But he already has reached a number of deals that are setting off alarm bells overseas.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, a lawmaker known for his 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 national police

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 79 of 88

force. This includes the paramilitary border police, a unit on the front lines of much of the fighting with Palestinians in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank.

Ben-Gvir has labeled Arab lawmakers "terrorists" and called for deporting them. He wants to impose the death penalty on Palestinian attackers and grant soldiers immunity from prosecution.

Netanyahu also has agreed to appoint the lawmaker Avi Maoz as a deputy minister overseeing a new authority in charge of "Jewish identity" and giving him responsibilities over Israel's educational system.

Maoz is known for his outspoken anti-LGBTQ positions and disparaging remarks about the Reform movement and other non-Orthodox Jews.

He wants a ban on Pride parades, has compared gays to pedophiles and wants to allow some forms of conversion therapy, a discredited practice that tries to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQ children.

Maoz hopes to change Israel's "Law of Return," which allows anyone with a single Jewish grandparent to immigrate to Israel, and replace it with a much stricter definition of who is a Jew. He also opposes non-Orthodox conversions to Judaism. This is an affront to liberal Jewish groups, which have less rigid views on Jewish identity.

Bezalel Smotrich, a settler leader with a history of anti-gay and anti-Palestinian comments, has been granted widespread authority over settlement construction and Palestinian civilian life in the occupied West Bank.

Netanyahu has been generous toward his allies because they support major legal reforms that could freeze or dismiss his corruption trial. Critics say such moves will imperil Israel's democratic foundations.

Speaking on NBC's "Meet the Press," Netanyahu tried to play down such concerns as he vowed to safeguard democracy and LGBTQ rights. "I ultimately decide policy," he said.

Halie Soifer, chief executive of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, said it is premature to judge a government that hasn't yet taken office. But she acknowledged the concerns about issues like LGBTQ rights, Palestinian rights and respect for democracy – particularly with memories of the Trump administration still fresh.

"Many of those concerns are based on our own experience with an administration that didn't share our values," said Soifer.

Whether U.S. policy will be affected is unclear. The Biden administration has said it will wait to see policies, not personalities, of the new government.

But Eric Alterman, author of "We Are Not One," a new book about relations between Israel and American Jews, says the sides are moving in opposite directions.

Progressive Democrats already have pushed for a tougher approach to Israel because of its treatment of the Palestinians.

"It may come suddenly. It may come in pieces. But there's simply a break coming between American Jews and Israeli Jews," Alterman said.

Electricity, telecoms return to parts of Ethiopia's Tigray

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Basic services like electricity and telecoms have been restored to key parts of Ethiopia's Tigray region following the signing of a cease-fire deal a month ago, but most areas are still cut off from the world.

The agreement signed Nov. 2 requires Ethiopia's federal government to restore basic services to Tigray, which has been mostly without phone, internet and banking services since war erupted two years ago. Power has also been disrupted to the region of more than 5 million people.

On Tuesday, the state-affiliated Fana Broadcasting Corporate reported that Tigray's capital, Mekele, had been reconnected to the national power grid following maintenance to a transmission line.

Kibrom Gebreselassie, the director of Mekele's Ayder hospital, confirmed that the city has had "uninterrupted" electricity since Tuesday evening. "This is for the first time in weeks," Kibrom told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 80 of 88

However, the electricity supply remains erratic in parts of Mekele, according to residents.

Telecommunications have resumed to parts of southern Tigray and to the region's second-largest city of Shire, which hosts large numbers of displaced people. Two residents told the AP the city's phone network was restored over the weekend but said the city is still without power, banking and internet services.

Phone lines appeared to still be down in the towns of Axum and Adigrat on Wednesday afternoon.

The shutdown of Tigray's basic services has drawn accusations of a government-imposed blockade, while restrictions on humanitarian aid entering the region prompted United Nations investigators earlier this year to conclude that Ethiopia's government has likely used starvation as a method of war.

