

Groton Daily Independent

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Groton Community Calendar

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 7th grade at 4 p.m. followed by 8th 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.

Sunday, Dec. 11

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:45 a.m.

St. John's Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45

a.m.; Zion worship, 11 a.m.; Christian Lit. Circle, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

Open Gym: Grade JK-8, 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.; Grades 6-12, 3:30 p.m. to 4 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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GDILIVE.COM

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
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheeting**

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Illness strikes Langford Area

Langford Area School: NO SCHOOL Friday December 8th due to the sickness spreading in our student body.

Thursday GBB v. Oaks POSTPONED

Friday NO PRACTICES ALLOWED

Saturday Double Header v Leola - Frederick POSTPONED

**'TIS THE
SEASON TO
SHOP LOCAL**

GROTON
Chamber Of Commerce



GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

December 12, 2022 – 7:00 PM – GHS Library Conference Room

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of November 14, 2022 board meeting as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of November 2022 District bills for payment.
3. Approval of November 2022 Financial Report, Agency Accounts, and Investments.
4. Approval of November 2022 School Lunch Report.
5. Approval of November 2022 School Transportation Report.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Consider bids for Groton Area MS/HS HVAC Project.
3. Required review of District Covid-19 Learn On Plan.
4. Projected 5-Year Capital Outlay Expenditures.
5. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. South Dakota Department of Education CTE Innovative Equipment Grant Award – Health Science Simulation Lab.
2. Adopt Supplemental Budget for CTE Innovative Equipment Grant.
3. Preview 2023-2024 calendar draft.
4. Approve resignation of Kiersten Sombke, MS/HS Principal, at end of the 22-23 school year.
5. Approve resignation/retirement of Mike Weber, Business Manager, at end of 22-23 school year.
6. Declare 30 computer bags surplus.
7. Approve managed print contract extension with A&B Business.
8. Approve hiring Amanda Bisbee as all-school play director for 2022-2023 at 5% of base salary.
9. Discuss potential for football field and 1969 addition renovation.

ADJOURN

X SERIES | *Cub Cadet*

PUT WINTER IN ITS PLACE



3X 30" HD

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

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

MSRP
\$1,999*



3X 26" TRAC

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

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

MSRP
\$2,099*



2X 30" MAX

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

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

MSRP
\$1,899*

■ Indicates step-up feature



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

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

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

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

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

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**EXCEPTIONAL FINANCING
OFFERS AVAILABLE!**



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Middle/High School Winter Concert



The Middle School/High School Winter Concert was held Thursday evening. The 8-12 Band performed "Good King Salsa"; "Holy Night, Silent Night" and "Scherzo for Santa." The finale was a sing-a-long with "Deck the Halls," "Jingle Bells," "O Christmas Tree" and "We Wish You A Merry Christmas." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Emily Clark and Elliana Weismantel did Christmas Piano Interludes at the concert.

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The 8-12 choir performed, "Joyeux Noel" and "Feliz Navidad." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The boys choir sang, "The Misy Mountains Cold" featuring Jaeger Kampa. Scott Glodt directed the choirs.. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The Percussion Ensemble performed, "Away in a Manger." Desiree Yeigh directed the bands. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM)

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The Girls Choir sang, "Carol of the Bells." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The Chamber Choir sang, "That's Christmas to Me." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The 6-7 band performed, "Saxes We Have Heard on High," "Noel, Noel" and "Deck the Halls with Chips and Salsa." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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The 6-7 choir performed, "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen" and "You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The Flex Band performed, "Christmas Bells and Brass." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM)



Shareholder-rights firms circling as Daktronics postpones earnings report

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER AND JOHN HULT -
DECEMBER 8, 2022 5:03 PM

Multiple law firms specializing in shareholder rights are inviting affected investors to contact them after a regulatory filing raised concerns about the finances of Brookings-based Daktronics.

Shares of the company tumbled after it announced Tuesday that it was postponing its earnings report and also rescheduling a conference call about the report to 10 a.m. Central on Monday. The company's stock fell 39% after the filing, and Daktronics stock was down again in early trading Thursday, slipping to as low as \$1.90 per share.

Daktronics filed paperwork with the Securities and Exchange Commission that cited "the discovery of a material weakness relating to the lack of adequate and appropriate financial reporting." The company also referenced "ongoing supply chain disruptions and inflationary challenges in materials, freight and personnel related costs."

The news was met with at least four announcements from law firms specializing in shareholder rights on Business Wire, a press release service operated by Berkshire Hathaway.

One of the releases came from Schall Law Firm, which bills itself as a firm that "represents investors all over the world who have been harmed by securities fraud and corporate malfeasance."

"The investigation focuses on whether the company issued false and/or misleading statements and/or failed to disclose information pertinent to investors," the release said.

Daktronics is one of South Dakota's best-known success stories and is an anchor business for the community of Brookings. Since its founding 54 years ago in a garage by two engineering professors at South Dakota State University, the company has become a leading manufacturer of scoreboards, LED screens and other displays across the country, including professional sports teams. Daktronics became a publicly traded company in 1994.

Daktronics' footprint includes about 2,500 employees worldwide, with more than half of those in South Dakota.

Company co-founder Aelred "Al" Kurtenbach was inducted into the South Dakota Hall of Fame in 1992. The professor-turned-entrepreneur was inducted into the Information Display & Entertainment Association Hall of Fame in 2019.

The company's annual report for 2022 noted that major display sales to the NBA's L.A. Clippers and Real Madrid soccer club helped drive an "all-time order record of \$846 million for the year."

But that same annual report pointed to yearslong struggles with a pandemic-impacted supply chain and



Daktronics is a Brookings-based scoreboard manufacturer. The company has been in business for over 50 years. (Courtesy of Daktronics)

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inventory management. Revenues dropped by \$127 million in fiscal year 2021 – a time frame during which layoffs were announced – before bouncing back in fiscal year 2022. That bounceback amounted to \$129 million, \$2 million more than was needed to cover its losses from the previous year.

“For a manufacturer, this stressed our capacity and operational planning,” President and CEO Reece Kurtenbach wrote in the report. “In addition, our production levels were frequently disrupted by varying supply chain challenges. Semiconductor parts, including integrated circuits and other components needed for production, have had sporadic availability because of allocations, slowed transportation, and continued COVID restrictions in certain geographies.”

The report also noted a negative cash flow from operations of \$27 million – the company’s first negative cash flow for that line item since fiscal year 2018. The company reported a product backlog of more than \$472 million, nearly double its backlog figure from the previous year and more than double any previous backlog during the past five years. Gross profits were also at a five-year low.

In August, the company admitted it faced challenges because of COVID-19, with many employees working remotely and entire floors of some buildings sitting empty.

“I think it’s true that the pandemic kind of picks and chooses how it impacted different areas, and we saw that in our businesses, as well,” Reece Kurtenbach told SDPB.

Daktronics stock traded at more than \$35 per share in 2006 but plummeted in 2008 during the Great Recession. The share price has fallen nearly 80% in the last five years and is down 65% in the last year.

Daktronics said in the new SEC filing that its plans include “obtaining financing secured by a mortgage on our facilities, a sales-leaseback transaction, leasing property and equipment, and continued focus on reducing working capital.”

“Since these plans are not finalized and are subject to market conditions that are not within our control, they cannot be deemed probable,” the report reads. “As a result, we have concluded that our plans do not alleviate substantial doubt about our ability to continue as a going concern.”

Brookings Mayor Oepke “Ope” Niemeyer was hesitant to discuss the matter Thursday but did express concern about the company.

“It’s not been an easy road for them,” Niemeyer said.

In other news, the Daktronics Board of Directors expanded to eight members with the appointment of Howard Atkins, announced Wednesday.

“The Board has expanded our ongoing refreshment to support the company’s long-term growth and value creation strategies,” Reece Kurtenbach said in the Wednesday news release.

Daktronics did not immediately respond to a request for comment.



MAKENZIE HUBER

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She’s spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.



JOHN HULT

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux falls Argus Leader.

Head of state universities orders compliance with Noem's TikTok ban

BY: SETH TUPPER - DECEMBER 8, 2022 2:47 PM

The executive director of the South Dakota Board of Regents says the state's higher education system will obey a new TikTok ban on state devices, and state universities will delete the various TikTok accounts they currently operate.

Regents Executive Director Brian Maher made the announcement Thursday during a regularly scheduled Board of Regents meeting at South Dakota Mines in Rapid City.

"The Board of Regents supports Governor Noem's ban," Maher said.

Gov. Kristi Noem announced the ban Nov. 29 in an executive order prohibiting the use of the TikTok social media app or website on state devices. She cited security concerns about Chinese government influence over the Chinese company that owns TikTok, while some observers said the move is part of Noem's broader effort to position herself as a national political figure.

The announcement from Maher ends speculation about how state universities – some of which have multiple TikTok accounts for marketing and recruitment – would respond to the ban.

There had been discussion about the use of personal devices to manage official university accounts, as the executive order only pertains to state-owned devices. South Dakota State University spokesman Mike Lockrem told South Dakota Searchlight recently that the school's TikTok accounts were typically run by social media managers using their own devices.

Maher's statement at Thursday's meeting appeared to leave no wiggle room for that.

"Our universities are not to use TikTok for university marketing and communication," Maher said.

Meanwhile, another state entity – the Department of Tourism – immediately deleted its TikTok account when Noem issued her order. That account had 61,200 followers and 1.7 million likes.



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.

Critics berate regents about drag show, and senator pledges to bring legislation

BY: SETH TUPPER - DECEMBER 8, 2022 5:56 PM

After the leader of the state's university system announced "process improvements" in response to controversy about a recent drag show, critics denounced the handling of the show and a state senator pledged legislation to address it.

The show took place Nov. 16 at South Dakota State University in Brookings. Some commenters on social media praised the show, while others criticized the university for allowing it and criticized advertising that described the show as "kid friendly."

Brian Maher, executive director of the Board of Regents, addressed the controversy Thursday during a board meeting at South Dakota Mines in Rapid City. He said his comments were meant to address "numerous calls and many conversations."

"The first point to make is that we follow state law and we do not – cannot – discriminate against student organizations based on the content or viewpoint of their expressive activity," Maher said. "Access to and use of facilities on our campuses is equally available to all."

Maher acknowledged "miscommunication and angst around how this event was marketed." It should be clear when an event is sponsored by a student organization rather than the university itself, he said. The drag show was sponsored by the student-run Gender & Sexualities Alliance.

"New protocol will make it clear when an event is being put on by a student organization in accordance with state law," Maher said, "and when an event is being sponsored and put on by the university. That is a significant distinction that didn't happen during this event."

Later, during the public comment portion of Thursday's meeting, numerous speakers criticized the drag show, drawing applause from a crowd of dozens behind them. Some pressed the board to support policy or law changes that would disallow future drag shows on university campuses.

One of the speakers, state Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller, R-Rapid City, said "we do have plans to bring some bills before the Legislature this year to address this kind of thing."

"This is absolutely sick, especially when families bring children," Frye-Mueller said.

No one associated with the drag show or SDSU addressed the board about the show. Board President Pam Roberts eventually ended the public comment period, and the board moved on to other agenda items without any discussion or action on the drag show.



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.

Marriage equality bill heads to Biden's desk following bipartisan U.S. House vote

South Dakota Rep. Johnson votes against legislation

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House overwhelmingly approved a marriage equality bill Thursday that would ensure same-sex and interracial couples continue holding many of the rights they have now, should the U.S. Supreme Court overturn the cases that established those constitutional protections.

The measure now heads to the desk of President Joe Biden, who plans to sign it.

The 258-169-1 vote included the backing of 39 Republicans, though many GOP lawmakers argued during debate there was no reason to pass the legislation since the justices have not agreed to take up any cases that would end legal marriages for interracial or same-sex couples. South Dakota's lone U.S. representative, Republican Dusty Johnson, voted against the bill, as did South Dakota's two U.S. senators when the bill passed the Senate earlier.

Democrats countered the legislation is essential to assure Americans that should the conservative-leaning court take up such a case in the future, as it did with abortion rights, same-sex and interracial marriages will still be recognized federally.

They also said religious liberty protections added in the Senate should assuage concerns about potential impacts on people and organizations.

"I'm standing here today because in the year 2022, families like mine are once again concerned that an activist out-of-step Supreme Court is going to take those rights away," Minnesota Democratic Rep. Angie Craig said during floor debate.

Wisconsin Democratic Rep. Mark Pocan argued that his marriage to his husband, Phil, shouldn't be any different from any other marriages when it comes to taxes, visiting a spouse in the hospital, Social Security benefits, or retirement.

Pocan urged his colleagues, including Republicans, to back the bill, saying "it's never too late to do the right thing."

He later added that he was sure "no one here would intend to discriminate against me and my spouse, as I would never against you and yours."

Virginia GOP Rep. Bob Good spoke out against the U.S. House passing the bill, saying the legislation did not comply with his religious views on marriage as a union between one man and one woman.

Good argued the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges case that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide was incorrect, saying the justices were "overriding the will of the people and their elected representatives."

Repeal of Defense of Marriage Act

The bill approved Thursday by the U.S. House would repeal the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act that had defined marriage as between one man and one woman. The law also allowed states to ignore legal same-sex marriages that were performed in states where the unions were legal.

The current measure would ensure that if the U.S. Supreme Court overturns the cases that legalized same-sex and interracial marriages, the federal government would continue recognizing those unions. It would also require states to recognize legal same-sex or interracial marriages between two people performed out-of-state.

The U.S. House voted 267-157 in July to approve the original version of the bill with 47 GOP lawmakers supporting the measure.

A bipartisan group of U.S. Senators — Tammy Baldwin, a Wisconsin Democrat; Susan Collins, a Maine Republican; Rob Portman, an Ohio Republican; Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona Democrat; and Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican — then began working behind the scenes to add religious liberty protections into the bill and to get the backing of at least 10 Republicans to clear that chamber's legislative filibuster.

After a few months of negotiations, senators voted 61-36 in late November to send the measure back

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to the House for final approval.

Following Senate passage of the bill, Biden said in a written statement that “the United States is on the brink of reaffirming a fundamental truth: love is love, and Americans should have the right to marry the person they love.”

“For millions of Americans, this legislation will safeguard the rights and protections to which LGBTQI+ and interracial couples and their children are entitled,” Biden wrote. “It will also ensure that, for generations to follow, LGBTQI+ youth will grow up knowing that they, too, can lead full, happy lives and build families of their own.”



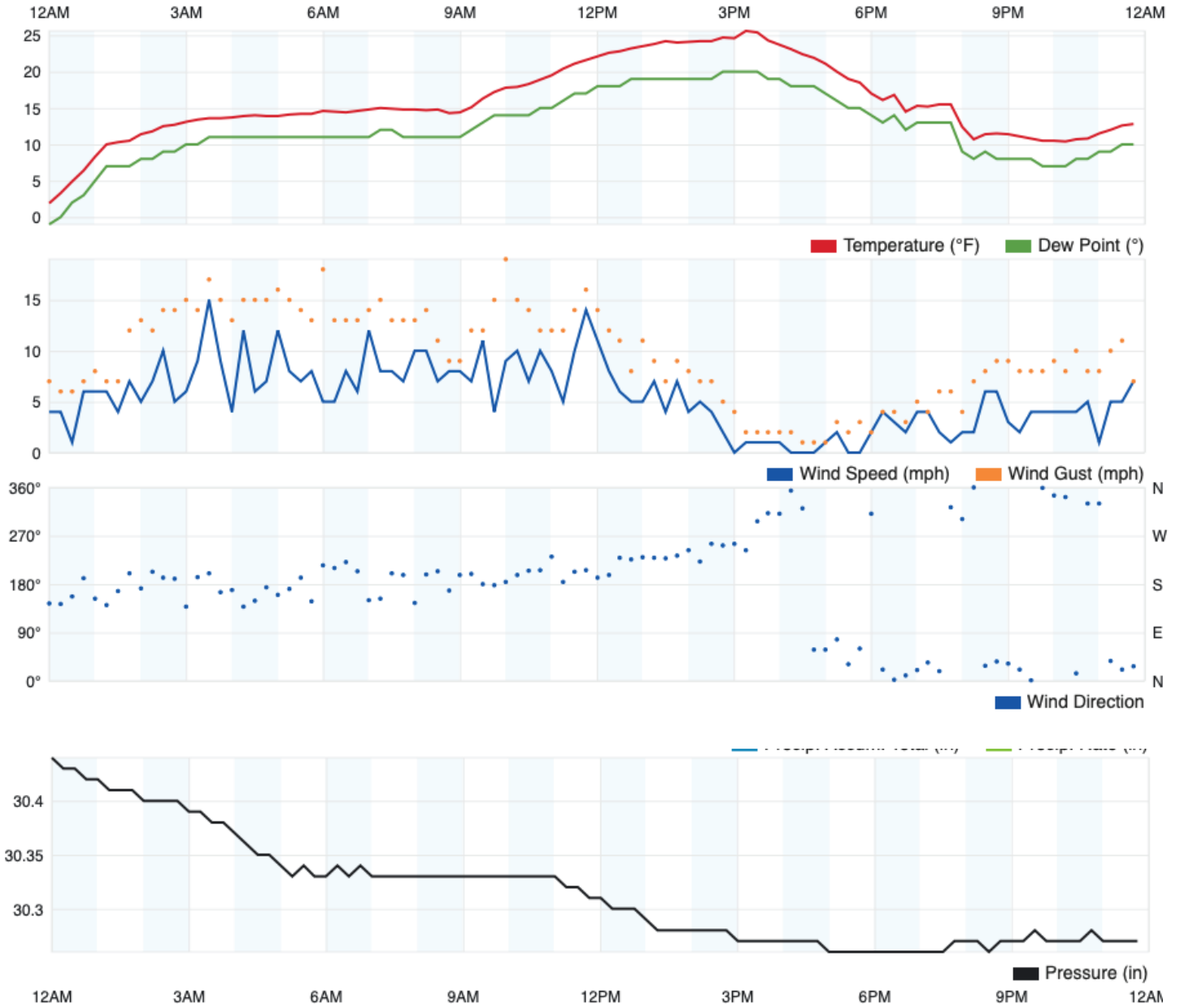
JENNIFER SHUTT

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.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
						
Patchy Fog	Cloudy	Decreasing Clouds	Partly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy then Chance Rain/Snow
High: 32 °F	Low: 21 °F	High: 35 °F	Low: 13 °F	High: 37 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 36 °F



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.