The internet blackout affecting Tigray "is the world's longest uninterrupted shutdown," according to rights group Access Now.

The closure of Tigray's banks has left millions of people unable to access their savings to buy food, according to aid workers, exacerbating the region's dire humanitarian crisis.

The National Bank of Ethiopia has ordered commercial banks to undertake audits ahead of re-opening branches located in areas of Tigray under the control of the federal military, according to local media reports.

The Tigray leaders were due to demobilize their forces within 30 days of signing the cease-fire deal. Last week, Tigray's top military commander, Tadesse Woreda, told reporters that 65% of Tigray's fighters had withdrawn from frontline areas.

Tigray's leadership, however, has said it will not fully demobilize until the military of neighboring Eritrea withdraws. The AP has reported witness accounts of Eritrean troops remaining in Tigray after the cease-fire deal and killing civilians and looting properties.

Making 'indie' video games gets trickier as industry evolves

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Video game developer Ben Esposito's first big break was a quirky game called Donut County starring a raccoon who dropped small objects and then entire neighborhoods into an ever-growing hole in the ground.

His latest, Neon White, is a campy twist on the first-person shooter genre that involves careening across heaven at breakneck speeds to stop a demon invasion. Drawn in an anime style and with a romantic subplot, it's nominated for "Best Indie" and "Best Action" game at Thursday's Game Awards, an Oscars-like event for the video game industry.

Every year, some tiny and independent video game developer studios like Esposito's Angel Matrix hold their own with the big leagues by making hit games that achieve commercial success or at least critical acclaim. Even one of the world's most popular games, Minecraft, was started by an independent game developer in Sweden who later sold his studio to Microsoft for \$2.5 billion.

"I have really odd taste," said Esposito, 33. "When I'm picking stuff, it's about trying to come up with that rare intersection of something that is offbeat and interesting to me, but if presented the right way, it could be financially successful."

How long these "indie" studios can flourish is up for debate as the gaming industry undergoes increasing consolidation – symbolized by Xbox-maker Microsoft's pending \$69 billion takeover of giant game publisher Activision Blizzard that awaits approval from U.S. and European regulators.

Esposito, the game's co-creator and director, and his wife, co-creator Geneva Hodgson, worked out of their home near Los Angeles to lead development of Neon White over the past three years. At the height of production, about five people worked full time on the game. Add friends, contractors and freelancers and it was still fewer than 20 people who touched the product, Esposito said.

And while there's no one formula for transforming an offbeat idea into a blockbuster hit found on computers, phones or a family's PlayStation, Xbox or Nintendo Switch, there are plenty of indie studios that have managed to build an audience for their games.

Thursday's Game Awards event in Los Angeles is showcasing several. Those include the French-made summer hit Stray, about a cute cat navigating the alleyways of a post-apocalyptic city; another game about a cult led by a possessed lamb; and the retro-looking Vampire Survivors that pits its hero against

a constant stream of monsters.

But as the industry keeps consolidating, some developers including Esposito worry that a golden age for high-quality indie games could be threatened as a smaller group of distributors makes choices about what gets funded.

"When it comes to bigger budgets, it's a challenge because the industry feels like it's contracting a bit," he said. "Studios get bought up. Talent gets concentrated into certain areas and then budgets change."

Games that Esposito describes as having middle-tier budgets in the \$2 million range — neither cheap to make, nor as expensive as the major studio franchises — could get sidelined.

"I think we're seeing that kind of mid-budget game start to disappear," he said. "I think that's really sad because that's the kind of budget that I think can produce really interesting, odd, risky but well-realized projects and I think Neon White's one of those."

Both *Stray* and *Neon White* benefited from the support of arthouse publisher Annapurna Interactive, the games division of the film studio behind movies like "Her" and "American Hustle." In the case of *Neon White*, that allowed Esposito's team to enhance the game by hiring professional voice actors.

"It's always a very risky endeavor to make an independent video game," said *Stray* producer Swann Martin-Raget. The tools to make games are becoming more accessible, and so many studios are making them that it can be "really hard to get people's attention," he said.

Stray captured plenty of people's attention this summer with its cinematic visuals of a realistic-looking tabby cat scampering around a city menaced by robots and other hazards. Its maker was BlueTwelve Studio, a small team of developers in the southern French city of Montpellier, some of whom previously worked at the nearby office of big game-maker Ubisoft.

As a sign of its upstart success, *Stray* is competing against big-budget blockbusters like Bandai Namco's *Elden Ring* and Sony's *God of War Ragnarök* for Thursday's prestigious "Game of the Year" award.

Games analyst Steve Bailey at London-based market research firm Omdia said it's hard to define what classifies a game as indie.

It used to mean "you have a small team, they do everything themselves and they release it without a publisher and they do not care about success. That was part of the original kind of indie spirit." Now it sometimes describes anything that doesn't come out of big studios making the highest-profile games.

"So it could even be somebody who has a publisher, some quite large studios actually, and budgets that might run into tens of millions of dollars that still get classed as indie," Bailey said.

Bailey said there's no question that players today have a rich and diverse collection of games to choose from on consoles, and from popular web-based game platforms such as Steam or Epic.

"There's this interesting balancing act that's taking place that the opportunities now are greater than they've ever been" for independent developers, Bailey said. "But the competition itself is absolutely massive."

In the short term, the consolidation could be good for independent developers as companies like Microsoft strive to offer the widest possible array of games to get people hooked on buying a monthly subscription-based service such as Xbox Game Pass.

In the longer term, there's more uncertainty if the game market starts to look more like streaming movie services like Netflix that can apportion budgets and contracts based on past viewership, Bailey said.

"In the future, when Xbox is focusing on profitability instead of expansion and acquisition, there might be a change of power," he said. "It might be harder for indies to get traction on subscription platforms. It's great for the people who are on there who get to be part of that wave, but the ones who are off, things might get harder."

Friction over LGBTQ issues worsens in global Anglican church

By CHINEDU ASADU and DAVID CRARY of The Associated Press and CATHERINE PEPINSTER of Religion News Service undefined

Friction has been simmering within the global Anglican Communion for many years over its 42 provinces' sharp differences on whether to recognize same-sex marriage and ordain LGBTQ clergy. This year, the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 82 of 88

divisions have widened, as conservative bishops – notably from Africa and Asia – affirmed their opposition to LGBTQ inclusion and demanded “repentance” by the more liberal provinces with inclusive policies.

Caught in the middle of the fray is the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who is the top bishop of the Church of England and ceremonial leader of the Anglican Communion, which is one of the world’s largest Christian communities. Welby has acknowledged “deep disagreement” among the provinces, while urging them to “walk together” to the extent possible.

The divide came into the spotlight four months ago at the communion’s Lambeth Conference, typically held once every decade to bring together bishops from the more than 165 countries with Anglican-affiliated churches. It was the first Lambeth Conference since 2008, and the first to which married gay and lesbian bishops were invited.

The conservative primates of Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda refused to attend, while other bishops who share their opposition to LGBTQ inclusion pushed unsuccessfully for the Lambeth gathering to reconfirm a 1998 resolution rejecting same-sex marriage.

Now those primates, and their allies worldwide, are looking ahead to a conference in Kigali, Rwanda, in April. They’re expected to discuss their dismay at support for same-sex marriage in some Anglican churches and what they see as Welby not taking a tough stand against such marriages.

Welby, in turn, says neither the Lambeth Conference nor he individually has the authority to discipline a member province or impose demands on it.

In Nigeria, Anglican leaders say a formal separation from the global church over LGBTQ inclusion is more likely than ever. They cite Welby’s comments at Lambeth and the subsequent appointment of the Very Rev. David Monteith – who has been part of a same-sex civil partnership since 2008 – as the new dean of the Canterbury cathedral.