Winter Storm Potential

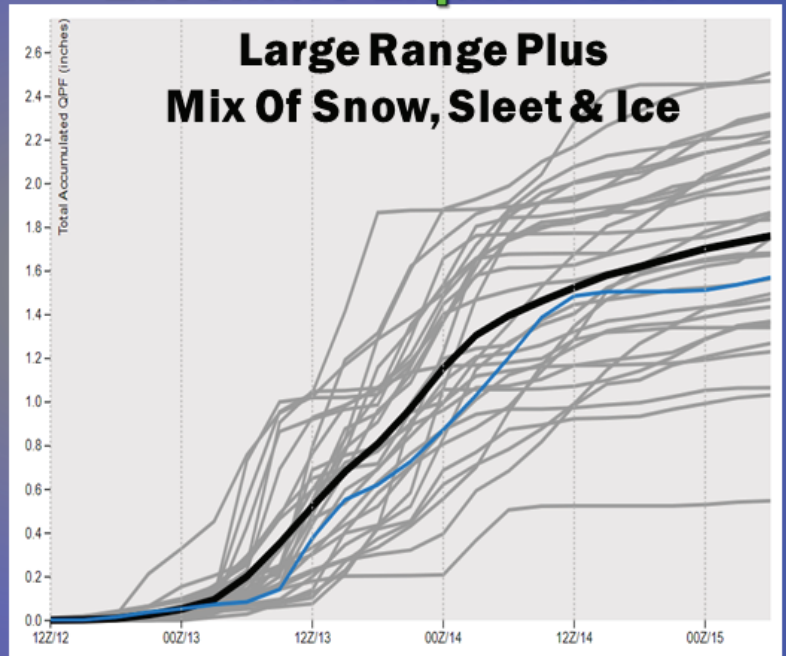
What We Do Know

- Lots of Moisture Streaming North
- Timing: Generally Late Mon Thru Wed or Thurs

What We Don't Know

- Exact Start & End Timing
- Temperatures & Transition Between Precip Types
- Locations For Max Snow & Ice
- Wind Speeds & Blowing Snow Potential

Ensemble **Liquid Total**



 Updated: 12/9/2022 3:07 AM Central

We continue to monitor a potentially potent winter storm next week. There is still a lot of uncertainty regarding the overall track and timing and how much moisture this will bring to the region. Here is an example of the wide range of outcomes in the moisture, and the uncertainty in impacts only increases since this will be falling as a mix of rain, ice, sleet and snow! Stay tuned.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 26 °F at 3:15 PM

Low Temp: 2 °F at 12:00 AM

Wind: 19 mph at 9:53 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 52 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 61 in 1939

Record Low: -27 in 1955

Average High: 31°F

Average Low: 10°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.18

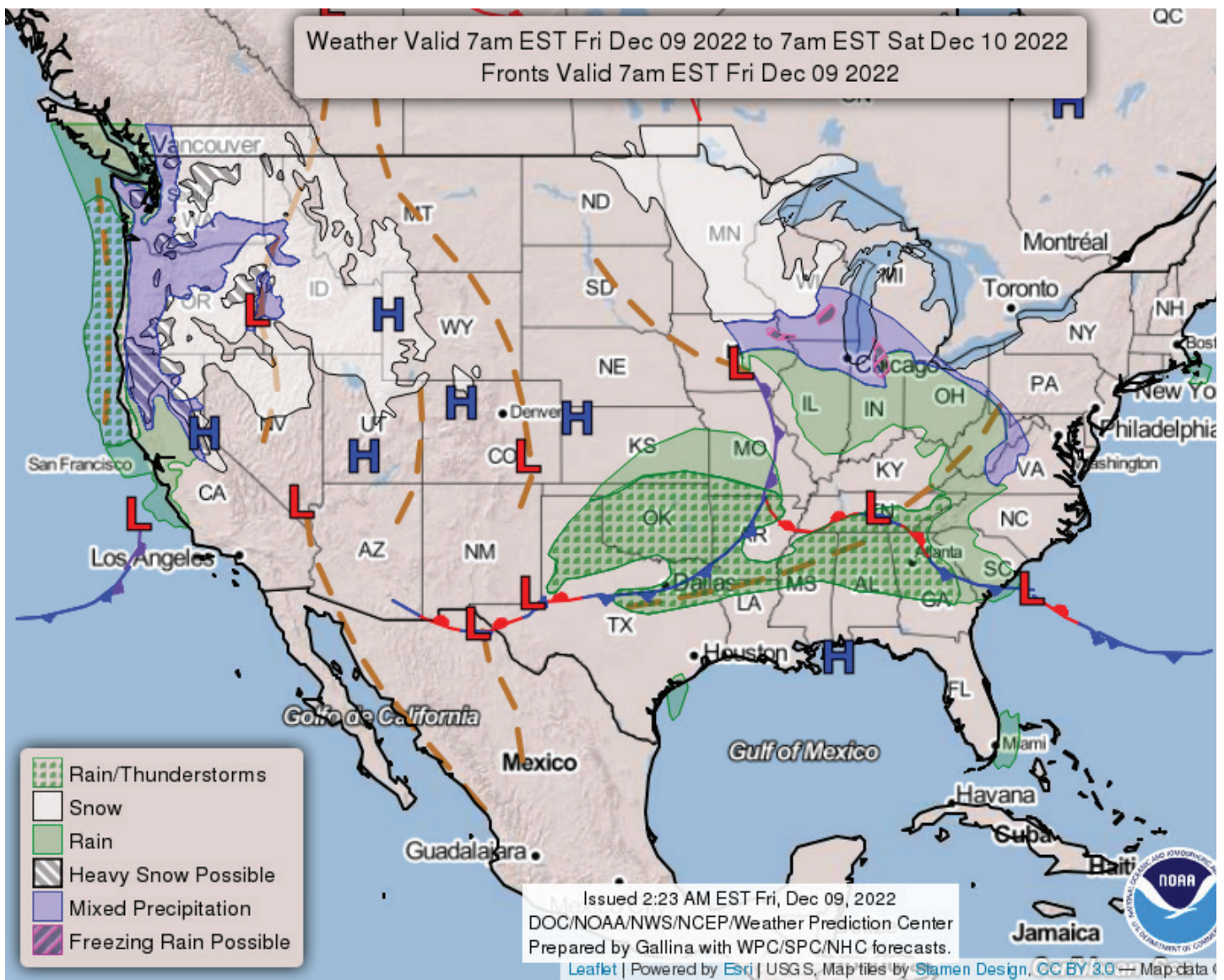
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.39

Precip Year to Date: 16.50

Sunset Tonight: 4:50:53 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:59:41 AM



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Today in Weather History

December 9, 1961: A snowstorm moved through the area and dropped 3 to 6 inches of snow east of the Missouri River and 1 to 3 inches to the west of the river from late afternoon on the 8th through late afternoon on the 9th. The storm was accompanied by high winds, blowing snow, icy highways, and temperatures falling to near zero. Three men were killed and one injured in a two-car crash near Watertown as snow and blowing snow sharply reduced visibilities. A skidding accident on a slippery highway near Winner resulted in an automobile fatality of one man. In a rural area near Vale, in Meade County, one man abandoned his stalled vehicle and was found the next day, frozen to death. 6 inches of snow fell at Sisseton and Wheaton, with 5 inches at Aberdeen and Watertown and 3 inches at Mobridge. Only an inch fell at Pierre.

December 9, 1917: A severe winter storm struck the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes Region. It produced 25 inches of snow and wind gusts to 78 mph at Buffalo NY. The storm produced 26 inches of snow at Vevay Indiana, with drifts fourteen feet high.

December 9, 2003: Although it never threatened land, a subtropical storm became Tropical Storm Peter approx. 700 miles WNW of the Cape Verde Islands. Combined with Tropical Storm Odette from earlier in the month, this is the first time since 1887 that two tropical storms formed in the Atlantic Basin in December.

1786 - A second great snowstorm in just five days brought another 15 inches of snow to Morristown NJ, on top of the eight inches which fell on the 7th and 8th, and the 18 inches which fell on the 4th and 5th. The total snowfall for the week was thus 41 inches. New Haven CT received 17 inches of new snow in the storm. Up to four feet of snow covered the ground in eastern Massachusetts following the storms. (9th-10th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1917 - A severe winter storm struck the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes Region. It produced 25 inches of snow and wind gusts to 78 mph at Buffalo NY. The storm produced 26 inches of snow at Vevay IND, with drifts fourteen feet high. By the 16th of the month people could walk across the frozen Ohio River from Vavey into Kentucky. (8th-9th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - The fifth storm in nine days kept the northwestern U.S. wet and windy. Winds along the coast of Washington gusted to 75 mph at Oceans Shores and at Hoquiam, and the northern and central coastal mountains of Oregon were drenched with three inches of rain in ten hours, flooding some rivers. Snowfall totals in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State ranged up to 36 inches in the Methow Valley. High winds in Oregon blew a tree onto a moving automobile killing three persons and injuring two others at Mill City. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter storm blanketed the Southern and Central Appalachians with up to ten inches of snow. Arctic air invaded the north central U.S. bringing subzero cold to Minnesota and North Dakota. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A strong storm produced wind gusts of 40 to 65 mph from the Alaska Peninsula to the North Gulf Coast of Alaska. Southeasterly winds gusted to 75 mph in the Anchorage hillside. Gusty winds associated with a strong cold front caused a power outage across much of the island of Hawaii. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE PROMISE OF PEACE

A professor stood before his class and boasted, "The Bible is false. It cannot be believed. It says, 'Peace and goodwill toward men.' History cannot account for a time when there were no wars!"

Disturbed, Arthur went to his pastor and related the incident. Calmly, his pastor said, "Art, that's not what the angels said. They said, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth among men with whom He is pleased.'"

Politicians speak of peace through treaties and boundaries, threats and sanctions, wars and rumors of wars. But that is not the peace that God speaks of in His Word. His Word speaks of a peace that comes through salvation and surrender to the Prince of Peace. It is a peace that comes from the new heart that He implants within us. It is a peace that Christians enjoy when we open the door to our hearts and allow Him to come in and rule our lives.

The peace that Scripture speaks of will never come from a non-peaceful source. It is a peace that comes through the risen Christ and has its source in God Himself.

We cannot find peace in a turbulent, war-torn world until we make peace with God through Jesus Christ. Only when we go to Him in humility and with faith, trust, and surrender, repent and ask for His forgiveness will He grant us His peace.

Prayer: We pray, Father for Your peace – a peace that comes from the God of all comfort Who gives us His peace that assures us of His presence in our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:13-14 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"



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

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2022-23 Community Events

- 07/21/2022: Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/22/2022: Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/24/2022: Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
07/27/2022: Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
08/05/2022: Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022: GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
No Date Set: Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022: Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/11/2022: 6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3-5pm
09/11/2022: Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10 a.m.
09/02-04: Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/01/2022: Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/07/2022: Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
10/31/2022: Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022: United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/13/2022: Snow Queen Contest
11/19/2022: Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
12/10/2022: Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
07/04/2023 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start (4th of July)
07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 38, Redfield 36

Chamberlain 47, Corsica/Stickney 40

Clark/Willow Lake 56, Waubay/Summit 33

Elkton-Lake Benton 41, Estelline/Hendricks 32

Herreid/Selby Area 48, Aberdeen Christian 18

Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 43, Iroquois/ Lake Preston Co-op 41

Philip 53, Bennett County 21

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 54, Brandon Valley 41

Sioux Falls Washington 53, Sioux Falls Lincoln 25

Sisseton 62, Milbank 29

Tri-State, N.D. 70, Waverly-South Shore 27

Wessington Springs 52, Faulkton 36

Gillette Early Bird Tournament=

St. Thomas More 43, Worland, Wyo. 20

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

St. Mary's, Neb. vs. Gregory, ppd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Great Plains Lutheran 45, Nebraska Lutheran, Neb. 39

Milbank 55, Sisseton 45

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 55, Kimball/White Lake 42

Stanley County 59, Miller 56

Wessington Springs 66, Faulkton 49

Gillette Early Bird Tournament=

St. Thomas More 55, Worland, Wyo. 37

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

St. Mary's, Neb. vs. Gregory, ppd.

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

Oil spill in rural Kansas creek shuts down Keystone pipeline

By JOHN HANNA, HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH, and JOSH FUNK Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — An oil spill in a creek in northeastern Kansas shut down a major pipeline that carries oil from Canada to the Texas Gulf Coast, briefly causing oil prices to rise Thursday.

Canada-based TC Energy said it shut down its Keystone system Wednesday night following a drop in pipeline pressure. It said oil spilled into a creek in Washington County, Kansas, about 150 miles (240 kilometers) northwest of Kansas City.

The company on Thursday estimated the spill's size at about 14,000 barrels and said the affected pipeline segment had been "isolated" and the oil contained at the site with booms, or barriers. It did not say how the spill occurred.

"People are sometimes not aware of of the havoc that these things can wreak until the disaster happens," said Zack Pistora, who lobbies the Kansas Legislature for the Sierra Club's state chapter.

Concerns that spills could pollute waterways spurred opposition to plans by TC Energy to build another

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crude oil pipeline in the Keystone system, the 1,200-mile (1,900-kilometer) Keystone XL, which would have cut across Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska. Critics also argued that using crude from western Canada's oil sands would worsen climate change, and President Joe Biden's cancellation of a U.S. permit for the project led the company to pull the plug last year.

In 2019, the Keystone pipeline leaked an estimated 383,000 gallons (1.4 million liters) of oil in eastern North Dakota.

Janet Kleeb, who founded the Bold Nebraska environmental and landowner rights group that campaigned against the Keystone XL, said there have been at least 22 spills along the original Keystone pipeline since it began service in 2010. She said federal studies have shown the type of heavy tar sands oil the pipeline carries can be especially difficult to clean up in water because it tends to sink.

"All oil spills are difficult, but tar sands in particular are very toxic and very difficult, so I'm awfully concerned," said Kleeb, who is also the Nebraska Democratic Party's chair.

But the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said there were no known effects yet on drinking water wells or the public, and the oil didn't move from the creek to larger waterways. Randy Hubbard, the Washington County Emergency Management coordinator, said there were no evacuations ordered because the break occurred in rural pastureland.

TC Energy said it had set up environmental monitoring at the site, including around-the-clock air quality monitoring.

"Our primary focus right now is the health and safety of onsite staff and personnel, the surrounding community, and mitigating risk to the environment," a company statement said.

Oil prices briefly surged at midday Thursday amid news of the spill, with the cost of a barrel of oil for near-term contracts rising by nearly 5%, and above the cost of oil contracts further into the future. That typically suggests anxiety in the market over immediate supply.

A U.S. Energy Information Administration spokesperson said the Keystone pipeline moves about 600,000 barrels of oil per day from Canada to Cushing, Oklahoma, where it can connect to another pipeline to the Gulf Coast. That's compared to the total of 3.5 million to 4 million barrels of Canadian oil imported into the U.S. every day.

Past Keystone spills have led to outages that lasted about two weeks, but this outage could possibly be longer because it involves a body of water, said analysts at RBC Capital Markets in a note to investors. Depending on the spill's location, it's possible that a portion of the pipeline could restart sooner, they said.

"It's something to keep an eye on," said Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy, which tracks gasoline prices. "It could eventually impact oil supplies to refiners, which could be severe if it lasts more than a few days."

The spill was 5 miles (8 kilometers) northeast of Washington, the county seat of about 1,100 residents. Paul Stewart, an area farmer, said part of it was contained on his land using yellow booms and a dam of dirt. The spill occurred in Mill Creek, which flows into the Little Blue River.

The Little Blue feeds the Big Blue River, which flows into Tuttle Creek Lake, north of Manhattan, home of Kansas State University. The EPA said the oil did not affect the Little Blue.

Dan Thalmann, publisher and editor of The Washington County News, a weekly publication, said crews were creating a rock path to the creek because recent rains made fields too soft to move in heavy machinery.

"Gosh, the traffic past my house is unbelievable — trucks after trucks after trucks," said Stewart, who took down an electric fence he'd finished putting up Wednesday, fearing it might be knocked down and dragged into a field.

Chris Pannbacker said the pipeline runs through her family's farm. She and her husband drove north of their farmhouse and across a bridge over Mill Creek.

"We looked at it from both sides, and it was black on both sides," said Pannbacker, a reporter for the Marysville Advocate newspaper.

Junior Roop, the sexton of a cemetery near the spill site, said people could smell the oil in town.

"It was about like driving by a refinery," he said.

Northern Plains tribes bring back their wild 'relatives'

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

FORT BELKNAP AGENCY, Mont. (AP) — Native species such as swift foxes and black-footed ferrets disappeared from the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation generations ago, wiped out by poisoning campaigns, disease and farm plows that turned open prairie where nomadic tribes once roamed into cropland and cattle pastures.

Now with guidance from elders and outside wildlife groups, students and interns from the tribal college are helping reintroduce the small predators to the northern Montana reservation sprawling across more than 1,000 square miles (2,600 square kilometers) near the U.S.-Canada border.

Sakura Main, a 24-year-old Aaniiih woman who is entering Fort Belknap's Aaniiih Nakoda College in January, is helping to locate, trap and vaccinate the severely endangered ferrets against deadly plague in a program overseen by the tribal fish and game department.

The nocturnal animals live among the mounded burrows of prairie dog colonies, where ferrets stalk the rodents almost as big as they are, wrapping themselves around their prey to strangle and kill it.

On a recent clear night, the Nakoda sacred site Snake Butte looming on the horizon, Main shined a flashlight into a long, skinny, wire trap atop a prairie dog burrow. Inside was the second ferret that she'd caught that night with fellow wildlife worker C.J. Werk, daughter of the former tribal president.

"We got one in there!" Main quietly exclaimed.

"Wow, really another one?" replied Werk, who was engaged in a friendly competition with another worker, her cousin, to catch the most ferrets. "I'm going to rub it in."

Hurried back to the "hospital trailer," the animal was sedated and vaccinated against sylvatic plague carried by their favorite prey, work done in partnership with World Wildlife Fund. It had a microchip inserted beneath its skin for future tracking, before being released back into the prairie dog colony to a soft cheer from Main and Werk.

As extinctions of animals and plants accelerate around the globe, Native American tribes with limited funding are trying to re-establish imperiled species and restore their habitat — measures that parallel growing calls to "rewild" places by reviving degraded natural systems.

But the direct relationship that Native Americans perceive between people and wildlife differentiates their approach from western conservationists, who often emphasize "management" of habitat and wildlife that humans have dominion over, said Julie Thorstenson, executive director of the Native American Fish & Wildlife Society.

"Western science looks at humans as kind of external managers of the land and of the ecosystem," she said. "Indigenous people see themselves as part of it."

The Nakoda and Aaniiih people have struggled to restore their land to a wilder state. Plague periodically wipes out ferret populations, and half the foxes released so far may have died or fled.

But tribal members say they're committed to rebuilding native species with deep cultural significance to restore balance between humans and the natural world. Tribal elders speak nostalgically of the long-gone Swift Fox Society, which prized the secretive, rarely seen animals and used their pelts and tails to adorn hair braids and costumes. They call the foxes and ferrets their "relatives."

"It's like having your family back," said Mike Fox, former director of the Fort Belknap wildlife program. "We have a pretty darn good spot on the Northern Plains to bring these animals back and just about complete the circle of animals that were originally here."

Prior to European settlement as many as one million ferrets occupied an estimated 156,000 square miles (400,000 square kilometers) from Canada to Mexico — wherever prairie dogs were found. By the 1960s, conversion of grasslands to crops, plague and poisoning campaigns reduced prairie dogs to 2,200 square miles (5,700 square kilometers). Ferrets were presumed extinct then rediscovered in 1981 on a ranch in Meeteetse, Wyoming.

They're one of the most endangered mammals in North America, with only about 300 in the wild, including fewer than 40 on Fort Belknap. Populations are propped up with a captive breeding program to

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counter periodic decimations by plague.

Prairie dogs are still considered a nuisance among ranchers, including on Fort Belknap, because they eat grass. Prairie dog shooting tournaments once were held annually to raise money for the tribal fish and game department, Fox said. The tournaments are gone on Fort Belknap, and prairie dogs — squirrel-sized rodents common across the U.S. Plains — are now recognized as vital to ferrets.

Parts of Fort Belknap also are being repopulated with bison, a species that sustained Native Americans for centuries before white settlers killed them off. Bison are being restored by dozens of tribes across the U.S., which is similar to efforts in the Pacific Northwest to sustain wild salmon populations, another keystone species that provides food for tribes.

The work to reestablish black-footed ferrets and swift foxes is different. Unlike bison and salmon, foxes and ferrets aren't food sources. They live in the shadows, hunting mostly at night, and are rarely seen.

Ferrets have been reintroduced to seven reservations on the Northern Plains and two tribal sites in the Southwest, while swift foxes have been returned to four reservations, said Shaun Grassel, a former biologist for the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe in South Dakota.

Less than 100 yards (91 meters) from a small pen holding three swift foxes about to be released at Fort Belknap, tribal elders Buster Moore and John Allen sat among cactuses and scrubby grasses and passed a pipe around a circle of men, while women sat nearby, watching and listening.

After the ceremony, Moore — whose Nakoda name is Buffalo Bull Horn — rubbed his hands on the hard earth, explaining that they prayed for the foxes, the tribes, the land itself.

"It sustains itself, it helps Mother Earth, everything sustain balance," Moore said of the restoration work celebrated that day. "Prairie dogs, wolves, swift fox, red fox, black-footed ferrets."

Once abundant on the plains, swift foxes now occupy about 40% of their original habitat. Since 2020, the tribes and college have worked with scientists from the Smithsonian's National Zoo to capture about 100 foxes from healthy populations in Wyoming and Colorado and relocate them to Fort Belknap.

As Moore spoke, the reservation's fish and wildlife biologist Tim Vosburgh and two assistants cautiously approached a few foxes in a pen. They used wire cutters to cut through the chain link and pulled it open.

When they moved about 50 yards (46 meters) away, a fox poked its head out of a prairie dog burrow inside the pen. It soon darted out the opening, followed within minutes by two others.

They disappeared across the rolling landscape and into the glaring sun behind the Bearpaw Mountains to the west.

"What they need is a little luck," said Allen the elder. "They need to survive the winter and then they won't have to worry about it, you know, because they've got all the skills. So we call on our relatives to protect them."

South Dakota coach Eric Peterson injured in fall at home

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota men's basketball coach Eric Peterson was hospitalized Thursday after he sustained multiple injuries in a fall at his home and will not be with the Coyotes when they play UC Irvine on Saturday.

Peterson was outside his house decorating for the holidays Wednesday when he fell, a school spokesman said. His injuries were not considered life threatening, and he was being treated at a Sioux Falls hospital.

Peterson is in his first year at South Dakota after spending three seasons as an assistant at Utah State. The Coyotes are 5-5.

South Dakota governor orders review of Chinese investments

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Thursday called for an immediate review of the state's investments to determine if it has stakes in Chinese companies, stepping up her rhetoric against the ascendant Asian economic giant that has also emerged as a powerful rival to the United States.

The Republican governor has taken aim at the state's ties to China and claimed that they pose a national

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security threat. Last week, she banned the popular video-sharing platform TikTok, which is owned by Chinese company ByteDance, from being used on state-owned devices.

Noem has become increasingly comfortable using her position as governor of a rural state to wade into national — and now international — issues. With executive orders and statements that cater to conservative media headlines, she has made it clear that her political ambitions lie beyond South Dakota. She is seen as a potential contender for the Republican nomination for the 2024 White House.

On Thursday, her office issued a statement saying she wanted the South Dakota Investment Council, which oversees a \$19 billion portfolio for the state's pension fund and other trust funds, to review its investments for ties to Chinese companies within seven days. She argued that all Chinese companies are tied to the country's Communist Party.

"South Dakotans deserve to know if their taxpayer dollars are being invested to benefit the Chinese Communist Party," Noem said in a statement.

China's government has worked in recent years to exert stronger ties to companies by pushing the development of party cells, which are small committees of Communist Party members, within companies. But it's not clear how much influence the cells have on company operations, and experts say the relationship between the party and business is complicated.

It isn't clear whether Noem's orders will have any real effect. In the Investment Council's most recent annual report, China did not make it onto a list of the top ten countries where it has invested. Noem said that if any investments in Chinese companies are found, the council should propose a plan to take its money elsewhere.

Last year, the Investment Council reviewed its portfolio to determine if it had invested in Russian companies after that country invaded Ukraine, but determined that there were not any direct investments in Russian companies.

U.S. President Joe Biden last year expanded a list of Chinese companies whose shares are off-limits to American investors because of their purported links to the Chinese military and surveillance. Chinese officials vehemently objected to that move.

2 dead after pickup collides with train near Harrisburg

HARRISBURG, S.D. (AP) — Two people have died and a third is seriously injured after a pickup truck collided with a train near Harrisburg, the South Dakota State Patrol said Thursday.

The crash happened before 5 p.m. Wednesday about one mile south of Harrisburg. The state patrol said preliminary information indicates that the driver of the pickup was heading west when he did not yield at a railroad crossing and collided with a southbound train.

Two passengers in the truck — a 45-year-old woman and a 12-year-old girl — died at the scene. The 44-year-old man who was driving the pickup suffered life-threatening injuries and was airlifted to a Sioux Falls hospital.

The state patrol says the driver of the pickup truck may face criminal charges. Authorities are also investigating whether the people in the truck were using seatbelts.

The train operator was not injured.

New abnormal: Climate disaster damage 'down' to \$268 billion

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

This past year has seen a horrific flood that submerged one-third of Pakistan, one of the three costliest U.S. hurricanes on record, devastating droughts in Europe and China, a drought-triggered famine in Africa and deadly heat waves all over.

Yet this wasn't climate change at its worst.

With all that death and destruction in 2022, climate-related disaster damages are down from 2021, according to insurance and catastrophe giant Swiss Re. That's the state of climate change in the 2020s that \$268

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billion in global disaster costs is a 12% drop from the previous year, where damage passed \$300 billion. The number of U.S. weather disasters that caused at least \$1 billion in damage is only at 15 through October and will likely end the year with 16 or 17, down from 22 and 20 in the last two years, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. But because of Hurricane Ian, overall damage amounts are probably going to end up in top three in American history.

Weather disasters, many but not all of them turbocharged by human-caused climate change, are happening so frequently that this year's onslaught, which 20 years ago would have smashed records by far, now in some financial measures seems a bit of a break from recent years.

Welcome to the new abnormal.

"We've almost gotten used to extremes. And this year compared to many years in the past would be considered a pretty intense year, but compared to maybe the most extreme years, like a 2017, 2020 and 2021, it does look like ... a slight adjustment down," said NOAA applied meteorologist and economist Adam Smith, who calculates the billion dollar disasters for the agency. "We're just getting used to it but that's not a good way to move into the future."

Wildfires in the United States weren't as costly this year as the last couple years, but the Western drought was more damaging than previous years, he said. America's billion dollar disasters in 2022 seemed to hit every possible category except winter storms: hurricanes, floods, droughts, wildfires, heat waves, hail storms and even a derecho.

When it comes to 2022's financial damages globally and the United States, Ian, which walloped Florida, was the big dog, even though Pakistan's flooding was more massive and deadly. In terms of just looking at dollars not people, Ian's damages eclipsed the drought-triggered African famine that affected more people. It also overshadowed river levels in China and Europe that dropped to levels so low it caused power and industrial problems and the heat waves in Europe, India and North America that were deadly and record-breaking.

Smith said NOAA hasn't finished calculating the damages from Ian yet, but there's a good chance it will have more than \$100 billion in damage, pushing past 2012's Superstorm Sandy that swamped New York and New Jersey, ranking only behind 2005's Katrina and 2017's Harvey for damaging hurricanes.

In the 1980s, the United States would average a billion-dollar weather disaster every 82 days. Now it's every 18 days, Smith said. That's not inflation because damages are adjusted to factor that out, he said. It's nastier weather and more development, people and buildings in harm's way, he said.

Globally "if you zoom in the last six years, 2017 to 2022, this has been particularly bad" especially compared to the five years before, said Martin Bertogg, Swiss Re's head of catastrophic peril.

"It felt like a regime change, some people called it a new normal," Bertogg said. But he thinks it was more getting back, after a brief respite, to a long-term trend of disaster costs steadily rising 5% to 7% a year.

U.S. climate envoy John Kerry said the increasing number of disasters makes the case for reducing emissions.

"You're spending money now because we're not doing the things we ought to be doing," Kerry said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We'll be spending a hell of a lot more under much more stringent circumstances than we are today if we don't move faster."

Not every year has to be a whopper. The U.S. got a break in 2019 when there were "only" 14 billion-dollar disasters, NOAA's Smith said.

"A growing body of evidence indicates that climate change is increasing the variability as well as the average of weather disasters, said Stanford University environment director Chris Field, who led a United Nations 2012 report on extreme weather. "What this means is that in some years we get hit harder than others. In other years we get hit like never before."

"The important thing is that the trend in disasters is increasing," Field said. "And it will continue to increase until we halt the warming."

Looking at damages, mostly insured losses, can give a skewed picture because how much a disaster cost depends greatly on how wealthy the area that the disaster hit, less so than the scale of the disaster itself, said Debarati Guha-Sapir, who runs the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters at the

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Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium.

And even more important, these figures are about dollars, not people, and that distorts the true picture, said Guha-Sapir and University of Washington health and climate professor Kristie Ebi.

"What is insured is a small fraction of total infrastructure and the people killed in Pakistan," which lowers the damage amount despite 1,700 people killed, Ebi said.

The flood in Pakistan, which submerged one-third of a country that's bigger than Texas, was not the only thing that hit that developing country.

"Pakistan just couldn't catch a break this year. A January snowstorm killed 23 followed by a lethal spring heatwave, then devastating floods from June-October took over 1,700 lives and untold livelihoods," said Jennifer Francis, a climate scientist at the Woodwell climate Research Center in Cape Cod. "Many other surprising, less publicized, and alarming events wreaked havoc on local communities, such as the sudden collapse of the lucrative snow crab fishery in the Bering Sea, rapid demise of European glaciers, inundation of several coastal villages in Alaska by ex-tropical cyclone Merbok."

"Additional heat in the atmosphere is sucking moisture out of soils, exacerbating drought and heatwaves," Francis said. "Evaporation from oceans and land also increases the amount of moisture in the air, which provides more fuel for storms and heavier downpours."

Swiss Re's Bertogg said although climate change is at work he estimates two-thirds, perhaps more, of the rise in damages is due to more people and things in harm's way.

Urbanization across the globe puts more people in dense environments, which increases damage when disaster hits, Bertogg said. Then add urban sprawl that takes those cities and makes them geographically bigger and thus more vulnerable, he said. A good example of that is how wildfires started damaging more homes in California as more homes got built in rural areas, he said.

Plus more construction is being built on the coast and along waterways making them more vulnerable to storms and flooding, with flooding as "the biggest threat for the global economy," Bertogg said.

But NOAA's Smith keeps searching for a little silver lining in storm clouds: "I just hope the trends get a little bit less profound and less stressful for society. We all need a break."

Colorado shooter's 2021 case dropped for lack of cooperation

By COLLEEN SLEVIN, JIM MUSTIAN, MIKE BALSAMO, BERNARD CONDON and JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — The Colorado Springs gay nightclub shooter had charges dropped in a 2021 bomb threat case after family members who were terrorized in the incident refused to cooperate, according to the district attorney and court documents unsealed Thursday.

The charges were dropped despite authorities finding a "tub" full of bomb-making chemicals and later receiving warnings from other relatives that suspect Anderson Lee Aldrich was sure to hurt or murder a set of grandparents if freed, according to the unsealed documents.

In a letter last November to state District Court Judge Robin Chittum, the relatives painted a picture of an isolated, violent person who did not have a job and was given \$30,000 that was spent largely on the purchase of 3D printers to make guns.

Aldrich tried to reclaim guns that were seized after the threat, but authorities did not return the weapons, El Paso County District Attorney Michael Allen said.

Allen spoke hours after Chittum unsealed the case, which included allegations that Aldrich threatened to kill the grandparents and to become the "next mass killer" more than a year before the nightclub attack that killed five people.

The suspect's mother and the grandparents derailed that earlier case by evading prosecutors' efforts to serve them with a subpoena, leading to a dismissal of the charges after defense attorneys said speedy trial rules were at risk, Allen said.

Testifying at a hearing two months after the threat, the suspect's mother and grandmother described Aldrich in court as a "loving" and "sweet" young person who did not deserve to be jailed, the prosecutor

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said.

The former district attorney who was replaced by Allen told The Associated Press he faced many cases in which people dodged subpoenas, but the inability to serve Aldrich's family seemed extraordinary.

"I don't know that they were hiding, but if that was the case, shame on them," Dan May said of the suspect's family. "This is an extreme example of apparent manipulation that has resulted in something horrible."

Aldrich's attorney, public defender Joseph Archambault, had argued against the document release, saying Aldrich's right to a fair trial was paramount.

"This will make sure there is no presumption of innocence," Archambault said.

The grandmother's in-laws wrote to the court in November 2021 saying that Aldrich was a continuing danger and should remain incarcerated. The letter also said police tried to hold Aldrich for 72 hours after a prior response to the home, but the grandmother intervened.

"We believe that my brother, and his wife, would undergo bodily harm or more if Anderson were released. Besides being incarcerated, we believe Anderson needs therapy and counseling," Robert Pullen and Jeanie Streltsoff wrote. They said Aldrich had punched holes in the walls of the grandparents' Colorado home and broken windows and that the grandparents "had to sleep in their bedroom with the door locked" and a bat by the bed.

During Aldrich's teenage years in San Antonio, the letter said, Aldrich attacked the grandfather and sent him to the emergency room with undisclosed injuries. The grandfather later lied to police out of fear of Aldrich, according to the letter, which said the suspect could not get along with classmates as a youth so had been homeschooled.

The judge's order comes after news organizations, including the AP, sought to unseal the documents, and two days after AP published portions of the documents that were verified with a law enforcement official.

Aldrich, 22, was arrested in June 2021 on allegations of making a threat that led to the evacuation of about 10 homes. The documents describe how Aldrich told the frightened grandparents about firearms and bomb-making material in the grandparents' basement and vowed not to let them interfere with plans for Aldrich to be "the next mass killer" and "go out in a blaze."

Aldrich — who uses they/them pronouns and is nonbinary, according to their attorneys — holed up in their mother's home in a standoff with SWAT teams and warned about having armor-piercing rounds and a determination to "go to the end." Investigators later searched the mother's and grandparents' houses where they found and seized handguns, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, body armor, magazines, a gas mask and a tub filled with chemicals that make an explosive when combined, documents show.

A sheriff's report said there had been prior calls to law enforcement referring to Aldrich's "escalating homicidal behavior" but did not elaborate. A sheriff's office spokesperson did not immediately provide more information.

The grandparents' call to 911 led to the suspect's arrest, and Aldrich was booked into jail on suspicion of felony menacing and kidnapping. But after Aldrich's bond was set at \$1 million, Aldrich's mother and grandparents sought to lower the bond, which was reduced to \$100,000 with conditions including therapy.

The case was dropped when attempts to serve the family members with subpoenas to testify against Aldrich failed, according to Allen. Both grandparents moved out of state, complicating the subpoena process, Allen said.

Grandmother Pamela Pullen said through an attorney that there was a subpoena in her mailbox, but it was never handed to her personally or served properly, documents show.

"At the end of the day, they weren't going to testify against Andy," Xavier Kraus, a former friend and neighbor of Aldrich, told AP.

Kraus said he had text messages from Aldrich's mother saying that she and the suspect were "hiding from somebody." He later found out the family had been dodging subpoenas. Aldrich's "words were, 'They got nothing. There's no evidence,'" Kraus said.

A protective order against the suspect that was in place until July 5 prevented Aldrich from possessing firearms, the El Paso County Sheriff's Office said.

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Soon after the charges were dropped, Aldrich began boasting that they had regained access to firearms, Kraus said, adding that Aldrich had shown him two assault-style rifles, body armor and incendiary rounds.

Aldrich "was really excited about it," Kraus said, and slept with a rifle nearby under a blanket.

Relatives of Aldrich's grandmother said after the suspect's 2021 arrest that she had recently given Aldrich \$30,000, "much of which went to his purchase of two 3D printers — on which he was making guns," according to documents in the case.

Aldrich's statements in the bomb case raised questions about whether authorities could have used Colorado's "red flag" law to seize weapons from the suspect.

El Paso County Sheriff Bill Elder released a statement Thursday saying that there was no need to ask for a red flag order because Aldrich's weapons had already been seized as part of the arrest and Aldrich couldn't buy new ones.

The sheriff also rejected the idea that he could have asked for a red flag order after the case was dismissed. The bombing case was too old to argue there was danger in the near future, Elder said, and the evidence was sealed a month after the dismissal and couldn't be used.

"There was no legal mechanism" to take guns following the case dismissal, the sheriff said.

Under Colorado law, records are automatically sealed when a case is dropped and defendants are not prosecuted, as happened in Aldrich's 2021 case. Once sealed, officials cannot acknowledge that the records exist, and the process to unseal the documents initially happens behind closed doors with no docket to follow and an unnamed judge.

Chittum said the "profound" public interest in the case outweighed Aldrich's privacy rights. The judge added that scrutiny of judicial cases is "foundational to our system of government."

During Thursday's hearing, Aldrich sat at the defense table looking straight ahead or down at times and did not appear to show any reaction when their mother's lawyer asked that the case remain sealed.

Aldrich was formally charged Tuesday with 305 criminal counts, including hate crimes and murder, in the Nov. 19 shooting at Club Q, a sanctuary for the LGBTQ community in mostly conservative Colorado Springs.

Investigators say Aldrich entered just before midnight with an AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle and began shooting during a drag queen's birthday celebration. Patrons stopped the killing by wrestling the suspect to the ground and beating Aldrich into submission, witnesses said.

Seventeen people suffered gunshot wounds but survived, authorities said.

Brittney Griner back home in US after Russian prisoner swap

By LEKAN OYEKANMI and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — American basketball star Brittney Griner returned to the United States early Friday after being freed in a high-profile prisoner exchange following nearly 10 months in detention in Russia.

The deal, which saw her swapped for notorious arms dealer Viktor Bout, secured the release of the most prominent American detained abroad and achieved a top goal for President Joe Biden. But the U.S. failed to win freedom for another American, Paul Whelan, who has been jailed for nearly four years.

Griner is a two-time Olympic gold medalist, Baylor University All-American and Phoenix Mercury pro basketball star. Her status as an openly gay Black woman, locked up in a country where authorities have been hostile to the LGBTQ community, injected racial, gender and social dynamics into her legal saga and brought unprecedented attention to the population of wrongful detainees.

Biden's authorization to release Bout, the Russian felon once nicknamed "the Merchant of Death," underscored the heightened urgency that his administration faced to get Griner home, particularly after the recent resolution of her criminal case on drug charges and her subsequent transfer to a penal colony.

Griner was seen getting off a plane that landed Friday at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland in Texas.

The athlete, who also played pro basketball in Russia, was arrested at an airport there in February after Russian authorities said she was carrying vape canisters with cannabis oil. Before her conviction, the U.S. State Department declared Griner to be "wrongfully detained" — a charge that Russia has sharply rejected.

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The Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed Thursday's swap, saying in a statement carried by Russian news agencies that the exchange took place in Abu Dhabi and Bout had been flown home.

Biden spoke by phone with Griner. U.S. officials said she would be offered specialized medical services and counseling.

In releasing Bout, the U.S. freed a former Soviet Army lieutenant colonel whom the Justice Department once described as one of the world's most prolific arms dealers. He was arrested in Thailand in 2008 and extradited to the U.S. in 2010.

Bout was serving a 25-year sentence on charges that he conspired to sell tens of millions of dollars in weapons that U.S. officials said were to be used against Americans.

Following Griner's arrest at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport in February, she pleaded guilty in July but still faced trial because admitting guilt in Russia's judicial system does not automatically end a case.

She acknowledged in court that she possessed canisters with cannabis oil but said she had no criminal intent and she accidentally packed them. Her defense team presented written statements that she had been prescribed cannabis to treat pain.

Fight to curb food waste increasingly turns to science

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Hate mealy apples and soggy french fries? Science can help.

Restaurants, grocers, farmers and food companies are increasingly turning to chemistry and physics to tackle the problem of food waste.

Some are testing spray-on peels or chemically-enhanced sachets that can slow the ripening process in fruit. Others are developing digital sensors that can tell — more precisely than a label — when meat is safe to consume. And packets affixed to the top of a takeout box use thermodynamics to keep fries crispy.

Experts say growing awareness of food waste and its incredible cost — both in dollars and in environmental impact — has led to an uptick in efforts to mitigate it. U.S. food waste startups raised \$300 billion in 2021, double the amount raised in 2020, according to ReFed, a group that studies food waste.

"This has suddenly become a big interest," said Elizabeth Mitchum, director of the Postharvest Technology Center at the University of California, Davis, who has worked in the field for three decades. "Even companies that have been around for a while are now talking about what they do through that lens."

In 2019, around 35% of the 229 million tons of food available in the U.S. — worth around \$418 billion — went unsold or uneaten, according to ReFed. Food waste is the largest category of material placed in municipal landfills, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which says rotting food releases methane, a problematic greenhouse gas.

ReFed estimates 500,000 pounds of food could be diverted from landfills annually with high-tech packaging.

Among the products in development are a sensor by Stockholm-based Innoscentia that can determine whether meat is safe depending on the buildup of microbes in its packaging. And Ryp Labs, based in the U.S. and Belgium, is working on a produce sticker that would release a vapor to slow ripening.

SavrPak was founded in 2020 by Bill Bergen, an aerospace engineer who was tired of the soggy food in his lunchbox. He developed a plant-based packet — made with food-safe materials approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration — that can fit inside a takeout container and absorb condensation, helping keep the food inside hotter and crispier.