Bishop Williams Aladekugbe of Nigeria’s Ibadan North Anglican Diocese said same-sex unions are “un-godly and devilish” and their recognition by some provinces is a major reason “we cannot continue to fellowship with them.”

“If it is going to cause further division, let it be,” Aladekugbe told The Associated Press. “If they don’t worship God the way we worship him, if they don’t believe in what we believe in... let us divide (and) we go our own way.”

Henry Ndukuba, primate of the Anglican church in Nigeria, cited such divisions during an interview with a church-run television network.

The archbishop of Canterbury “is a symbol of unity” in the Anglican Communion, Ndukuba said, but “because of the way things are going, we are not tied to the apron of Canterbury.”

The umbrella group for the conservative bishops is the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GFSA). Its steering committee is headed by South Sudan Archbishop Justin Badi, and includes archbishops from Bangladesh, Chile, Congo, Egypt, the Indian Ocean region and Myanmar.

At the Lambeth Conference, the committee issued a stern communique – in effect demanding their views on LGBTQ issues hold sway throughout the Anglican Communion and that the “revisionist” provinces be disciplined or marginalized.

That threat was aimed at the provinces which have embraced LGBTQ-inclusive politics – including the Episcopal Church in the United States, and the Anglican churches of Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales. For now, the Church of England refuses to conduct same-sex marriages, but some of its bishops want that policy to change.

The GFSA leaders contend that conservative-led jurisdictions are home to 75% of the global Anglican Communion population, which is estimated at 80 to 85 million.

“For too long the Anglican Communion has been driven by the views of the West,” Badi told news media during the conference. “We often feel that our voice is not listened to, or respected.”

In their communique, Badi and his allies stressed they are not defecting. Yet they questioned whether the global Anglican community, under current circumstances, could consider itself a truly unified body.

“If there is no authentic repentance by the revisionist Provinces, then we will sadly accept a state of

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 83 of 88

'impaired communion' with them," the communique said.

Welby, instead of reprimanding the LGBTQ-inclusive provinces, commended the sincerity of their approach to human sexuality.

"They are not careless about scripture. They do not reject Christ," Welby said at Lambeth. "But they have come to a different view on sexuality after long prayer, deep study and reflection on understandings of human nature."

The Most Rev. Michael Curry, presiding bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church, saw this as a breakthrough.

"What shifted in the rhetoric," he said, "was a genuine acknowledgement that both sides had arrived at their views through serious study of scripture, theology, and modern understanding of human nature."

The Rev. Chuck Robertson, a top aide to Curry whose dossier includes relations with the Anglican Communion, described Welby's comments as "a game-changer."

"It reflects that those who've been going beyond traditional teaching have done so with deep care," Robertson said. "This is something new -- a corner had been turned."

The conservative bishops' frustrations with Welby intensified in October when Monteith was appointed the new dean of the Canterbury cathedral.

While Welby did not personally make the appointment, he issued a statement expressing delight at the choice made by a selection panel. Within days, the GSFA steering committee conveyed its dismay.

The announcement "puts in question the seriousness with which (Welby) wants to pursue the unity of the Communion," the committee said. "We take exception to the Church of England's accommodation of a person in a same-sex union being appointed to an office of spiritual authority over the flock of God's people."

A Rwandan bishop, Alexis Bilindabagabo of the diocese of Gahini, said he condemns the ordination of gay priests because "weak" people shouldn't stand at the pulpit.

"A gay man must be led, but he should not lead others," said Bilindabagabo.

LGBTQ activists say most Anglican churches in Africa are led by conservative priests, including many averse to even discussing homosexuality.

"For Uganda, the Anglican church has almost played a leadership role in being intolerant," said Frank Mugisha, a prominent LGBT leader in the East African country where a lawmaker once introduced legislation seeking to punish some homosexual acts with execution.

In some cases, Mugisha said, Anglican priests take a hard-line stance because they fear losing their flock to more conservative evangelical groups.

In contrast to other Anglican provinces in Africa, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa has considered letting dioceses conduct same-sex marriages, though it has yet to take that step.

The church is based in South Africa – the only African country to legalize such unions – and also represents dioceses in several neighboring countries. It was led for many years by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was a staunch advocate of LGBTQ rights well as leading foe of apartheid.

The Southern Africa church has been critical of Anglican leaders elsewhere on the continent who support harsh laws against LGBTQ people.

"It is evident that some of the draconian laws in some African countries are in fact violations of human rights and some bishops of the Anglican Church in these countries have openly supported these laws," said Bishop Allan Kannemeyer, who heads the Diocese of Pretoria.

It's unclear what lies ahead for the Anglican Communion. The GSFA leaders, in their October statement, say that if Welby does not take the lead in "safeguarding the Church's teaching," there may be an opening for conservative bishops to increase their influence.

That topic will likely be paramount at the April meeting in Rwanda, to which GSFA bishops have been invited. It will be hosted by the Global Anglican Future Conference – known as Gafcon – which includes the archbishops of Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda, as well as leaders of conservative Anglican entities that already have split from the Anglican Communion, such as the Anglican Church in North America.

No one from the Anglican Communion's head office in London is expected to attend.

"Some in Gafcon see it as a movement for biblical renewal, which is fine, but others as a rival to the Anglican Communion," said Gavin Drake, the communion's communications director. "There is a growing frustration within the Communion at this 'political wing' of Gafcon."

By the time they meet in April, Gafcon and GFSA members might be further angered by events within the Church of England, whose General Synod will gather in February to consider proposals on same-sex marriage developed during a lengthy discussion process. There's a possibility of an unprecedented vote allowing Church of England priests to conduct same-sex weddings for the first time.

A significant development came in early November, when Steven Croft, the bishop of Oxford, became the church's first diocesan bishop to speak in favor of same-sex marriage. He published a 50-page essay urging a lifting of the ban and sent it to all members of the College of Bishops.

At stake, he said, was the Church of England's claim to serve the whole of society. Its anti-LGBTQ stance "is leading to a radical dislocation between the Church of England and the culture and society we are attempting to serve," he said.

Five other Anglican bishops have publicly backed Croft's call for change.

Ronaldo loses Portugal spot to sully World Cup journey

By STEVE DOUGLAS AP Sports Writer

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — So, the dream is still alive for Cristiano Ronaldo.

Soccer's most prolific modern-day scorer might yet, at the age of 37 and probably playing in his last World Cup, claim the one major title to elude him in a career like no other.

It didn't quite feel that way, though, as he walked off the field alone at Lusail Stadium, leaving the rest of the Portugal team to celebrate getting through to the quarterfinals after a 6-1 rout of Switzerland on Tuesday.

In fact, it was a rather sad sight. A veteran in decline departing the scene as his teammates — some barely half his age — continued to party.

This has been a turbulent and bruising few weeks for Ronaldo.

First came the explosive interview with Piers Morgan that shaped the start of his fifth World Cup campaign. Then the fallout, which included the termination of his contract at Manchester United.

When the tournament started, he broke a record — becoming the first male player to score at five different World Cups — and then he underwhelmed, failing to score in back-to-back games and responding to a substitution against South Korea by showing his displeasure and angering his coach.

Then came Tuesday night and the moment that might be looked back on as the start of the end of his glittering, record-breaking international career. Not only was he dropped from the starting lineup, but the 21-year-old player who replaced him — Goncalo Ramos — scored a remarkable hat trick.

Just imagine the thoughts going through Ronaldo's head as he trudged off the field after playing around 20 minutes as a substitute?

This was one of Portugal's greatest wins — indeed, it was the country's largest margin of victory in a World Cup knockout game — and it felt like Ronaldo could hardly get off the field quick enough.