Nashville, Tennessee-based hot chicken chain Hattie B's was skeptical. But after testing SavrPaks using humidity sensors, it now uses the packs when it's catering fried foods and is working with SavrPak to integrate the packs into regular takeout containers.

Brian Morris, Hattie B's vice president of culinary learning and development, said each SavrPak costs the company less than \$1 but ensures a better meal.

"When it comes to fried chicken, we kind of lose control from the point when it leaves our place," Morris said. "We don't want the experience to go down the drain."

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But cost can still be a barrier for some companies and consumers. Kroger, the nation's largest grocery chain, ended its multi-year partnership with Goleta, California-based Apeel Sciences this year because it found consumers weren't willing to pay more for produce brushed or sprayed with Apeel's edible coating to keep moisture in and oxygen out, and thus extending the time that produce stays fresh.

Apeel says treated avocados can last a few extra days, while citrus fruit lasts for several weeks. The coating is made of purified mono- and diglycerides, emulsifiers that are common food additives.

Kroger wouldn't say how much more Apeel products cost. Apeel also wouldn't reveal the average price premium for produce treated with its coating since it varies by food distributor and grocer. But Apeel says its research shows customers are willing to pay more for produce that lasts longer. Apeel also says it continues to talk to Kroger about other future technology.

There is another big hurdle to coming up with innovations to preserve food: Every food product has its own biological makeup and handling requirements.

"There is no one major change that can improve the situation," said Randy Beaudry, a professor in the horticulture department at Michigan State University's school of agriculture.

Beaudry said the complexity has caused some projects to fail. He remembers working with one large packaging company on a container designed to prevent fungus in tomatoes. For the science to work, the tomatoes had to be screened for size and then oriented stem-up in each container. Eventually the project was scrapped.

Beaudry said it's also hard to sort out which technology works best, since startups don't always share data or formulations with outside researchers.

Some companies find it better to rely on proven technology — but in new ways. Chicago-based Hazel Technologies, which was founded in 2015, sells 1-methylcyclopropene, or 1-MCP, a gas that has been used for decades to delay the ripening process in fruit. The compound — considered non-toxic by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — is typically pumped into sealed storage rooms to inhibit the production of ethylene, a plant hormone.

But Hazel's real breakthrough is a sachet the size of a sugar packet that can slowly release 1-MCP into a box of produce.

Mike Mazie, the facilities and storage manager at BelleHarvest, a large apple packing facility in Belding, Michigan, ordered around 3,000 sachets this year. He used them for surplus bins that couldn't fit into the sealed rooms required for gas.

"If you can get another week out of a bushel of apples, why wouldn't you?" he said. "It absolutely makes a difference."

The science is promising but it's only part of the solution, said Yvette Cabrera, the director of food waste for the Natural Resources Defense Council. Most food waste happens at the residential level, she said; lowering portion sizes, buying smaller quantities of food at a time or improving the accuracy of date labels could have even more impact than technology.

"Overall as a society, we don't value food as it should be valued," Cabrera said.

After midterms, GOP reconsidering antipathy to mail ballots

By BILL BARROW and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — In Georgia's Senate runoff, Republicans once more met the realities of giving Democrats a head start they could not overcome.

According to tallies from the secretary of state, Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock built a lead of more than 320,000 votes heading into Tuesday's election. He topped Republican Herschel Walker by an almost 2-1 ratio in mailed ballots and had an advantage of more than 250,000 early, in-person votes over Walker. So even with Walker gaining more votes on Election Day, the challenger lost by nearly 97,000 votes.

It was only the latest example of how Republicans have handed Democrats an advantage in balloting due to former President Donald Trump's lies about the risks of mail voting. Conservative conspiracy theorists urged GOP voters to wait until Election Day before casting their ballots and spun tales about how such a

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strategy would prevent Democrats from rigging voting machines to steal the election.

There was no widespread fraud in the 2020 election or this year's midterms.

One problem with such a strategy is the random glitches that often arise on Election Day.

In Arizona's most populous county, for example, a printer error created long lines at several voting locations on Nov. 8. Republicans ended up losing several statewide contests, including for governor and secretary of state, although Maricopa County officials said all voters had a chance to cast a ballot and that all valid ballots were counted.

The race for Arizona attorney general, where the GOP candidate is behind by just over 500 votes, is heading to an automatic recount.

In northern Nevada, a snow storm made travel tricky on Election Day. The Republican candidate for Senate lost his race by 8,000 votes. In Georgia's runoff, rain drenched the state as the disproportionately Republican crowd finally made its way to the polls.

Overall, Republican turnout was fairly robust in the midterms, suggesting the party did not have many problems getting its voters to the polls. But the loss in Georgia, which enabled Democrats to gain a Senate seat during an election where the GOP hoped to retake the chamber, was the last straw for several conservatives.

"We've got to put a priority on competing with Democrats from the start, beat them at their own game," said Debbie Dooley, a Georgia tea party organizer who remains loyal to Trump but is critical of how he has talked about the U.S. election system.

In Washington, South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the second-ranking GOP leader, told reporters: "We've got to get better at turnout operations, especially in states that use mail-in balloting extensively."

Ronna McDaniel, chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, said in an interview on Fox News this week that Republican voters need to cast ballots early.

"I have said this over and over again," she said. "There were many in 2020 saying, 'Don't vote by mail, don't vote early.' And we have to stop that."

McDaniel did not name the main person in 2020 who was attacking voting before Election Day — Trump.

When the U.S. went into lockdown during the March 2020 primaries, the nation's voting system shifted heavily to mail. The then-president began to attack that manner of casting ballots, saying Democratic efforts to expand it could lead to "levels of voting that if, you ever agreed to it, you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again."

Trump continued to baselessly claim mail balloting would lead to massive fraud, then blamed that imaginary mass fraud for his loss in November even after his own Department of Justice found no such organized activity. Trump's lies helped spur the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, new GOP-backed laws tightening election regulations in Republican-led states and a wave of Republican candidates running for statewide posts in the 2022 elections who embraced his conspiracy theories.

Academic research has shown that mail voting increases turnout but doesn't benefit either party. It is, however, normally pushed by campaigns. Once they have locked in some votes by mail, they can focus turnout operations on the laggards and get them to vote by Election Day.

Mail voting also provides a hedge against bad weather, equipment mishaps, traffic jams and other Election Day woes that can discourage voters.

Republicans in states such as Florida and Utah set up robust systems of mail voting and kept expanding their footprint. In states such as Colorado that mail every voter a ballot, older, conservative-leaning voters were the ones most likely to return their ballots by mail.

Still, the GOP has traditionally been more skeptical of mail balloting, though it was not a central piece of party identity until Trump made it so in 2020. But even conservatives who push back against expanding mail voting warn that the party has to wake up to reality.

"There is a tension on the right between folks who say, 'They're the rules and you've got to play by them,' and those who say, 'No, you do not,'" said Jason Snead of the Honest Elections Project, a conservative group that advocates for tighter restrictions on mail voting. "I think there's a lot of reevaluation

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and reassessment going on.”

“You can stand on principle and say, ‘I am not going to do this,’ but it’s a drag on performance if you do,” Snead said.

He noted that Republicans with robust early voting programs, such as Govs. Brian Kemp in Georgia and Ron DeSantis in Florida, easily won their elections while those who echoed Trump’s conspiracy theories mostly lost.

One of the worst performances for election conspiracy theorists was in Pennsylvania, where the Republican candidate for governor, who had watched as protesters attacked the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, lost by nearly 15 percentage points. The GOP also lost a Senate seat there and control of the lower house of the legislature.

Democrats out-voted Republicans by mail by more than 3-to-1, netting 69% of the nearly 1.25 million mail ballots cast in the state. That was almost one-fourth of a total of nearly 5.4 million ballots cast.

Republicans who control the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a massive overhaul of the state’s voting system in 2019, allowing anyone to cast a ballot by mail. Many Republicans had second thoughts in 2020 after Trump began to castigate mail voting. GOP lawmakers and their allies have since fought in court to throw out the law and inflate the number of mail ballots rejected for technicalities.

Top party officials in the state are now reassessing.

“Republican attitudes on mail-in ballots are going to have to change,” said Sam DeMarco, chair of the Allegheny County GOP. “President Trump is running across the country telling people not to use it, and it’s crushing us.”

EXPLAINER: Why can’t Lebanon elect a president?

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Lebanon has been without a president for over a month, its legislators unable to agree on a new head of state.

The impasse is holding up a range of initiatives, from putting into place structural reforms for an International Monetary Fund program to allowing the country’s state-owned television channel to broadcast the World Cup.

Here is a look at the latest episode of political paralysis in the crisis-hit country.

WHAT IS BEHIND THE DEADLOCK?

President Michel Aoun, an ally of Iran-backed Hezbollah, completed his six-year term on Oct. 30. Lebanon’s deeply-divided parliament has met nine times to elect a successor and failed every time, worsening political paralysis and stalling measures to alleviate a crippling economic crisis that has pulled three-quarters of the population into poverty.

The weekly sessions have become farcical with most legislators casting blank ballots. Others have written in mock candidates, including late former presidents Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Salvador Allende of Chile. Parliamentarians often leave the session midway through, resulting in no quorum.

The tiny country’s latest spell of paralysis also comes as it scrambles to rekindle strained ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, which once kept Lebanon flush with cash. Hezbollah’s dominance in Lebanese politics over the past decade and their backing of Yemen’s Houthi rebels against the Saudi-led coalition has angered Riyadh. In 2021, Saudi Arabia banned agricultural exports from Lebanon, nominally due to shipments being used to smuggle drugs, and later that year banned all Lebanese exports after a minister called Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen “absurd.”

Experts say the impasse is somewhat linked to ongoing Saudi Arabia and Iran talks in Baghdad, Iraq, aiming to restore diplomatic ties.

“Saudi Arabia is clearly linking Yemen and Lebanon dossiers in its negotiations with the Iranian side,” Carnegie Middle East Senior Fellow Mohanad Hage Ali said. “It’s trying to assert itself as a main stakeholder, and that renewed interest could relate to them seeing a potential benefit that could be translated in Yemen.”

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Lebanon's paralysis in parliament reflects that stalemate.

"In order to elect a president in Lebanon, you first need to find a consensual figure who is not vetoed by major Lebanese players, and who is vetted and okayed by regional powers," said Karim Emile Bitar, Professor of International Relations at Beirut's Saint Joseph University. "So far you have a tug-of-war between the Iranian-Syrian axis backing Hezbollah and on the other hand the alliance that is closer to the United States and Saudi Arabia."

The country has frequently witnessed political paralysis in its short and troubled history, including a presidential vacuum of over two years before Aoun's election in 2016. In 2008, armed clashes erupted for a week, before politicians gathered in Doha, Qatar to reach a settlement for a consensus presidential candidate.

Ibrahim Mneimeh, an independent reformist legislator, says the impasse has become the "status quo" and believes traditional parties are waiting for "foreign interference" for a settlement.

"Unfortunately this is happening over and over again." Mneimeh said.

WHO ARE THE CANDIDATES?

Under Lebanon's power-sharing system since its independence from France in 1943, a president has to come from the Maronite Catholic sect; the prime minister is a Sunni and the parliament speaker a Shiite.

While Hezbollah has yet to publicly name a candidate, public perception is that the group backs Sleiman Frangieh, a close ally of the party and of Syrian President Bashar Assad. The nominal candidate of the camp opposing Hezbollah and that often describes the group as a state-within-a-state is parliamentarian Michel Moawad. Both candidates come from established political families.

Moawad has received more votes than any other candidate, but has failed to garner a majority and is widely seen as too divisive a figure to reach the presidency. Meanwhile, Lebanese army chief Gen. Joseph Aoun has reportedly been discussed as a possible consensus candidate, though his name has not yet appeared on the ballot.

Parliamentarian Gebran Bassil, the son-in-law of President Aoun, the head of the Free Patriotic Movement party, and an ally of Hezbollah, has long been seen as Aoun's successor of choice. Though he appears out of the running due to limited popular support and being targeted by U.S. sanctions, he and his party have not yet endorsed another candidate.

WHAT ARE THE REPERCUSSIONS?

With no developments to break the impasse, most experts say that political blocs will focus on trying to extract maximum political concessions, including divvying up the appointment of ministerial and senior government posts.

A Western diplomat who had met with most of Lebanon's political blocs told The Associated Press that they are playing a "waiting game."

Hage Ali likens the current deadlock to a game of poker. "You keep your cards hidden, you don't blink or flinch, and wait until the side breaks down," he explained. "Everyone is maneuvering at this point, either showing up with a blank ballot or choosing a candidate who isn't viable."

Meanwhile, tensions between hostile political groups in Lebanon continue to worsen.

Hezbollah deputy secretary general Naim Kassem said the group would not accept a candidate who opposes its stockpile of arms and supports what he alleged was "the American-Israeli project" in Lebanon.

In the opposing camp, Moawad has slammed Hezbollah and its allies' for ruining ties with the Gulf and the wider international community, and at a discussion panel said would prefer paralysis over a new president affiliated to them.

"We're seeing a repeat of the past where Hezbollah and allies gives Lebanon two choices: either accept their candidate or have a presidential vacuum," said Charles Jabbour, a spokesman for the Lebanese Forces party, a Moawad ally.

There are also fears that a prolonged paralysis will further delay a possible IMF deal to recover its economy and renew investor confidence in the country.

The IMF has set conditions following a tentative agreement last April, including amending its banking secrecy law, restructuring its banks, and formalizing capital controls. Lebanon needs a president to ratify

any laws that parliament passes.

In the meantime, Lebanon is set to have the second highest inflation rate worldwide in 2022.

"We are already on the verge of state collapse," Bitar said. "If the paralysis lasts more than just a few weeks or months it could lead to a complete collapse."

China struggles with COVID infections after controls ease

By JOE McDONALD Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A rash of COVID-19 cases in schools and businesses were reported by social media users Friday in areas across China after the ruling Communist Party loosened anti-virus rules as it tries to reverse a deepening economic slump.

Official data showed a fall in new cases, but those no longer cover big parts of the population after the government on Wednesday ended mandatory testing for many people. That was part of dramatic changes aimed at gradually emerging from "zero-COVID" restrictions that have confined millions of people to their homes and sparked protests and demands for President Xi Jinping to resign.

Social media users in Beijing and other cities said coworkers or classmates were ill and some businesses closed due to lack of staff. It wasn't clear from those accounts, many of which couldn't be independently confirmed, how far above the official figure the total case numbers might be.

"I'm really speechless. Half of the company's people are out sick, but they still won't let us all stay home," said a post signed Tunnel Mouth on the popular Sina Weibo platform. The user gave no name and didn't respond to questions sent through the account, which said the user was in Beijing.

The reports echo the experience of the United States, Europe and other economies that have struggled with outbreaks while trying to restore business activity. But they are a jarring change for China, where "zero COVID," which aims to isolate every case, disrupted daily life and depressed economic activity but kept infection rates low.

Xi's government began to loosen controls Nov. 11 after promising to reduce their cost and disruption. Imports tumbled 10.9% from a year ago in November in a sign of weak demand. Auto sales fell 26.5% in October.

"Relaxing Covid controls will lead to greater outbreaks," said Neil Thomas and Laura Gloudeman of Eurasia Group in a report, "but Beijing is unlikely to return to the extended blanket lockdowns that crashed the economy earlier this year."

The changes suggest the ruling party is easing off its goal of preventing virus transmission, the basis of "zero COVID," but officials say that strategy still is in effect.

Restrictions probably must stay in place at least through mid-2023, public health experts and economists say. They say millions of elderly people need to be vaccinated, which will take months, and hospitals strengthened to cope with a surge in cases. Officials announced a vaccination campaign last week.

On Friday, the government reported 16,797 new cases, including 13,160 without symptoms. That was down about one-fifth from the previous day and less than half of last week's daily peak above 40,000.

More changes announced Wednesday allow people with mild COVID-19 cases to isolate at home instead of going to a quarantine center that some complained were crowded and unsanitary. That addressed a major irritant for the public.

A requirement for subway riders, supermarket shoppers and others to show negative virus tests also was dropped, though they still are needed for schools and hospitals.

A post signed Where Dreams Begin Under Starlight by a user in Dazhou, a southwestern city in Sichuan province, said all but five students in a public school class of 46 were infected.

"It's really amazing that the school insists students go to school," the user wrote. The user didn't respond to a question sent through the account.

The requirement for hundreds of millions of people to be tested as often as once a day in some areas over the past two years helped the government spot infections with no symptoms. Ending that approach reduces the cost of monitoring employees and customers at offices, shops and other businesses. But it

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increases the risk they might spread the virus.

This week's changes follow protests that erupted Nov. 25 in Shanghai, Beijing and other cities against the human cost of "zero COVID."

It isn't clear whether any of the changes were a response to protests, which died out following a security crackdown.

The ruling party's Politburo on Wednesday declared stabilizing weak economic growth its priority, though leaders have said local officials still are expected to protect the public.

"The re-pivot to growth and the exit from zero-Covid are clear from the top level," said Larry Hu and Yuxiao Zhang of Macquarie Group, an Australian bank, in a report. However, they warned, "uncertainties remain high," including "how disruptive the exit of zero-Covid could be."

Party leaders stopped talking about the official 5.5% annual growth target after the economy shrank by 2.6% from the previous quarter in the three months ending in June. That was after Shanghai and other industrial centers shut down for up to two months to fight outbreaks.

Private sector economists have cut forecasts of annual growth to as low as below 3%, which would be less than half of last year's 8.1% and among the weakest in decades.

Social media posts suggested some cities might have outbreaks that weren't reflected in official figures.

Posts dated Thursday by 18 people who said they were in Baoding, a city of 11 million southwest of Beijing, reported they tested positive using home kits or had fevers, sore throats and headaches. Meanwhile, the Baoding city government reported no new cases since Tuesday.

Drugstores were mobbed by customers who bought medications to treat sore throats and headaches after rules were dropped that required pharmacists to report those purchases, prompting fears a customer might be forced into a quarantine center.

Also Friday, the market regulator announced prices of some medicines including Lianhua Qingwen, a traditional flu treatment, rose as much as 500% over the past month. It said sellers might be punished for price-gouging.

Lines formed outside hospitals, though it wasn't clear how many people wanted treatment for COVID-19 symptoms.

People waited four to five hours to get into the fever clinic of Chaoyang Hospital in Beijing, according to a woman who answered the phone there and would give only her surname, Sun. She said no virus test was required but patients had to show a smartphone "health code" app that tracks their vaccine status and whether they have been to areas deemed at high risk of infection.

Hong Kong, which enforces its own anti-virus strategy, has faced a similar rise in cases as the southern Chinese city tries to revive its struggling economy by loosening controls on travel and the opening hours of restaurants and pubs.

Hong Kong reported 75,000 new cases over the past week, up about 25% from the previous week. But those don't include an unknown number of people who stay at home with COVID-19 symptoms and never report to the government.

Helping Ukraine is 'self-preservation,' finance chief says

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Ukraine's finance minister says crucial Western financial support is "not charity" but "self-preservation" in the fight to defend democracy as his country deals with growing costs to repair electrical and heating infrastructure wrecked by Russian attacks.

Serhiy Marchenko also told The Associated Press in an interview Thursday from Kyiv that he believes European Union officials will sort out a dispute with Hungary that has blocked a key 18 billion-euro (\$18.97 billion) aid package and would cover much of Ukraine's looming budget gap.

Marchenko said financial support for Ukraine is tiny compared to what developed countries spent to combat emergencies like the global financial crisis of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic. And that the money bolsters freedom and security far beyond his country's struggle, he added.

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"It's not charity to support Ukraine," Marchenko said. "We are trying to protect freedom and democracy of all (the) civilized world."

He said the damage from Russian missile attacks on civilian infrastructure such as power stations would cost 0.5% of annual economic output next year, adding to the burden as Ukraine tries to cover a budget deficit equivalent to \$38 billion. The World Bank put Ukraine's gross domestic product at just over \$200 billion in 2021, so the damage could amount to roughly \$1 billion.