So where does this leave Ronaldo? Already without a club, he is now likely to be second choice for Portugal to Ramos, who only made his Portugal debut three weeks ago.

Portugal coach Fernando Santos threw Ronaldo a lifeline, saying he'd continue to select players according to the strengths and weaknesses of the team's opponent. But it's unthinkable that Ramos will lose his place now for the quarterfinal match against Morocco.

"I will use what I believe is the right strategy, as I have done my entire life," Santos said, as bullish as ever.

Tellingly, Santos praised his team for playing with "a lot of fluidity" and "as a collective." That style is harder to forge when Ronaldo, whose mobility is just not what it was, is the sole striker.

His goal that was ruled out for offside against Switzerland was an example of a player trying to steal a few meters to compensate for his lack of pace, and it's not the first time that has happened at this World Cup.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 85 of 88

Meanwhile, Ramos needed just 72 minutes in his first start at a World Cup — in fact, it was his first start in international soccer — to show he might be the future. His finishing, his link-up play and his work off the ball underlined why he is being spoken of as one of the next big things in Portuguese soccer.

Portugal midfielder Bruno Fernandes said “most people in the world had never heard about him” before the match against Switzerland.

Well, they have now, and expect Benfica to be busy fielding enquiries into a striker who has scored 21 goals for the team in 2022 and has just netted the first hat trick in a World Cup knockout stage since Tomas Skuhravy for Czechoslovakia in 1990.

While some of the top clubs might be beckoning for Ramos, Ronaldo looks to be heading for the obscurity of the Saudi Arabian league, even if that does come with an exorbitant salary.

For a man who spent last summer pushing for a move from United because he wanted to play in the Champions League, it is quite the fall.

Will he go there as a World Cup winner? Maybe, because Portugal produced a dynamic performance against Switzerland that was every bit as impressive as Brazil’s the previous night against South Korea.

And there remains that tantalizing prospect of a title match between Argentina and Portugal. One that will invariably be labeled a head-to-head between Ronaldo and his long-time rival, Lionel Messi.

But what might be eating away at the Portugal superstar, what he might have been thinking as he left the field at Lusail Stadium, is that while Messi is leading Argentina to that final frontier with goals and brilliant performances, Ronaldo is no longer the player carrying his national team.

Ronaldo might even be a burden, given the way Portugal performed without him against Switzerland.

Donors race to get generators, other aid to hard-hit Ukraine

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — When Russian forces launched a military campaign against infrastructure in Ukraine nearly two months ago, they opened a front that carried the war along power lines, water mains and heating systems to homes, schools, offices and churches.

The government in Kyiv and the Western countries that have backed it with billions in military aid now are scrambling along with the United Nations and aid groups to get blankets, insulation, generators, medical supplies, cash and more essentials into the invaded country as winter looms.

Millions of Ukrainians are without regular access to heat, electricity and water in sub-freezing temperatures, Martin Griffiths, who heads the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, told the U.N. Security Council on Tuesday. Some have no access at all, he said.

“In Ukraine today, the ability of civilians to survive is under attack,” Griffiths said.

Despite a swift response and a high commitment from donors to a U.N. aid appeal, the needs are changing fast — and swelling. Much has been made of the need for diesel generators whose buzzing motors create stopgap electricity for cellphone towers, restaurants and especially hospitals, which are the Ukrainian government’s highest priority.

Sporadic electricity has widespread impacts. It deprives people of warmth from electric space heaters, steady light in the evenings and power for the millions of electronic devices and computers in a highly digitized country — and thus for livelihoods.

Strikes that disable deliveries of gas cut off the flames for furnaces and stoves. Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko advised the capital’s residents to consider moving temporarily to rural areas, where basics like wood to burn for heat are more plentiful.

In the most desperate, hard-hit cities, some residents resort to scooping up dirty water from puddles in the street while water systems are temporarily disabled.

Saviano Abreu, a spokesperson for U.N.’s humanitarian affairs office’s operation in Ukraine, said it pulled together hundreds of generators starting back in June, aware of the country’s harsh winters.

“With this situation and people living in damaged houses, we did know back then that we would have problems with heating, water and electricity, but not at this scale,” Abreu said, noting that supply chain

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 86 of 88

issues posed obstacles to securing more equipment.

"In the neighboring countries around Ukraine, it's already not available, so we bring it from much farther at this point," he said.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said last week that it would roll out its "largest cash assistance program in history" in Ukraine, totaling \$1.7 billion for 6.3 million people. It said the experience in other countries has shown distributing money directly to people to buy food, clothing and other basics is an effective strategy.

The U.N. Development Program is taking a different, longer-term approach. It's seeking to fill requests from Ukraine's government for technical equipment like power transformers, transformer substations, high-frequency stoppers, high-voltage inputs, surge arresters, industrial gas turbines and other items to help restore the electricity grid and energy systems.

"Together with the World Bank, (we're) doing an assessment across Ukraine of all the damages and needs that have resulted from this targeting of the energy infrastructure," Jaco Cilliers, the program's acting resident representative in Ukraine, said. "We are in the process of putting that together, which includes obviously the larger-scale equipment that would be needed for the restoration."

"It's a work in progress," he said.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken last week announced \$53 million in bilateral aid to help Ukraine acquire "critical electricity grid equipment" — on top of another \$55 million for emergency energy sector support, such as for generators.

The European Union last month said it had made available 523 million euros (about \$550 million) for humanitarian aid for Ukraine, and the United States has pledged \$1.2 billion to an appeal by the U.N. humanitarian coordination agency.

"EU governments should now ensure that the announced aid actually reaches Ukraine as quickly as possible, without the many months of delay of previous packages," said Christoph Trebesch, who leads a team behind the "Ukraine Support Tracker" at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy in Germany.

A spokesperson for the EU's executive commission said in an e-mail that over one-quarter of the funds the bloc made available for humanitarian aid has been allocated, mostly for a "winterized shelter response."

The EU's Civil Protection Mechanism also has shipped in fire trucks, ambulances, de-mining equipment, food supplies, mobile hospitals, excavators, and portable, prefabricated Bailey bridges, the spokesperson said.

The wish list of United24, a campaign launched by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to secure private donations, is seeking ambulances, anesthesia machines, and over 7,800 "modular external fixators" — a medical device that helps broken bones heal properly.

Donors have come through in ways large and small: the German city of Dortmund just finished shipping a third batch of support to the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv, including vans, trucks, and other vehicles. From the small British town of Hertford, a truck makes a delivery every couple of months, packed with medical supplies, food and — right now — Christmas gifts for children.

And despite Ukraine's massive needs, there is too much of some kinds of aid. The Help Ukraine Center, a group of volunteers that brings in aid through its main warehouse in neighboring Poland, appealed to donors: "NO MORE CLOTHES PLEASE." The center is shifting its focus to medical products, food and hygiene products.

Erik Heinonen, who works on the response of the Catholic Relief Services charity in Ukraine, said small items like a propane stove can have a huge impact.

"If you're a mother with small children, you're concerned about, you know, heating up food," he said. "It would be great to give my children a bath.' ... so, like the very basics of just getting through your day."

Today in History: December 8, U.S. enters World War II

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 87 of 88

Today is Thursday, Dec. 8, the 342nd day of 2022. There are 23 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 8, 1941, the United States entered World War II as Congress declared war against Imperial Japan, a day after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

On this date:

In 1765, Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin, was born in Westborough, Massachusetts.

In 1886, the American Federation of Labor was founded in Columbus, Ohio.

In 1949, the Chinese Nationalist government moved from the Chinese mainland to Formosa as the Communists pressed their attacks.

In 1980, rock star and former Beatle John Lennon was shot to death outside his New York City apartment building by Mark David Chapman.