Ukraine needs outside financing to cover the budget deficit caused by the war. Cash or loans help it avoid printing money at the central bank to cover basic needs like paying people's pensions, a practice that risks fueling already painful inflation.

Proposed EU loans worth 18 billion euros, along with major U.S. support and possible help from the International Monetary Fund, would cover a large part of Ukraine's budget shortfall. But the European package has been blocked by Hungary over disputes with Brussels, which is concerned about democratic backsliding and possible mismanagement of EU money in Budapest.

"Of course, it's worried us and we're worried that it can block or postpone the money flow for Ukraine," Marchenko said. "But I believe that the wisdom" of EU officials "can solve all issues, and they will together join Ukraine's efforts for independence."

He praised what he called continuing strong support from Western governments, citing the U.S. in particular for its "predictability." Total aid committed to Ukraine reached 113 billion euros as of this week, according to data compiled by the Ukraine Support Tracker at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

"Now is not the time to postpone any support, to just be tired of Ukraine and Ukraine's problems ... because the next time, you realized that without Ukraine, Russia will come closer to the European border," Marchenko said.

"It's about self-preservation, it's self-protection — this should be in the minds of EU citizens," he added.

Ukraine has made gains on the battlefield but has been struggling with Russian attacks on critical infrastructure, leaving millions of Ukrainians without regular access to heat, electricity and water in sub-freezing temperatures, U.N. officials say.

Donors are scrambling to get generators, insulation, medical supplies and cash into the country as winter looms. The U.N. Development Program and World Bank are working to assess damage and fill requests for power transformers and substations to restore Ukraine's electrical grid.

On top of people losing power and heat, Marchenko noted how the number of Ukrainians living in poverty has been "increasing drastically." Inflation was above 26% as of October and could rise to 28% by year's end, he said.

The government is working to increase pensions for some, while Western donations go toward social and humanitarian aid.

"All possible resources which we can use, we will use to help our people to survive in this condition," he said. "But again, people understand why they are suffering" — to live in an independent country.

Marchenko said the war would leave behind Ukraine's earlier reputation for corruption and political influence by prominent business figures dubbed oligarchs.

Ukraine improved its score on Transparency International's corruption perceptions index in recent years but still ranked 122 out of 180 countries before the war.

Now, "there is no time for oligarchs. There is no time for corruption in Ukraine," Marchenko said. "Half our budget is military expenditure, so half is totally social and humanitarian expenditures," leaving "no room" for misconduct.

"And I would prefer that this myth or this story about Ukraine's corruption will evaporate after the war," he said.

Marchenko's stance on corruption was echoed by Torbjorn Becker, director of the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics, during an online book launch Thursday for "Rebuilding Ukraine: Principles and Policies" by the Paris- and London-based Centre for Economic Policy Research.

"If a country is not spending money wisely when it's being attacked by a neighbor like Russia, we know that they would have lost the war by now," Becker said.

"So the fact that Ukraine is still there and defending its territory is one of the testaments that corruption should not be our focus now when we are talking about support to Ukraine," he added.

UK cost-of-living woes stir push for more free school meals

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, England (AP) — As the school bell rings, dozens of children begin filing into the canteen at Hillstone Primary School. The day's offering, a roast dinner, is a popular one, and many are eager to tuck into their plates of turkey slices, roasted potatoes, broccoli and gravy.

For some children in this area of suburban Birmingham, central England, where many families are low income, it may be the only nutritious hot meal in a day.

Some students eating sandwiches from their lunchboxes instead say they get one hot lunch a week, but they would like more. "My mum says it costs a bit more," one girl said last week.

Free school lunches are provided for all 4- to 7-year-olds in England, but most parents of older children have to pay about 2.20 pounds (\$2.70) a day for their child to have a cooked meal. That may sound like a small amount, but charities and teachers say it's becoming increasingly unaffordable for hundreds of thousands of families struggling to cope with the United Kingdom's worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation.

Whether Britain's government should spend to feed more schoolchildren is a hot-button issue as more families fall into poverty and cannot afford basics after paying their skyrocketing energy and food bills. The government said it will keep reviewing meal eligibility and pointed to other relief given to needy families.

Inflation in the U.K. has hit a 41-year high of 11.1%, driven in large part by gas and electricity costs, which have almost doubled from last winter amid Russia's war in Ukraine. Prices for staples like milk, butter and pasta also have shot up by some 30%.

To qualify for free school lunches, England's households have to receive government benefits and earn less than 7,400 pounds (\$9,021) a year. That's below the threshold in parts of the U.S., Europe and even elsewhere in the U.K.

The Food Foundation, a charity leading a campaign to extend the free school lunch program, argues the income level is too low. It estimates that 800,000 children in England are living in poverty but not eligible for free meals.

"It's those children who we are really worried right now during the cost-of-living crisis, because those families are having to make really tough choices about where to spend their money," said Anna Taylor, the charity's executive director.

To save cash, many parents don't pay for a school meal and pack their kids a lunch, which often isn't as nutritious, Taylor said.

"We've been hearing from teachers that children are going to school with empty lunchboxes or with stuff that they're very ashamed to show to their friends," she added.

During the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Food Foundation and soccer star Marcus Rashford persuaded Britain's government to provide free meals to children in poverty over the school holidays. Rashford, who spoke of his mother struggling to put food on the table, helped sway the government to change its policies that allowed 1.3 million children to claim free meals.

Taylor said many Britons are now even worse off because some never recovered from pandemic job losses before being hit with massively higher bills. Monthly surveys conducted by her charity suggested that the number of families saying they have had to skip or have smaller meals because they couldn't afford food has doubled over the course of January to October.

"It's unprecedented levels of food insecurity right now," she said.

The Department of Education said the government understands the "pressures" many households face and that it is already giving cost-of-living subsidies to millions of the poorest families, supporting "more children and young people than ever before." It added that officials will "keep all free school meal eligibility under review."

At Hillstone Primary, 51% of children qualify for free lunches, and headteacher Jason King says many of

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the others also need financial help. Some parents even approached the school for food.

"When I started here 27 years ago, there were no food banks in the area. It wasn't heard of," King said. The school recently put together food parcels for a parent who said he had no money left for food. "They've got no food at home. They come to us — we're not going to turn them away."

Louise Glew, a parent who volunteers at the school, said she was getting by but knew plenty of others struggling. She said she didn't understand why the government couldn't find the money to extend free school meals to all elementary students.

"Parents are prideful, they don't want to go, 'I need help.' But if the dinner was free for all (schoolchildren) they wouldn't need to," Glew said. "They would get a warm meal every day, and the parent wouldn't have to panic, thinking, 'Oh, have they had something warm? Have they eaten enough?'"

The government said over one-third of students in England receive free school meals, including all 4- to 7-year-olds and about 1.9 million older children who qualify based on family income.

England lags other parts of the U.K. The Welsh government, for example, says it will provide free school lunches for all elementary school students by 2024.

Some European countries, like Sweden and Finland, provide free lunches almost entirely through school life. Others, like France and Germany, have varied policies including subsidies that depend on parents' income.

In the U.S., the states decide. A federal law made meals free for all schoolchildren during the pandemic, but those benefits expired before this school year. The experience has sparked local efforts to make universal free school lunch permanent, with California and Maine passing bills last year.

In the U.K., Taylor acknowledged that the government has little spare cash for public spending but argued that the cost — an estimated 477 million pounds a year — is a long-term investment needed now more than ever.

"This is not a sort of a 'nice to have,'" she said. "Children will wear the effects of these decisions in their bodies and in their achievements in life."

Santa visit brings joy to a frosty Alaska Inupiaq village

By MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

NUIQSUT, Alaska (AP) — Though the weather outside was frightful, schoolchildren in the northern Alaska Inupiaq community of Nuiqsut were so delighted for a visit by Santa that they braved wind chills of 25 degrees below zero just to see him land on a snow-covered airstrip.

Once again, it was time for Operation Santa Claus in Alaska. And here in Nuiqsut, a roadless village of about 460 residents on Alaska's oil-rich North Slope, the temperatures may have been plunging but the children were warming quickly.

Never mind that Santa left Rudolph at home to catch a ride on an Alaska Air National Guard cargo plane to Nuiqsut, just 30 frosty miles (50 kilometers) south of the Arctic Ocean. Here, just a reindeer skip and a hop from the North Pole, the students were abuzz with good cheer.

"Some of them were out on the deck and they were jumping up and down, excited to see the plane coming in," said Principal Lee Karasiewicz of the Trapper School, as he kept watch over pupils from the 160-student K-12 facility privileged to get a pre-Christmas visit from the jolly, fat one.

"They knew right away by the size of the plane, who was on that plane," Karasiewicz said of the students.

When Santa and Mrs. Claus stepped off the hulking cargo plane, some of the children rushed to greet him with hugs, their beaming parents snapping photos on their phones.

Year after year across the decades the Alaska National Guard has delivered gifts, supplies and often Christmas itself to a few tiny rural Alaska communities, trying in particular to make things merry in villages hit by recent hardships.

Operation Santa Claus began back in 1956 when the residents of one community, St. Mary's, found themselves without money to buy gifts. Townsfolk stung by flooding and then a drought that wipe out their subsistence hunting and fishing opportunities were forced to spend Christmas money on food instead.

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That's when the guard stepped in, bringing them donated gifts and supplies.

For Nuiqsut, the adversity came last spring when an oil production facility about 7 miles (11 kilometers) from town sprang a natural gas leak. Though oil workers evacuated, there was no mandatory evacuation in Nuiqsut even though the community was put on alert, said Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak, the town's mayor.

Subsequently, she said, some people began experiencing symptoms related to gas exposure, such as headaches or trouble breathing. About 20 families, including some with pregnant women or elders and others with special medical conditions, decided to self-evacuate.

Long accustomed to helping out in disasters, the guard sent its tribal liaison official to the town after the leak was contained. The official spoke with community members and relayed their concerns back to guard leadership.

The Santa event held the last Tuesday in November was "a wonderful opportunity" to show children the guard in a different light — not always coming around just when there's trouble, Ahtuanguaruak said.

"It's about bringing in the National Guard in a non-stressful event so the kids could see them doing good work that's not during a scary event," she said.

While there were a few puzzled faces of children sitting on Santa's lap for the first time, there was nothing frightening about the visit — and certainly no lists of who was naughty or nice.

Once all had gathered in the school gym, each child had the opportunity for a short visit with Santa and Mrs. Claus, and each received a backpack brimming with snacks and books, hygiene supplies and a gift.

Qannik Amy Alice Woods, a second grader, didn't want to open her backpack just yet. This was her first experience with Santa Claus, but he won her over like every other child in the world.

"He's cool," she said, flashing two thumbs up before heading to the bleachers to enjoy a fresh banana, a hard-to-find item above the Arctic Circle. Children also got a more location-appropriate treat: ice cream sundaes.

Fourth grader Mallory Lampe also had her first direct meeting with Santa but didn't wait to open her backpack. "I got this kind of toy," she exclaimed with joy, holding up an interactive creature whose eyes light up when you press its nose.

The Alaska National Guard delivered more than 1,400 pounds (635 kilograms) of gifts for the children of Nuiqsut. For the last 53 years, the program has been conducted in conjunction with the Salvation Army.

The two other villages served this year were Scammon Bay, which experienced fuel and food delivery problems last year, and Minto, chosen because it had never had a visit in the program's history, said Dana Rosso, a spokesperson for the Alaska National Guard.

About 650 pounds (295 kilograms) of gifts were delivered to Minto for about 65 children, and nearly 1,800 pounds (816 kilograms) of gifts for the 325 or so children in Scammon Bay.

During a mission briefing before the plane left Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage for Nuiqsut, Santa gave the volunteer elves an important tip.

In Alaska Native culture, it's considered rude to refuse a request or a gift offered by someone, even taking part in a dance.

That's why near the end of the program in Nuiqsut, Santa and Mrs. Claus were on the school gym floor with uniformed guard members and scores of others performing a traditional Alaska Native dance. It started when a local drum and dance group performed to honor their guests, and it quickly turned into an impromptu hootenanny.

At the end of the last song, a beaming Mrs. Claus grabbed one of the dancers and hugged her tightly to show her gratitude.

"We can't go to all of our villages, but when we have a village celebrate this opportunity, it's a celebration that transfers through the tundra drums across our state," Mayor Ahtuanguaruak said. "We all get to share in the joy."

China's Xi at Saudi palace to meet royals on Mideast trip

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Chinese leader Xi Jinping met on Thursday with Saudi Arabia's king and crown prince while on a visit to the kingdom, solidifying ties with a region crucial to his country's energy supplies as sanctions intensify on Russia over its war on Ukraine.

Xi arrived at Al Yamama Palace in Riyadh and was greeted by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, King Salman's assertive son who stands ready to rule the oil-rich kingdom in the decades to come. Xi shook hands with the prince as an honor guard on horseback carried Saudi and Chinese flags.

It wasn't immediately clear what Xi focused on in his discussions, though he wrote in a newspaper column published by Al Riyadh newspaper that "exchanges between China and Arab states date back more than 2,000 years." The column also quoted a saying by Islam's Prophet Muhammad: "Seek knowledge even if you have to go as far as China."

"The Arab people value independence, oppose external interference, stand up to power politics and high-handedness, and always seek to make progress," Xi's column read.

He also noted that the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, which include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, serve as "an energy tank for world economy." China, the world's largest crude oil importer, relies heavily on Saudi oil, paying tens of billions of dollars annually to the kingdom.

Saudi state media released silent video of Xi and Prince Mohammed meeting at the palace, with a large picture of King Salman hanging in the background. Another video showed Xi later talking with the 86-year-old monarch and signing documents alongside him. Many of the Saudi officials wore facemasks in that meeting.

Saudi officials later said deals had been signed between the nations, including some involving Chinese technology company Huawei on cloud-computing, data centers and other high-tech ventures. The U.S. has already warned its Gulf Arab allies about working with Huawei over spying concerns.

Xi and King Salman also agreed to holding meetings between the two countries' leaders every two years, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

The agency later reported that Xi met with Sudanese military leader Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan after a deal Monday to establish a civilian-led transitional government following the military takeover there last year. However, no timeline has been set and the deal sparked renewed protests Thursday in the country.

Xi separately met with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as well in Riyadh.

Gulf Arab states are trying to recalibrate their foreign policy as the United States turns its attention elsewhere in the world.

Russia's war on Ukraine — and the West's hardening stance on Moscow — has also left the Arab countries wanting to cement ties with China. For Prince Mohammed, hosting Xi boosts his own international profile after being linked to the killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

Beyond China's oil purchases, its construction expertise could be tapped as well for Prince Mohammed's planned \$500 billion futuristic city of Neom on the Red Sea. Chinese construction firms have worked elsewhere in Arab countries in the Persian Gulf, particularly in Dubai in the UAE.

Saudi Arabia, home to the holiest sites in Islam, also has provided political cover to China over its harsh policies toward Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. More than a million have been sent to detention centers, forced to denounce Islam and swear fealty to Xi and the party.

The trip to Saudi Arabia marks a further move by Xi to restore his global profile after spending most of the pandemic inside China. The visit is his third overseas trip since early 2020. It also comes as Xi, who was granted a third five-year term as leader in October, has faced street protests over his zero-COVID-19 policies that represent the most-significant challenge to his rule.

During the visit, Xi is expect to attend the inaugural China-Arab States Summit and a meeting of the GCC.

Chronic malnutrition stalks many poor children in Ecuador

By GONZALO SOLANO Associated Press

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QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — Sara Milena is barely 20 days old. Her mother, Tania Herrera, lives with her parents, who are the breadwinners of an Ecuadorian household where they earn \$5 to \$7 a day to feed five adults and support the new arrival.

That income is stretched in hopes of feeding the adults twice a day: coffee with bread, when there is any, in the morning and a plate of rice at night, or maybe not.

Originally from the Andean province of Cotopaxi, the family has lived in the capital for several years and only from time to time manages to buy chicken meat. The baby is breastfed.

Erwin Ronquillo, secretary of the government program Ecuador Grows Without Malnutrition, said child malnutrition is chronic among Ecuador's 18 million inhabitants. It is seen everywhere, but hits hardest in rural areas and among the country's Indigenous peoples, he said.

Ecuador has the second highest rate of chronic child malnutrition in Latin America, after Guatemala. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, one in three Ecuadorian children suffers from malnutrition. Of those, 40.7% are Indigenous, though Indigenous make up only 7% of the population. In just over a fifth of the malnutrition cases, learning is affected.

Neiri Espinosa, a mother abandoned by her partner who lives in Quito's remote Pisulí neighborhood, said her children, 8 and 4 years old, do not usually eat meat. Both appear to be younger because of short stature and significant thinness of the youngest girl, telltale signs of malnutrition.

Sometimes they can afford a bit of chicken, but not often, Espinosa said.

"It is difficult to get any job (as a domestic worker), worse after the pandemic," she said.

Monica Cabrera, a family educator with the Ministry of Social Inclusion, is assigned to the Camal Metropolitano neighborhood on the southern edge of Quito, a high-risk area where she has been robbed several times. Even so, she visits the homes of at least 25 young mothers, among whom there are two minors, aged 15 and 17. Her job is to support them while they are in their maternity process and then until the child reaches 1 year old.

Cabrera said the poorest in the city are generally Indigenous migrants from rural areas who eke out livings recycling trash, making bricks or working as street vendors.

"Those who have more have the luxury of eating twice a day," she said, but adds that she knows of families that eat only once and sometimes not even that.

In its latest report, UNICEF says 50% of Ecuadorian households with children had difficulty obtaining the necessary food in 2021 due to the pandemic. As a result, 27% of children had their development compromised due to chronic malnutrition, the agency says.

In addition to the lack or scarcity of food, 72.3% of children lack basic services for child development, such as health and education, UNICEF says.

The government of President Guillermo Lasso, a conservative former banker, has pledged to combat chronic malnutrition by spending \$350 million a year to improve health, family, education and counselling services.

Part of that support translates into a \$50 monthly stipend for Tania Herrera, the mother of baby Sara Milena. To receive it, she committed to attend all child support activities to which she is summoned.

Motherhood has shelved, perhaps permanently, Herrera's dream of becoming a soldier. Now she hopes of one day returning to her former tough job in an artisanal potato and fried banana factory.

Katherine Gualotuña lives in a home cobbled together from wood and plastic on the edge of a ravine in Zámbez, a rural town northeast of Quito. Intense humidity fills the shack, which is no more than 25 square meters (270 square feet). There are no windows, just a doorway covered by a curtain.

"It's that the ravine is receding and we are homeless, that's why we are here," she said, holding 4-month-old Arleth Paulette on her lap.

"It has been four very tired months, but beautiful. We are happy with the girl," she added.

But the arrival of the baby has meant new expenses for an already strapped family. Her mother contributes what she can from selling street food at a park in central Quito. Her father works as a cleaner for the municipality.

Gualotuña is working on her thesis needed to graduate as a technologist in industrial mechanics. Sitting

in the cramped home, she said her greatest desire is to have "money to get out of here and build a little house."

New Peru president vows to finish term, others want election

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Peru's first female president is pushing to cement her hold on power, saying she expects to complete the term of her ousted predecessor and buck the trend of presidential failures blighting the Andean nation.

Yet, even as Dina Boluarte made the call Thursday, some politicians already were calling for early elections in an indication of continued political rancor.

Boluarte, who was elevated from vice president to replace leftist Pedro Castillo as the country's leader Wednesday after he angered many by trying to dissolve the legislature before an impeachment vote, said she should be allowed to hold the office for the remaining 3 1/2 years of his term.

"The constitution is the magna carta that all Peruvians must obey," and it calls for the presidential term to run until July 28, 2026, she said at her first news conference, held a day after Castillo was voted out of office and arrested on charges of rebellion just 17 months into his term.

After being sworn in as president Wednesday, Boluarte called for a truce with legislators who dismissed Castillo for "permanent moral incapacity," a clause of the constitution that experts say is so vague it allows the removal of a president for almost any reason. It was also used to oust President Martín Vizcarra, who governed in 2018-2020.

"I know that there are voices that are calling for early elections. That is democracy," Boluarte said. But she added that there is a need for stability in Peru, a strongly polarized country that has had six presidents in the last six years.