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev signed a treaty at the White House calling for destruction of intermediate-range nuclear missiles.

In 1991, AIDS patient Kimberly Bergalis, who had contracted the disease from her dentist, died in Fort Pierce, Florida, at age 23.

In 2001, the U.S. Capitol was reopened to tourists after a two-month security shutdown.

In 2008, in a startling about-face, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed told the Guantanamo war crimes tribunal he would confess to masterminding the Sept. 11 attacks; four other men also abandoned their defenses.

In 2011, the 161-day NBA lockout ended when owners and players ratified the new collective bargaining agreement.

In 2014, the U.S. and NATO ceremonially ended their combat mission in Afghanistan, 13 years after the Sept. 11 terror attacks sparked their invasion of the country to topple the Taliban-led government.

In 2016, John Glenn, whose 1962 flight as the first U.S. astronaut to orbit the Earth made him an all-American hero and propelled him to a long career in the U.S. Senate, died in Columbus, Ohio, at age 95.

In 2020, the Supreme Court rejected Republicans' last-gasp bid to reverse Pennsylvania's certification of President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the electoral battleground; the court refused to call into question the certification process in the state.

Ten years ago: Police charged Dallas Cowboys defensive lineman Josh Brent with intoxication manslaughter after he flipped his car in a pre-dawn accident that killed teammate Jerry Brown. (Brent was convicted in Jan. 2014 and sentenced to 180 days in jail; he was reinstated by the NFL in Sept. 2014.) Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel became the first freshman to win the Heisman Trophy.

Five years ago: Japanese pitching and hitting star Shohei Ohtani announced that he would sign with the Los Angeles Angels.

One year ago: With more than two dozen states poised to ban abortion if the U.S. Supreme Court were to give them the OK, California clinics and their allies in the state Legislature revealed a plan to make the state a "sanctuary" for those seeking reproductive care. President Joe Biden signed an executive order to make the federal government carbon-neutral by 2050, aiming for a 65% reduction in planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and an all-electric fleet of car and trucks five years later. The number of Americans fully vaccinated against COVID-19 reached 200 million. Nearly 17 years after being sentenced to die, Scott Peterson was resentenced in California to life without parole for the Christmas Eve killing of his pregnant wife, Laci, in 2002. (The state Supreme Court found that Peterson's jury was improperly screened for bias against the death penalty.) Center-left leader Olaf Scholz became Germany's ninth post-World War II chancellor.

Today's Birthdays: Flutist James Galway is 83. Singer Jerry Butler is 83. Pop musician Bobby Elliott (The Hollies) is 81. Actor Mary Woronov is 79. Actor John Rubinstein is 76. Actor Kim Basinger (BAY'-sing-ur) is 69. Rock musician Warren Cuccurullo is 66. Rock musician Phil Collen (Def Leppard) is 65. Country singer Marty Raybon is 63. Political commentator Ann Coulter is 61. Rock musician Marty Friedman is 60. Actor Wendell Pierce is 59. Actor Teri Hatcher is 58. Actor David Harewood is 57. Singer Sinéad (shih-NAYD') O'Connor (AKA Shuhada' Davitt) is 56. Actor Matthew Laborteaux is 56. Baseball Hall of Famer Mike

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 08, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 153 ~ 88 of 88

Mussina is 54. Rock musician Ryan Newell (Sister Hazel) is 50. Actor Dominic Monaghan is 46. Actor Ian Somerhalder is 44. Rock singer Ingrid Michaelson is 43. R&B singer Chrisette Michele is 40. Actor Hannah Ware is 40. Country singer Sam Hunt is 38. MLB All-Star infielder Josh Donaldson is 37. Rock singer-actor Kate Voegele (VOH'-gehl) is 36. Christian rock musician Jen Ledger (Skillet) is 33. NHL defenseman Drew Doughty is 33. Actor Wallis Currie-Wood is 31. Actor AnnaSophia Robb is 29.