"In coordination with all organizations, we will be looking at alternatives to reorient the country's course," she said.

Seeking to avoid being added to the list of canned presidents, Boluarte quickly began to show herself in public working as Peru's new head of state. She met with groups of conservative and liberal lawmakers at the presidential palace. Before that, she danced an Andean dance after watching a Roman Catholic procession of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception.

Analysts, however, predicted a tough road for the new president, a 60-year-old lawyer and political neophyte.

Jorge Aragón, a political science professor at Peru's Pontifical Catholic University, said a Boluarte government "is going to be very complicated, if not impossible."

Noting that Boluarte has no legislative base of support, Aragón said she faces the hard task of trying to forge ties with numerous blocs in a fractious Congress.

A poll by the Institute of Peruvian Studies in November suggested most Peruvians might want a ballot before 2026, with 86% of those surveyed saying they preferred early presidential and congressional elections if Castillo should be removed.

But Patricia Zárate, head of the institute's opinion studies area, said Thursday that Boluarte might be able to hold on if members of Congress don't want to risk early elections.

"If she can work with all the legislative blocs that are negotiating certain ministries or certain policies, she could last a little longer than President Castillo," Zárate, said. "Since Congress wants to survive, maybe it can at least negotiate some issues to let them survive."

Still, Zárate said, "reaching 2026 looks very distant."

Luis Mendieta, who was Castillo's chief of staff, said he hoped Boluarte can build alliances in Congress that "will allow her to approve more than 64 important bills that the Castillo government is leaving."

"She must also look for a Cabinet that guarantees governability — difficult but it can be achieved," Mendieta said.

Former President Ollanta Humala, who governed in 2011-2016, was skeptical, nothing the new leader

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was not involved in politics or government before becoming vice president and has no base in Congress.

"She does not have the tools to govern," Humala told N. television. He predicted that any truce with Congress "will last a month or perhaps more, but then the great problems of the country come upon her."

The governor of Cusco, Jean Paul Benavente, demanded the new president call an early vote, saying that would offer a "solution to the political crisis of the country."

In the streets, small demonstrations by Castillo supporters continued in the capital and others parts of Peru, including Tacabamba, the district capital closest to the rural home of Castillo. Protesters there demanded he be released, rejected Boluarte as president and called for Congress to be closed.

In Lima, several hundred protesters trying to reach the Congress building clashed with police, who used canes and tear gas to push them back.

"The only thing left is the people. We have no authorities, we have nothing," said Juana Ponce, one of the protesters. "It is a national shame. All these corrupt congressmen have sold out. They have betrayed our president, Pedro Castillo."

How senators 'defied political gravity' on same-sex marriage

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Wisconsin Sen. Tammy Baldwin was on the Senate floor, but her mind was on the other side of the Capitol.

The House was voting that July afternoon on Democratic legislation to protect same-sex and interracial marriages in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision to overturn the federal right to an abortion. And it was suddenly winning more Republican votes than Baldwin — or anyone else — had expected.

Baldwin, who became the first openly gay senator when she was elected a decade ago, said she was "overjoyed" as she saw the votes coming in. She excitedly walked over to Ohio Sen. Rob Portman, who was also on the Senate floor and had been one of the first Republican senators to come out in favor of same-sex marriage.

"Did you see this?" Baldwin asked, showing Portman a list of Republicans who had voted for the House bill — almost four dozen.

Portman, who had worked with her on the issue in the past, was immediately on board. "Count me in," he told her.

Along with Maine Sen. Susan Collins, who eventually led the bipartisan effort with Baldwin, the senators teamed up with Sens. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., and Thom Tillis, R-N.C., to try to find the additional Republican votes necessary to pass the Senate.

It was a monthslong effort, building on a decadeslong push, in which they implored their colleagues senator to senator, tweaked the bill to make it more appealing — without changing what it would do — and enlisted key outside allies to help. They convinced skeptical Republicans that it was a personal, not political, effort for the Democrats and that "the sky is not going to fall," Baldwin said.

Collins, who has a long record of working on gay rights issues, said the GOP support in the House was a turning point. "It both surprised and heartened me," she said, "because it suggested we could get the bill through both the House and the Senate and signed before the end of the year."

In the end, they "defied political gravity," as Baldwin puts it, and passed the Respect for Marriage Act through the Senate. When the final vote was called, they had twelve Republican supporters — two more than they needed to break the filibuster in the 50-50 Senate and pass the bill. The House gave it final passage on Thursday and sent the bill to President Joe Biden for his signature.

Along the way, the five senators — Democrats Baldwin and Sinema and Republicans Collins, Portman and Tillis — found that attitudes have changed in the decade since most Republicans were openly campaigning against gay marriage. Not only because of the 2015 Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, but because increasing numbers of people — daughters, sons, friends, staffers — were openly gay and starting families, living normal lives.

"If you look at the arc of visibility around the LGBTQ community, there's more and more people who are married to a same-sex partner and maybe raising a family with their same-sex partner," said Baldwin,

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who has been working on gay rights issues since she entered politics almost 40 years ago. "And in some ways, you don't want to do harm, right? And recognize how important the certainty is for these families. And I think that made a huge difference in our ability to get to a super-majority in the Senate."

Still, most Republicans weren't inclined to vote for the bill. Supporters had to find at least seven more Republicans to get to yes.

In the first weeks after the House vote, the five senators went to work to find those votes. Baldwin, who had advised House lawmakers to keep the bill simple and straightforward, says "the ink wasn't even dry on the ledger yet" when she took the list of House supporters and started to talk to members from those same states, noting that their home-state colleagues across the Capitol had supported the bill. In those early conversations, she says, she was introducing senators to the idea of supporting the bill "from the perspective of 'they would have political cover.'"

But in talking to Republicans, they quickly found that the biggest concern was religious liberty, and whether the bill would penalize private institutions or groups that did not want to perform same-sex marriages or provide services to same-sex couples. So they started crafting an amendment to address it.

"As we talked to senators we found a real openness to the bill, but concerns about religious liberty and consciousness protections," Collins said. She said they started reaching out to some religious groups, asking what they would like to see in the bill if they were going to support it.

A main concern was that a church or organization could have its tax-exempt status revoked if it didn't perform a same-sex marriage. "That was a huge issue," Collins said.

The bill, which requires states to legally recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states, would not have done that. But Collins said the senators "wanted to make sure it was crystal clear" in the amendment that churches would not be in any way penalized or required to perform marriages. So they added language affirming the rights of religious institutions and groups while keeping the original language in the bill intact.

By November, dozens of religious groups supported the bill, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, a member of the Latter-day Saints church and one of the 12 senators who eventually supported the legislation, was involved in those early talks.

"I would not have been able to support the bill were it not for the religious liberty provisions that were added, and I pointed that out to them as they were looking to collect 11 or 12 votes," Romney said after the Senate vote.

According to Portman, Romney also pushed for a series of findings at the beginning of the bill that stated that "beliefs about the role of gender in marriage are held by reasonable and sincere people based on decent and honorable religious or philosophical premises."

Tim Schultz, the president of the advocacy group 1st Amendment Partnership, directed a coalition of religious groups supporting the bill. He says that it was clear after the first House vote that the senators and progressive advocacy groups were serious about addressing the concerns and getting the bill done, and not using it as a political wedge issue. "They didn't want a show vote in the Senate," Schultz says.

As the senators organized inside, groups of influential Republicans who were supportive organized on the outside. Key to that effort were Ken Mehlman, a former Republican National Committee chairman and campaign manager for former President George W. Bush's 2004 campaign, and a group that he is funding, Centerline.

Focusing on senators in nine states, the group conducted state polls, drove local press coverage, organized telephone campaigns and put together more than 70 meetings with senators and staff. The group circulated a list of 430 prominent Republicans and conservatives who supported the legislation, including former senators and Cabinet officials.

Mehlman says the campaign was based on data and polling showing an increasing support for gay marriage. More than two-thirds of the public now supports the unions.

"Center-right voters are supportive of the freedom to marry, and those numbers have increased in recent years," Mehlman says. "Voters are supportive and often ahead of politicians on these questions."

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But even as the supporters mobilized, it wasn't clear if the senators had the votes. Baldwin says that many Republicans she was talking to were skeptical of Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's motivations so close to the midterm elections.

So Baldwin and the other senators met with Schumer in mid-September and told him they needed to delay a vote until after the election. It was "disappointing," she says, and she knew she and Schumer would get pushback from groups that wanted them to force the question on the floor. But she argued it was the right thing to do, and Schumer agreed. "I'm trusting your counts," she says he told her.

When the Senate returned after the election, with Senate Democrats having won a majority, Schumer announced they would hold an immediate vote on the marriage bill. By then, Baldwin and the others felt more sure of a win — and on Nov. 16, twelve Republicans voted yes in a key procedural vote to move forward.

In addition to Collins, Portman and Tillis, Republicans supporting the legislation were Richard Burr of North Carolina, Todd Young of Indiana, Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Mitt Romney of Utah, Joni Ernst of Iowa, Roy Blunt of Missouri, Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming and Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan of Alaska.

After that vote, as the Senate left town for Thanksgiving, some conservative groups mobilized against the bill. On Nov. 23, the Heritage Foundation announced a new \$1.3 million ad campaign.

"Liberals are hurrying to cram in their far left agenda, and a few Republican senators are helping them," the ad said.

But supporters held firm despite the pressure, and the bill passed the Senate on Nov. 30. As the roll was called, Baldwin teared up, hugging Schumer and others.

"The thing that gets me so choked up is all the times somebody comes up and says this matters to me," Baldwin said afterward, through tears.

Looking back on her four decades of advocacy — she was elected to local office in the mid-1980s, after she had already come out as gay — she says she always thought she would live to see marriage equality.

"I'm not surprised that we won that in the courts," she says. "But protecting it in the legislative body is a big deal."

US keeps eye on China's space activities for potential risks

BEIJING (AP) — The U.S. is closely monitoring Chinese activities that potentially threaten American assets in space as debris rapidly accumulates in low Earth orbit, the head of United States military operations in space said Friday.

Commander of U.S. Space Command Army Gen. James Dickinson also cheered the overwhelming passage in the United Nations of a resolution that countries not conduct direct-ascent antisatellite tests that create vast fields of space debris, which endanger satellites and space stations.

Of the four countries that have conducted such ASAT tests, the United States was the only one that voted in favor, while China and Russia voted no and India abstained.

"We can't continue to contribute to the debris that we find in the space domain," Dickinson said in a telephone news conference with reporters in Asia. Most of that debris lies in crucial low Earth orbit, which has become "congested, competitive and contested," he said.

Even tiny shards of metal can pose a danger and the number of objects is growing rampantly. Space Command is now tracking more than 48,000 in near Earth orbit, including satellites, telescopes, space stations and pieces of debris of all sizes, up from 25,000 just three years ago, Dickinson said.

China in 2003 became the third government to send an astronaut into orbit on its own after the former Soviet Union and the United States. Its program has advanced steadily since.

The Chinese space program drew rare international criticism after it conducted an unannounced test in 2007 in which it used a missile to blow up a defunct Chinese satellite, creating debris that continues to pose a hazard.

Beijing believes that "space is a very important piece to not only their economic or the global economic

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environment, but also the military environment, so we continue to watch that very closely as they continue to increase capabilities," Dickinson said.

The secretive Chinese program is run by the ruling Communist Party's military wing, the People's Liberation Army, precluding it from participating in the International Space Station or engaging in most forms of cooperation with NASA.

Proceeding with little outside help, China last month launched the last of three modules for its own space station, which briefly hosted six Chinese astronauts in space during a turnover of the three-person crew. It also has rovers on the moon and Mars and is planning a crewed lunar mission sometime in the future.

With U.S.-China tensions high over Taiwan, the South China Sea, trade and technology, space is increasingly becoming a potential flash point. In addition, the Pentagon last week released an annual China security report that warned Beijing would likely have 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035, and that it has provided no clarity on how it plans to use them.

China continues to "build capabilities that, really quite frankly, hold most of our assets at risk in the space domain," Dickinson said.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further showed space to be a "contested domain that must be protected. It's a role that we at U.S. Space Command take very seriously," he said.

"I'm seriously focused on our pacing challenge, China," Dickinson said, using a description of Beijing that has become standard in the Pentagon. "The unified stance of our allies and partners is critical in countering the coercion and subversion that threatens the international rules-based order here in the Indo-Pacific and beyond," Dickinson said.

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 of Mohsen Shekari 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 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 "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 group Iran Human Rights. "This execution must have rapid practical consequences internationally."

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

Shekari was accused of blocking a street in Tehran and attacking with a machete a member of the security forces, who 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. Protesters say they are angry over the collapse of the economy, heavy-handed policing and the entrenched power of the country's Islamic clergy.

Mizan said Shekari had been arrested on Sept. 25, then convicted on Nov. 20 on the charge of "mo-harebeh," 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 failed.

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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 meting out harsh punishments.

"Salavati alone has sentenced more than 100 political prisoners, human right activists, media workers and others seeking to exercise freedom of assembly to lengthy prison terms as well as several death sentences," the U.S. Treasury said in sanctioning him in 2019.

"Judges on these Revolutionary Courts, including Salavati, have acted as both judge and prosecutor, deprived prisoners of access to lawyers and intimidated defendants."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said America was "appalled" by Shekari's execution.

"Our message to Iran's leadership is clear: End this brutal crackdown," Blinken wrote on Twitter. "We will continue to hold the Iranian regime accountable."

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock condemned Shekari's execution in a Twitter post, saying "the Iranian regime's contempt for humanity is limitless."

James Cleverly, the United Kingdom's foreign secretary, described himself as "outraged" and said: "The world cannot turn a blind eye to the abhorrent violence committed by the Iranian regime against its own people."

France's Foreign Ministry said the "execution is yet another instance of the serious, unacceptable violations of fundamental rights and freedoms committed by the Iranian authorities."

And the European Union said it "condemns his execution in the strongest possible terms."

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.'"

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric on Thursday reiterated the organization's strong opposition to the death penalty.

"And we deplore what we see today in Iran and sadly we see in other countries," Dujarric said. "What we would want to see is a world where there is no death penalty."

Griner freed: WNBA star swapped for Russian, heads home

By ERIC TUCKER, MATTHEW LEE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — American basketball star Brittney Griner headed home Thursday night, freed from Russian prison in exchange for the U.S. releasing notorious Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout in the culmination of an eight-month saga of high diplomacy and dashed hopes.

But the U.S. failed to win freedom for another American, Paul Whelan, jailed in Russia for nearly four years.

The deal, the second in eight months amid tensions over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, secured the release of the most prominent American detained abroad and achieved a top goal for President Joe Biden. Yet it carried what U.S. officials conceded was a heavy price.

"She's safe, she's on a plane, she's on her way home," Biden said from the White House, where he was accompanied by Griner's wife, Cherelle, and administration officials.

Biden's authorization to release Bout, the Russian felon once nicknamed "the Merchant of Death," underscored the heightened urgency that his administration faced to get Griner home, particularly after the recent resolution of her criminal case on drug charges and her subsequent transfer to a penal colony. Griner, who also played pro basketball in Russia, was arrested at an airport there after Russian authorities said she was carrying vague canisters with cannabis oil.

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Griner is a two-time Olympic gold medalist, Baylor University All-American and Phoenix Mercury pro basketball star, whose arrest made her the most high-profile American jailed abroad. Her status as an openly gay Black woman, locked up in a country where authorities have been hostile to the LBGQT community, injected racial, gender and social dynamics into her legal saga and brought unprecedented attention to the population of wrongful detainees.

The Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed the swap, saying in a statement carried by Russian news agencies that the exchange took place in Abu Dhabi and that Bout had been flown home. Russian media showed Griner walking off a Russian plane in Abu Dhabi where she was greeted by a U.S. official. Two Russians greeted Bout with a hug.

Later, Russian TV showed Bout walking off the plane on a snow-covered tarmac in Moscow, his mother and wife hugging him, giving him flowers.

Biden spoke by phone with Griner, and she was expected back in the U.S. within 24 hours, Biden said. U.S. officials said she would be offered specialized medical services and counseling.

Both Russian and U.S. officials had conveyed cautious optimism in recent weeks after months of strained negotiations, with Biden saying in November that he was hopeful that Russia would engage in a deal now that the midterm elections were completed. A top Russian official said last week that a deal was possible before year's end.

Even so, the fact that the deal was a one-for-one swap was a surprise given that U.S. officials had for months expressed their determination to bring home both Griner and Whelan, a Michigan corporate security executive jailed in Russia since December 2018 on espionage charges that his family and the U.S. government have said are baseless.

"We've not forgotten about Paul Whelan," Biden said. "We will keep negotiating in good faith for Paul's release."

However, U.S. officials said they did not see an immediate path to bringing about Whelan's release, saying Russia has treated his case differently because of the "sham espionage" charges against him. Still, they said they believe communication channels with the Russians remain open for negotiations for his freedom.

"We didn't want to lose the opportunity today to secure the release of one of them," said Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Whelan's brother David said in a statement he was "so glad" for Griner's release but also disappointed for his family. He credited the White House with giving the Whelan family advance notice and said he did not fault officials for making the deal.

"The Biden administration made the right decision to bring Ms. Griner home, and to make the deal that was possible, rather than waiting for one that wasn't going to happen," he said.

In a statement released by Griner's agent, her family thanked the Biden administration as well as the Whelan family, who they said "have been generous with their support for Brittney and our family during what we know is a heartbreaking time."

In releasing Bout, the U.S. freed a former Soviet Army lieutenant colonel whom the Justice Department once described as one of the world's most prolific arms dealers. He was arrested in Thailand in 2008 and extradited to the U.S. in 2010.

Bout was serving a 25-year sentence on charges that he conspired to sell tens of millions of dollars in weapons that U.S. officials said were to be used against Americans. Biden issued an executive grant of clemency to free the arms dealer from a federal prison in Illinois to effect the prisoner swap.

The deal drew criticism from some prominent Republicans, including House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, his party's nominee to become speaker once the GOP retakes control of the chamber in January.

"This is a gift to Vladimir Putin, and it endangers American lives," he said of Bout's release. "Leaving Paul Whelan behind for this is unconscionable."

The U.S.-Russia exchange was carried out despite deteriorating relations between the powers prompted by Moscow's war against Ukraine. The White House said Kyiv was provided assurances that the terms were limited to the prisoner swap and would not impact U.S. support for Ukraine's defense.

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Over the summer, the imprisonment of Americans produced the highest-level known contact between Washington and Moscow — a phone call between Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov — in more than five months.

In an extraordinary move during otherwise secret negotiations, Blinken revealed publicly in July that the U.S. had made a “substantial proposal” to Russia for Griner and Whelan. Though he did not specify the terms, people familiar with it said the U.S. had offered Bout.

The public overture drew a rebuke from the Russians, who said they preferred to resolve such cases in private, and carried the risk of weakening the U.S. government’s negotiating hand for this and future deals by making the administration appear desperate. But the announcement also communicated to the public that Biden was doing what he could and to ensure pressure on the Russians.

The release also followed months of back channel negotiations involving Bill Richardson, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and a frequent emissary in hostage talks, and his top deputy, Mickey Bergman.

Following Griner’s arrest at Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport in February, she pleaded guilty in July but still faced trial because admitting guilt in Russia’s judicial system does not automatically end a case.

She acknowledged in court that she possessed the canisters with cannabis oil but said she had no criminal intent and their presence in her luggage was due to hasty packing.

Before being sentenced on Aug. 4 and receiving a punishment her lawyers said was out of line for the offense, an emotional Griner apologized “for my mistake that I made.” She added, “I hope in your ruling it does not end my life.”

Her supporters had largely stayed quiet for weeks after her arrest, but that approach changed in May once the State Department designated her as unlawfully detained. A separate trade — Marine veteran Trevor Reed for Konstantin Yaroshenko, a Russian pilot convicted in the U.S. in a cocaine trafficking conspiracy — spurred hope that additional exchanges could be in the works.

Whelan has been held in Russia since December 2018. The U.S. government also classified him as wrongfully detained. He was sentenced in 2020 to 16 years in prison.

Whelan was not included in the Reed prisoner swap, escalating pressure on the Biden administration to ensure that any deal that brought home Griner also included him.

Bill protecting same-sex, interracial unions clears Congress

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House gave final approval Thursday to legislation protecting same-sex marriages, a monumental step in a decadeslong battle for nationwide recognition that reflects a stark turnaround in societal attitudes.

President Joe Biden has said he will promptly sign the measure, which requires all states to recognize same-sex marriages. It is a relief for hundreds of thousands of couples who have married since the Supreme Court’s 2015 decision that legalized those marriages and have worried about what would happen if the ruling were overturned.

In a statement after the vote, Biden called the legislation a “critical step to ensure that Americans have the right to marry the person they love.” He said the legislation provides “hope and dignity to millions of young people across this country who can grow up knowing that their government will recognize and respect the families they build.”

The bipartisan legislation, which passed 258-169 with 39 Republican votes, would also protect interracial unions by requiring states to recognize legal marriages regardless of “sex, race, ethnicity, or national origin.” After months of negotiations, the Senate passed the bill last week with 12 Republican votes.

Democrats moved the bill quickly through the House and Senate after the Supreme Court’s decision in June that overturned the federal right to an abortion — including a concurring opinion from Justice Clarence Thomas that suggested the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision legalizing same-sex marriage could also be reconsidered.

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While many Republicans predicted that was unlikely to happen, and said the bill was unnecessary, Democrats and GOP supporters of the bill said it shouldn't be left to chance.

"We need it," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who presided over the vote as one of her last acts in leadership before stepping aside in January. "It is magic."

The bill is "a glorious triumph of love and freedom," Pelosi said, tearing up as she celebrated its passage.

In debate before the vote, several gay members of Congress talked about what a federal law would mean for them and their families. Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., said he and his husband should be able to visit each other in the hospital just like any other married couple and receive spousal benefits "regardless of if your spouse's name is Samuel or Samantha."

Rep. Chris Pappas, D-N.H., said he was set to marry "the love of my life" next year and it is "unthinkable" that his marriage might not be recognized in some states if Obergefell were to be overturned.

"The idea of marriage equality used to be a far-fetched idea," said Rep. David Cicilline, D-R.I. "Now it's the law of the land and supported by the vast majority of Americans."

The legislation lost some Republican support since July, when 47 Republicans voted for it — a robust and unexpected show of support that kick-started serious negotiations in the Senate. But most of those lawmakers held firm, with a cross section of the party, from conservatives to moderates, voting for the bill. House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy voted against it.

"To me this is really just standing with the Constitution," said Republican Rep. Ann Wagner of Missouri, who voted for the bill both times. She pushed back on GOP arguments that it would affect the religious rights of those who don't believe in same-sex marriage.

"No one's religious liberties are affected in any way, shape or form," Wagner said.

Republican Rep. Chris Stewart of Utah said he was "proud to once again vote in favor of protecting our LGBTQ and religious friends and neighbors." He praised Senate changes to the bill ensuring that it would not affect current rights of religious institutions and groups.

"Civil rights are not a finite resource, we do not have to take from one group to give to another," Stewart said.

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

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.

"God's perfect design is indeed marriage between one man and one woman for life," said Rep. Bob Good, R-Va, before the vote. "And it doesn't matter what you think or what I think, that's what the Bible says."

Rep. Vicky Hartzler, R-Mo., choked up as she begged colleagues to vote against the bill, which she said undermines "natural marriage" between a man and a woman.

"I'll tell you my priorities," Hartzler said. "Protect religious liberty, protect people of faith and protect Americans who believe in the true meaning of marriage."

Democrats in the Senate, led by Wisconsin's Tammy Baldwin and Arizona's Kyrsten Sinema, worked with supportive Republican senators to address those GOP concerns by negotiating changes to clarify that the legislation does not impair the rights of private individuals or businesses. 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.

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Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, who led negotiations with Baldwin and Sinema in the Senate, attended a ceremony after the House vote with Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

"When I think about this bill, I think about how much it matters to people in each of our lives, our family members, our coworkers, our neighbors, our friends," Collins said.

Thursday's vote came as the LGBTQ community has faced violent attacks, such as the shooting 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, 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. Schumer said after the House vote that his daughter and her wife are expecting their first child next year.

"My grandchild will live in a world that will respect and honor their mothers' marriage," Schumer said.

Baldwin, the first openly gay senator, has been working on gay rights issues for almost four decades. She also attended the House ceremony.

"We are giving these loving couples the certainty that their marriages are legal, and that they will continue to have the same rights and responsibilities and benefits of every other married couple," Baldwin said. "We are telling these Americans that we see them and we respect them."

USC QB Caleb Williams voted AP Player of the Year

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Southern California quarterback Caleb Williams is The Associated Press college football player of the year, becoming the school's first winner of the award since 2005 with his stellar debut season for the Trojans.

Williams received 32 of the 46 first-place votes and 117 total points from AP Top 25 poll voters to win the award presented by Regions Bank. The Heisman Trophy favorite finished well ahead of TCU quarterback Max Duggan, who came in second with six first-place votes and 64 points.

Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud was third, with Tennessee's Hendon Hooker in fourth and Georgia's Stetson Bennett fifth.

Alabama linebacker Will Anderson Jr., the first repeat SEC Defensive Player of the Year, was the only non-quarterback in this year's top eight vote-getters, finishing sixth after coming in fourth last season.

Stroud and Hooker got two first-place votes apiece, while one first-place vote each went to Bennett, Anderson and star running backs Bijan Robinson of Texas and Blake Corum of Michigan. Alabama quarterback Bryce Young, who won the AP award last season, finished 11th this year.

Williams, Stroud, Duggan and Bennett are the finalists for the Heisman, which will be presented in New York on Saturday. The winner of the AP award has differed from the Heisman winner just twice in the past two decades.

Later Thursday, during the ESPN College Football Awards show, Williams also won the Maxwell Award as the most outstanding player in college football, but Duggan beat out Williams for the Davey O'Brien Award as the nation's top quarterback.

Other winners included Anderson, who claimed the Chuck Bednarik Award as the nation's top defensive player; Olusegun Oluwatimi of Michigan, who won the Outland Trophy as the top interior lineman; and Robinson, who claimed the Doak Walker Award as the nation's top running back.

The clear favorite for the AP honor was Williams, the elusive passer and runner with an electrifying arm and strong leadership skills. The sophomore followed Lincoln Riley from Oklahoma to the West Coast last winter, and the duo immediately returned USC (11-2) to national prominence with a seven-win improvement over last season's record.

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Williams has passed for 4,075 yards with an FBS-leading 37 touchdowns and just four interceptions this season, completing 66.1% of his passes while winning the Pac-12's Offensive Player of the Year award. He also won the Walter Camp Player of the Year award.

His ability to avoid defensive pressure has bordered on the supernatural at times, and he has racked up 372 yards rushing and 10 touchdowns while setting the USC school records for total touchdowns and total offensive yards (4,447) in a season.

"I think he's just elegant in the way he plays the game," USC receiver Kyle Ford said. "That's the only word to describe it. He's out there and he's in the backfield, zigzagging around and doing spin moves, and he doesn't get touched and has a first down, and he's out of bounds. Stuff like that is amazing to me, stuff that he pulls off during a game. He's a gamer, and he's a winner."

Perhaps most impressive, Williams has played a critical role in bringing cohesion, teamwork and 11 victories to a program returning from a four-win season with a new coaching staff and more than two dozen veteran player additions through the transfer portal.

Although he usually deflects questions about his own play by praising his teammates, Williams admits leadership "means everything" to him.

"I've been trying to lead more," he added. "Being in a position where you can go and do something bigger, or do something that you've always dreamed of as a child, it brings that understanding that the time is right now."

From his first weeks in Los Angeles, Williams welcomed the responsibility of organizing and motivating this group of new teammates. He swiftly cemented friendships across the roster with his charisma and upbeat personality.

"Talk about a dude you can count on for anything," USC left guard Andrew Vorhees said. "A guy who genuinely cares, is supportive in every way, really tries to be a guy that brings people together. It's a brotherhood to him."

USC went 11-1 in the regular season, and Williams put up one spectacular game after another down the stretch, capped by rivalry victories over UCLA and Notre Dame. Although the Trojans missed out on the College Football Playoff after losing the Pac-12 title game to Utah while Williams hobbled through the evening with a hamstring injury, No. 8 USC will finish its turnaround season in the Cotton Bowl against Tulane.

Williams is the third winner of the AP award in six years for Riley, who also coached Oklahoma quarterbacks Baker Mayfield (2017) and Kyler Murray (2018) to Heisman trophies in the same years.

USC is enjoying its best season since the tenure of former coach Pete Carroll, and the Trojans now have their first AP Player of the Year since those glory days. Quarterback Matt Leinart won the award in 2004, and tailback Reggie Bush claimed it the next year.

Both went on to claim the Heisman, and Williams is favored to win USC's record eighth as the school's first finalist since 2005.

Other awards handed out Thursday night:

- Jalin Hyatt of Tennessee won the Biletnikoff Award as the nation's top receiver.
- Tre'Vius Hodges-Tomlinson of TCU won the Jim Thorpe Award as the best defensive back.
- Christopher Dunn of North Carolina State won the Lou Groza Award for the best kicker.
- Adam Korsak of Rutgers won the Ray Guy Award as the top punter.
- North Carolina receiver Tylee Craft won the Disney Spirit Award.
- Florida State offensive lineman Dillan Gibbons won the Wuerffel Trophy for community service.

Before Thursday:

- Iowa's Jack Campbell won the Butkus Award as the nation's top linebacker.
- Brock Bowers of Georgia won the Mackey Award as the best tight end.
- Oluwatimi won the Rimington Trophy as the best center.
- Bennett won the Burlsworth Trophy as the top player whose career started as a walk-on.
- Anderson won the Lombardi Award and claimed the Nagurski defensive player of the year award for the second straight year.

Griner swap wasn't what US hoped for, but what it could get

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Antony Blinken's surprise announcement last July lacked any detail, but its meaning was crystal clear.

In a rare comment on secret talks, he said the Biden administration had made a "substantial proposal" to Russia to end the imprisonment of two Americans: WNBA star Brittney Griner and Paul Whelan.

The message was plain, for those closely following the cases:

To get Griner and Whelan home, the U.S. would agree to the release of Viktor Bout, an imprisoned Russian arms dealer with the ominous nickname of "the Merchant of Death." The Russians had made no secret of their desire to get Bout home.

On Thursday, Bout and Griner began their journeys home after a dramatic one-for-one swap. Yet Whelan remains imprisoned in Russia. The deal wasn't all that U.S. officials had wanted. But after months of difficult private negotiations and angry public accusations, it was, they concluded, the best they could get.

It came together in the past few days after the administration grudgingly accepted that though the Russians would not budge on Whelan, they were prepared to relent on Griner, creating imperfect but ultimately workable options for a U.S. government under pressure to make a deal.

"This was not a choice for us on which American to bring home. It was a choice between bringing home one American or none," said White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

Whelan, a Michigan corporate security executive who had regularly traveled to Russia, was arrested in December 2018 while visiting Moscow for a friend's wedding. He was convicted of espionage charges that he and the U.S. government say are baseless and is serving a 16-year prison sentence.

"For totally illegitimate reasons, Russia is treating Paul's case differently than Brittney's, and while we have not succeeded in securing Paul's release, we are not giving up," Biden said Thursday.

Griner's arrest in February on drug possession charges made her instantaneously the most high-profile American jailed abroad. Her status as a gay Black woman, her prominence in women's basketball and her imprisonment at a time of war combined for an unusual confluence of storylines in sports, politics and diplomacy.

For weeks, the focus seemed to center on legal aspects of the case and questions of her guilt or innocence. But that changed in May after the U.S. designated her a wrongful detainee, a move that placed her case with the government's top hostage negotiator and came just after a separate prisoner swap between the U.S. and Russia.

Griner's guilty plea last summer and nine-year prison sentence made it clear her best hope for release was through a prisoner swap. Blinken's public reveal of a "substantial proposal" created speculation of who beyond Bout, a notorious arms dealer serving a 25-year sentence, the U.S. might be willing to release in a two-for-two exchange — and who else Russia might want.

Lawyers for Alexander Vinnik, an accused Russian cryptocurrency launderer recently extradited to California, advanced his client's name to officials in Russia and the U.S., but he was ultimately left out of Thursday's deal.

"We think that he is a good candidate, remains a good candidate," said one of Vinnik's lawyers, David Rizk. "He's somebody that both sides have a lot of interest in, and he's also somebody who hasn't killed anybody. He hasn't committed any violent crime."

A senior administration official, briefing reporters on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House, said Thursday that the U.S. "explored a wide range of alternatives and permutations that we felt were, frankly, quite generous in resolving both cases." The official did not elaborate.

Throughout the fall, there were few signs of progress, with U.S. officials repeatedly saying that Russia had yet to respond in good faith to their offer. Blinken spoke by phone to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in July in the highest-level known contact between the two sides since Russia invaded Ukraine, but Russian officials gave no hint that headway had been made.

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As U.S. officials talked directly with Russian counterparts, Bill Richardson, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and top deputy Mickey Bergman held backchannel discussions in Russia and other countries with their own contacts to try to find middle ground.

"We were aiming, working together, for a two-for-two but I think the geopolitical situation prevented us from doing the two-for-two – in other words, the increasingly hostile relationship" between the countries, Richardson said in an interview.

Back in Washington, officials were repeatedly stressing the extent to which the U.S. viewed the cases of Griner and Whelan through the same lens and with the same urgency. In September, Biden hosted Griner's wife, Cherelle, and Whelan's sister, Elizabeth, for separate meetings at the White House.

But the reality, administration officials now say, is that Russia viewed Whelan's case differently, with one official saying Moscow "put him through sham proceedings that convicted him of trumped-up espionage charges." Russia, the official said, had "rejected each and every one of our proposals for his release."

A potential thaw for Griner was evident in recent weeks. Biden told reporters after the midterm U.S. elections that he was hopeful Russia would now be more willing to negotiate her release. A Russian official said last week a deal was possible by the end of the year.

Progress escalated this week. Cherelle Griner was invited to the White House for a meeting with national security adviser Jake Sullivan, and she was with Biden Thursday morning when he was notified Griner was secure.

Brittney Griner was put through to the Oval Office and Biden said, "It's Joe Biden. Welcome, welcome home!" one official said of the conversation.

In anticipation of the transfer, Griner was relocated from the Russian penal colony where she arrived last month and was flown to the United Arab Emirates for the transfer. Arriving there, too, was Bout, who was not presented with his official clemency paperwork until U.S. officials knew Griner was also present.

The deal brought a joyful end to an agonizing wait for Cherelle Griner, who in June told The Associated Press how a phone mixup by the U.S. government left her unable to connect with her wife on the couple's four-year wedding anniversary. Just two months ago she said her wife was at her "absolute weakest moment in life right now."

The final outcome was less joyful for the Whelan family, though they said they supported the administration's action. Elizabeth Whelan was visited in Massachusetts by a U.S. official bearing the news. Paul Whelan himself was also briefed by the administration.

"To realize now that not only didn't it include him, but also that there may not be any other things that the U.S. currently has control over that could bring Paul home — that's a new thing to be thinking about," brother David Whelan said in an interview.

Peru president's power grab recalls country's dark past

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Peru's ousted President Pedro Castillo rose to power 17 months ago as a populist outsider. But he squandered what little popularity he had when he stunned the nation by dissolving Congress in an act of political suicide that recalled some of the darkest days of the nation's anti-democratic past.

At a court appearance Thursday, a judge ordered Castillo held on charges of rebellion in the same Lima prison where Alberto Fujimori remains incarcerated 30 years after the former strongman sent tanks and soldiers in a far more forceful attempt to close the legislature.

Castillo, 53, looked downcast as he gave simple "yes" or "no" answers to the judge's questions.

Most Peruvians took the ouster in stride, with the streets in downtown Lima calm as residents went about their business. Late in the day a few hundred Castillo supporters marched peacefully toward the Congress, where they were blocked by riot police firing tear gas.

Meanwhile, his successor, Dina Boluarte, began the difficult task of trying to rally Peruvians behind institutions gutted for years by endemic corruption and mistrust. Boluarte, a Marxist lawyer who was Castillo's vice president, now becomes the country's sixth president in as many years. She's the first woman to lead

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the South American country of 33 million and the only one fluent in Quechua, the Indigenous language spoken by Peru's poor.

With polls showing Peruvians despising Congress even more than they do Castillo, Boluarte appealed for a "truce" from the political feuding that has paralyzed Peru for years. As part of her effort to reorient the country, she walked back comments a day earlier that she would finish Castillo's five-year term, which ends in 2026, and refused to rule out the possibility of holding early elections — something that requires approval of a hard-to-muster constitutional amendment.

"I know there are voices indicating early elections and this is democratically respectable," she said.

The Biden administration condemned Castillo's power grab as illegal and expressed support for Boluarte's call for a government of national unity. Meanwhile, several leftist allies in Latin America have refused to speak out against his overthrow. A major exception was Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who called Castillo's removal a "soft coup" fueled by deep-seated racism against the former school teacher from the heavily Indigenous Andean highlands.

"It is no longer military intervention," said López Obrador. "It's done with control of the media by the oligarchs, undermining legal and legitimately constituted authorities, especially if they want to do something for the benefit of the long-suffering people who do not belong to the elites."

In just three tumultuous hours Wednesday, 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 as accusations of corruption, inexperience and incompetency forced him to shelter inside the presidential palace and a hostile Congress comprised of political elites mocked his humble roots.

Castillo won a runoff election in June 2021 by just 44,000 votes after campaigning on promises to nationalize Peru's key mining industry and rewrite the constitution, gaining support in rural Peru.

However, once in office, he cycled through dozens of Cabinet choices, a number of whom have been accused of wrongdoing. Congress first tried to impeach him last December over 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 did.

Lawmakers tried again in March, accusing Castillo of "permanent moral incapacity," a term incorporated into Peruvian constitutional law that Congress has used more than a half dozen times since 2017 to try to remove presidents. The effort failed, with only 55 votes in favor.

Each time, Castillo was defiant, arguing he hadn't done anything wrong.

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

On Wednesday, Peru was girding for a third impeachment vote. The night before, the president said in an unusual midnight address to the nation that a sector of Congress had it out for him and that he was paying for mistakes made due to inexperience.

Then shortly before noon Wednesday, Castillo went on state television to announce the dissolution of Congress. He said elections would be held to choose new lawmakers and a new constitution would be written. Some Cabinet ministers resigned immediately, but the Supreme Court and Constitutional Tribunal rejected it as an attempted coup.

The president can dismiss lawmakers to end a political standoff but only in limited circumstances — after losing two votes of confidence in Congress, which last occurred in 2019, when then President Martín Vizcarra dismissed lawmakers.

Despite the high political drama, only small clashes have erupted between a handful of Castillo supporters and riot police on guard outside the police station in Lima where he is being held.

Boluarte, 60, will have to seek reconciliation with a weak mandate and no party. On Thursday, she hosted several political leaders at the presidential palace.

Hanging over the political crisis is the question of what to do with Castillo.

López Obrador said Thursday that he had all but greenlighted Castillo's request for asylum, made in a phone call Wednesday to the Mexican president's office. But he said those plans were frustrated when

Castillo was intercepted by police on his way to the Mexican Embassy in Lima, where a group of protesters awaited. Later, his foreign minister said Mexico's ambassador met with Castillo in prison and would initiate consultations with Peruvian authorities about his asylum request.

Colombia's President Gustavo Petro called on the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to intervene to guarantee Castillo's constitutional rights, saying he was unable to get a fair trial with so many powerful interests stacked against him. But echoing the comments of Brazil's incoming president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Petro left no doubt that Castillo had brought the troubles upon himself.

"Anti-democracy can't be fought with more anti-democracy," he wrote on Twitter.

FTC sues to block Microsoft-Activision Blizzard \$69B merger

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

The Federal Trade Commission on Thursday sued to block Microsoft's planned \$69 billion takeover of video game company Activision Blizzard, saying it could suppress competitors to Microsoft's Xbox game console and its growing games subscription business.

The FTC's challenge could be a test case for President Joe Biden's mandate to scrutinize big tech mergers. The commission voted 3-1 to issue the complaint after a closed-door meeting, with the three Democratic commissioners voting in favor and the sole Republican voting against.

The complaint points to Microsoft's previous game acquisitions, especially of well-known developer Bethesda Softworks and its parent company ZeniMax, as an example of where Microsoft is making some upcoming game titles exclusive to Xbox despite assuring European regulators it had no intention to do so.

"Microsoft has already shown that it can and will withhold content from its gaming rivals," said a prepared statement from Holly Vedova, director of the FTC's Bureau of Competition. "Today we seek to stop Microsoft from gaining control over a leading independent game studio and using it to harm competition in multiple dynamic and fast-growing gaming markets."

The FTC said it was filing the complaint through its administrative process rather than taking the case to a federal court. An administrative law judge it set to hear evidence but not until August 2023, according to the complaint.

Microsoft's president, Brad Smith, signaled in a statement Thursday that the company is likely to challenge the FTC's action.

"While we believed in giving peace a chance, we have complete confidence in our case and welcome the opportunity to present our case in court," Smith said.

The company had been ramping up its public defense of the deal in recent days as it awaited a decision. Smith said Microsoft has been committed to addressing competition concerns and brought proposed concessions to the FTC earlier this week.

"We continue to believe that this deal will expand competition and create more opportunities for gamers and game developers," Smith said.

Microsoft announced the merger deal in January but has faced months of resistance from Sony, which makes the competing PlayStation console and has raised concerns with antitrust watchdogs around the world about losing access to popular Activision Blizzard game franchises such as the military shooter game Call of Duty.

Antitrust regulators under Biden "have staked out the view that for decades merger policy has been too weak and they've said, repeatedly, 'We're changing that,'" said William Kovacic, a former chair of the FTC.

That has put pressure on the FTC to fulfill its bold promises to "not allow dodgy deals and not accept weak settlements," said Kovacic, who was a Republican commissioner appointed in 2006 by then-President George W. Bush. But he said Microsoft has a good chance of winning its legal challenge.

"It's evident that the company has been making a number of concessions," he said. "Microsoft would likely raise them in court and say the FTC is being incorrigibly stubborn about this."

Microsoft announced its latest promise Wednesday, saying it would make Call of Duty available on Nintendo devices for 10 years should its acquisition go through. It has said it tried to offer the same commitment to Sony.

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In an appeal to Biden administration priorities, Microsoft had also sought to characterize its deal as worker-friendly after announcing a "labor neutrality agreement" in June with the Communications Workers of America that would allow workers to unionize after the acquisition closes. The union's president, Chris Shelton, wrote an opinion column in The Hill this week calling on the FTC to "seal the deal, not blow it up."

The deal is also under close scrutiny in the European Union and the United Kingdom, where investigations aren't due to be completed until next year.

FTC's decision to send the complaint to its in-house judge instead of seeking an urgent federal court injunction to halt the merger could drag the case out for months and give more "confidence to authorities outside the U.S. to take a swing at the deal on their own," said Kovacic, who is now a professor at George Washington University Law School.

Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick said in a message to employees Thursday that the FTC's action "sounds alarming, so I want to reinforce my confidence that this deal will close."

"The allegation that this deal is anti-competitive doesn't align with the facts, and we believe we'll win this challenge," Kotick wrote.

Kotick said the deal will be good for players, employees, competition and the industry.

"We believe these arguments will win despite a regulatory environment focused on ideology and misconceptions about the tech industry," he said.

Led by FTC Chair Lina Khan, a legal scholar who's advocated for tougher antitrust enforcement, the commission is made up of three Democrats and one Republican after a second Republican stepped down earlier this year and left an open seat on the panel.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren tweeted Thursday that she welcomed the FTC action, noting that she had urged Khan to scrutinize the proposed merger.

"Corporate monopolies have had free rein to hike prices and harm workers, but now the Biden admin is committed to promoting competition," Warren said.

Both the Justice Department and the FTC this year have looked at strengthening merger guidelines to better detect and prevent illegal and anticompetitive deals.

Federal regulators also on Thursday opened their campaign to block Facebook parent Meta's acquisition of a virtual-reality company Thursday in a San Jose, California, courtroom.

In that case, the FTC sued to prevent Meta's acquisition of Within Unlimited and its fitness app Supernatural, asserting it would hurt competition and violate antitrust laws.

Microsoft in recent years has largely escaped the more intense regulatory backlash its tech rivals such as Amazon, Google and Meta have endured. But the sheer size of the Activision Blizzard acquisition — which could be the priciest in tech industry history — has drawn attention.

Microsoft's last big antitrust battle occurred more than two decades ago when a federal judge ordered its breakup following the company's anticompetitive actions related to its dominant Windows software. That verdict was overturned on appeal, although the court imposed other, less drastic, penalties on the company.

Mauna Loa lava no longer imminent threat to Hawaii highway

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Lava from the world's largest volcano is no longer an imminent threat to the main highway across the Big Island of Hawaii, scientists said Thursday, a development that was a welcome reprieve for motorists who depend on the road.

Mauna Loa was still erupting Thursday morning, but the lava that was feeding the flow heading toward the crucial road has been cut off, likely because of a reduced production rate, said David Phillips, deputy scientist-in-charge at U.S. Geological Survey's Hawaiian Volcano Observatory.

"That's good news for us," Hawaii County Mayor Mitch Roth said. Still, county officials said they will stay on the alert — because scientists say things could always change.

Lava from Mauna Loa, which began erupting Nov. 27 after being quiet for 38 years, was 1.76 miles (2.83

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kilometers) from Saddle Road, also known as Route 200 or Daniel K. Inouye Highway, the U.S. Geological Survey said.

"So just to emphasize, there is no current threat to any island communities or infrastructure at this time," Phillips said.

Last week, officials said the earliest the lava could hit the road was one week, prompting motorists to brace for upheaval from a possible closure that could add hours to commute times on alternate coastal routes. But, as expected, the lava slowed considerably in recent days as it moved across flatter ground, leaving scientists unable to estimate a clearer timeline.

Phillips said the active fissure is still generating lava flows, but they'll be localized around the fissure.

If there are additional flows in the channel, it's very unlikely that supply from the top will push the flow front ahead to become a threat, said Frank Trusdell, a geologist with the volcano observatory.

"So right now, we don't expect that the new lava coming out on the surface to be able to replenish the supply to the flows that are closest to Daniel K. Inouye Highway," he said.

Meanwhile, scientists were trying to understand why lava fountains were higher than usual overnight — a marvel noticed by people across the island, Phillips said. There wasn't a good estimate of size, he said, but the fountains were at least several hundred feet.

Some 20,000 vehicles have used a viewing route, which opened last week in an attempt to manage throngs of nighttime lava-gawkers, officials said.

Authorities were giving citations to people who, in an attempt to get a closer look, ventured onto prohibited areas. The state was "investigating people and companies who have entered the closed area and posted shots of themselves and lava flows on social media," said a statement Thursday from the Department of Land and Natural Resources.

Native Hawaiian community members planned to be out along the highway Friday to ensure the area is free from garbage.

"And so as we do when we are preparing for the arrival of Pele, it is a practice for many of us to prepare our homes, prepare the areas where we live, and to make sure that that these areas are clean," said Hawaiian cultural advisor Noe Noe Wong-Wilson, referring to the deity of volcanoes and fire.

For many Native Hawaiians, an eruption of a volcano like Mauna Loa has a deep yet very personal cultural significance.

Philly's slain 'Boy in Box': 66 years later we know his name

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM Associated Press

His name was Joseph Augustus Zarelli.

Nearly 66 years after the battered body of a young boy was found stuffed inside a cardboard box, Philadelphia police say they have finally unlocked a central mystery in the city's most notorious cold case: The victim's identity.

Revealing the name to the public Thursday, authorities hope it will bring them a step closer to the boy's killer and give the victim — known to generations of Philadelphians as the "Boy in the Box" — a measure of dignity.

"When people think about the boy in the box, a profound sadness is felt, not just because a child was murdered, but because his entire identity and his rightful claim to own his existence was taken away," Philadelphia Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw said at a news conference.

She said the city's oldest unsolved homicide has "haunted this community, the Philadelphia police department, our nation, and the world" for more than six decades.

The homicide investigation remains open, and authorities said they hoped publicizing Joseph's name would spur a fresh round of leads. But they cautioned the passage of time complicates the task.

"It's going to be an uphill battle for us to definitively determine who caused this child's death," said Capt. Jason Smith, commanding officer of the homicide unit. "We may not make an arrest. We may never make an identification. But we're going to do our darndest to try."

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Police said both of Joseph's parents are dead, but that he has living siblings. They said his family lived in west Philadelphia.

The child's naked, badly bruised body was found on Feb. 25, 1957, in a wooded area of Philadelphia's Fox Chase neighborhood. The boy, who was 4 years old, had been wrapped in a blanket and placed inside a large JCPenney bassinet box. Police say he was malnourished. He'd been beaten to death.

The boy's photo was put on a poster and plastered all over the city as police worked to identify him and catch his killer.

Detectives pursued and discarded hundreds of leads — that he was a Hungarian refugee, a boy who'd been kidnapped outside a Long Island supermarket in 1955, a variety of other missing children. They investigated a pair of traveling carnival workers and a family who operated a nearby foster home, but ruled them out as suspects.

An Ohio woman claimed her mother bought the boy from his birth parents in 1954, kept him in the basement of their suburban Philadelphia home, and killed him in a fit of rage. Authorities found her credible but couldn't corroborate her story — another dead end.

All the while, the boy's missing identity gnawed at police officials, generations of whom took up the case. They got permission to exhume his body for DNA testing in 1998 and again in 2019, and it was that latest round of testing, combined with genetic genealogy, that gave police their big break.

Dr. Colleen Fitzpatrick, president of Identifinders International, a company that uses forensic genetic genealogy to help law enforcement investigate cold cases, said the victim's DNA was so degraded that it took 2 1/2 years of work to be able to extract enough data to perform the genealogy.

The test results were uploaded to DNA databases, allowing genealogists to make a match on the child's maternal side. Authorities obtained a court order for vital records of any children born to the woman they suspected was Joseph's mother between 1944 and 1956, and found Joseph's birth certificate, which also listed the name of his father.

William Fleisher, the co-founder of a group of professional sleuths called the Vidocq Society that took up the Boy in the Box case a quarter-century ago, said that hundreds of investigators had poured their "hearts and souls" into learning the boy's identity and the circumstances of his death since 1957.

"Many of these men and women aren't with us anymore, but I feel their souls are standing here at this moment with us," Fleisher said at the news conference.

"Now our lad is no longer that boy in the box. He has a name."

Originally buried in a pauper's grave, the boy's remains now lie just inside the front gate at Ivy Hill Cemetery, under a weeping cherry tree, and a headstone designates him as "America's Unknown Child." Services have been held there each year on the anniversary of the boy's discovery inside the box.

People often leave flowers and, this time of year, Christmas decorations and toys.

"The boy has always been special to all of us, because we don't know who it is," Dave Drysdale, the cemetery's secretary-treasurer, said in a phone interview ahead of the news conference.

Now they do. And now that he has a name — his real name — it will be etched on the stone.

'It's fate.' 40 years later, Ke Huy Quan is a star, again

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Ke Huy Quan is trying hard not to cry.

He's been crying a lot lately. Quan tends to get emotional any time he contemplates his sudden reversal of fate. Every since "Everything Everywhere All at Once" opened in theaters earlier this year, 51-year-old Quan — who a lifetime ago was the iconic child star of "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom," as Short Round, and Data in "Goonies" — has been, he says, "overwhelmed by emotions every day."

"I didn't think this day would come. It was a day I wanted for so long, for decades. And it's finally here," says Quan. "When you have a dream and you kind of bury it because you think it won't come true, to see it finally come true is incredible."

"I cry a lot," he says.

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Quan was once one of the most indelible faces — and voices — of the 1980s. He was 12 when he was cast as Harrison Ford's Yankee-hat-wearing sidekick in "Temple of Doom." His younger brother, David, auditioned, but Ke caught Spielberg's eye. Quan starred in 1985's "Goonies," too, but found few roles after that. By the time Quan was in his 20s, he had all but disappeared from the screen. Struggling to find a foothold at a time when roles were scarce for Asian American actors, the Vietnamese-born Quan passed into "Where are they now?" territory.

Quan gave up acting. He went back to school to study film at the University of Southern California and transitioned into working behind the camera. Twenty years passed before he acted again. But when Quan was 49, he decided to give it one last go. Two weeks later, he landed his role in "Everything Everywhere All at Once."

Now, Quan is not just a working actor again, with a string of upcoming roles, he's being celebrated for one of the best performances of the year. He plays Waymond, the meek husband who transforms in the film's spiraling multiverses into a fanny-pack-slinging hero and a debonair "In the Mood for Love"-style bachelor. Decades may have passed, but Quan's sweetly sincere screen presence still shines.

The 51-year-old actor has already picked up awards from the Gotham Awards, the New York Film Critics Circle and has been nominated for a Spirit Award. After spending much of his adult life as an actor just looking for a second chance, Quan may be the favorite to win an Academy Award, for best supporting actor.

"For the longest time, all I wanted was just a job," Quan says. "Just an opportunity to act, to show people what I can do. This movie, 'Everything Everywhere All at Once,' has given me so much beyond anything I could have ever asked for."

While speaking by Zoom during his day off shooting Anthony and Joe Russo's "Electric State" in Atlanta, Quan's wife was nearby off-camera urging him: "Don't cry! Don't cry!" Quan tried. But as he reflected on his extraordinary journey, he often found it difficult.

"There are so many people out there who doubt themselves, who have dreams they've given up or didn't think would ever come true," Quan said, his voice cracking. "To those people, I hope my story inspires them."

'It's fate.' 40 years later, Ke Huy Quan is a star, again

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"There are so many people out there who doubt themselves, who have dreams they've given up or didn't think would ever come true," Quan said, his voice cracking. "To those people, I hope my story inspires them."

Remarks have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

AP: Since the release of "Everything Everywhere All at Once," what's this year been like for you?

QUAN: I'm cloud not nine but 18. Before it came out, I was really nervous. When I got back into acting, I didn't tell my family. I kept it a secret from everybody. I didn't know whether anyone would want me. I didn't even know if I could get a job. And even after we finished the movie, I didn't know if I was any good. That's why I kept it away from my family because I'm thinking: "If I get fired during production, they won't know about it." Or, "If I suck or the movie sucks, they won't know about it." I told them right before our trailer came out. The day before I called my family and said, "I've got a little surprise for you." I said, "I'm an actor again." When the movie came out, they saw it and they called me. They had zero information about my role. They said, "Ke, you're in this movie a lot!"

AP: Given your personal history, do you connect especially with the movie's exploration of alternate realities and lives not lived?

QUAN: For the longest time, the characters I went up for didn't have a character name, they only lasted a page or two. I thought this role was written for me. I remember reading it until 5 a.m., sitting on the sofa, imagining all the things I wanted to put into this character and the three versions of this character. I was looking out the window and I saw the sun rise. I felt like I have enough life experience now that I can do this. Right before I went to bed, reality set in. The imagination was done. I'm thinking: "There's no way I get this role, especially having not acted in more than 20 years." It's impossible! How can anybody think that your first movie back, that I would have this movie as my comeback movie? At that time, I think winning the lottery would have been much easier.

When I got that wonderful phone call and heard the three words that every actor is so eager to hear, which is "We want you," I was so happy I can't even describe my feelings at that time. Honestly, I don't think I could have played this character had it been offered to me 10 years ago. Everything had to happen the way it did. It's fate.

AP: You were spectacular as a child actor. Did you ever feel it was unjust that you didn't get more chances after that?

QUAN: In my late teens and my early twenties, when it was extremely difficult for me to get a job, I never blamed anybody. I thought I was not good enough. I thought I was not tall enough. I thought I was not good looking enough. I thought perhaps my acting wasn't good enough, and that's why I wasn't landing these roles. And I was really young. I blamed myself. For the longest time, I wished I was better. Hollywood writers were just not writing roles for Asian actors. I didn't think like that. I would always fantasize: "What would it be like for me to be in that role?" But of course, it never happened. Hollywood didn't write roles like that for Asian actors. I didn't know it then, so I just blamed myself.

AP: When you quit acting, had you made your peace with it? Or did you hold out some hope of returning some day?

QUAN: I struggle with that decision for at least two years. You know, the last audition that I did was for

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a role with no name, two lines. I walk in the room and there were 30 other Asian actors fighting for this tiny bread crumb. When I didn't even get that, I didn't see a future for myself anymore as an actor. I felt like time was just slipping away. I spent so much time waiting by the phone, hoping it would ring, hoping my agent would call me, hoping that one day I would get another role like Data or Short Round.

That was when I decided to enroll in USC film school. When I stepped away, I thought I stepped away for good. For the longest time, I believed that I didn't like acting anymore, until I started seeing my fellow Asian actors succeeding. I go: "Wow, time has changed. We are getting not just very stereotypical roles but meaningful roles, meaty roles." It wasn't until then that that acting bug, which I buried very, very deep, started crawling back to the surface, to the point that I could not deny that urge to get back anymore. You understand, I'm not in my 20s. I'm not in my 30s anymore. I was 49 when I made that decision. It scared me. But the idea of having regret of not giving voice to that dream scared me even more.

AP: All through those years, you've said Spielberg has sent you an annual holiday gift. What does he send you?

QUAN: It's always a wonderful present with a card. Every single year for the last 38 years. Every year will be different. I always look forward to that one special gift that I get from Steven. It always warms my heart that he still remembers me, that he still thinks about me when the holiday comes around. I'm always grateful to that man. Not only did he teach me so much, but he changed my life in the most wonderful way. I guess the reason why I love acting so much has a lot to do with him. My first experience as an actor was on his set. I have such fond memories of that experience. That's the reason I fell in love with acting.

AP: Have you seen him since "Everything Everywhere All at Once" came out?

QUAN: I saw Steven over Zoom during the pandemic. We did a couple of "Goonies" reunions, so that was really sweet. But ever since our movie came out, I have not seen or spoken to him. So I want to see him in person and ask him what he thinks about our movie and my performance. I hope I make him proud.

AP: You have, though, reunited with Harrison Ford. The photo taken at the D23 event probably warmed the hearts of millions.

QUAN: I also reunited with Frank Marshall and Kathleen Kennedy at the same event I saw Harrison. We all kind of had a mini-reunion. I even joked with Kathy and Frank, knowing that I'm not in "Indy 5" -- they've already made it -- I said: "Oh my gosh, it would have been so much better if Short Round was in it." Kathy was so sweet. Kathy said, "Ke, this is so much better. What you have now is so much better."

AP: How did you experience the response to the photo with Ford?

QUAN: I remember that day very well. It's been 38 years. After I went out and we chatted for a little bit, we took three pictures. The first one, it was just me putting my arms around him and him putting his arm over my shoulder. In that moment, I felt so comfortable. I could not help myself but to wrap my arms around him -- this man that I love dearly. Ever since it came out, the response to fans from all over the world, how they see that picture and it brings tears to their eyes -- it brought tears to my eyes. I was emotional when I hugged him. And to see him smile the way he did! It was just one of those very special moments in life you don't get very often. I will remember it as long as I live.

AP: What would an Oscar nomination mean to you?

QUAN: When I was auditioning for this movie, I prayed to get this role. I made a wish and it came true. I had my birthday in August and every year for the longest time, for as long as I live, every single year I've made a wish. This year I didn't. I didn't want to be greedy. I've already had everything I ever wanted as an actor with this amazing movie. Whatever happens, my dream has already come true. God, Buddha has already answered my prayer. Everything else is icing on the cake.

AP: Are you still recognized often on the street? Has this film changed how people approach you?

QUAN: Over the years, it was once every while. People recognize me, especially my voice. The question that I always get asked is: "Are you the kid from 'Indiana Jones?'" Or, "Are you the kid from 'Goonies?'" I'm so lucky to have been a part of those two wonderful movies. But for the longest time, I always wished that I would do something as an adult where people would recognize me. I've done Comic-Cons where I've signed autographs and pictures, but I was just a kid. Now I have that. When I go out, people say, "Wow, you're Waymond from 'Everything Everywhere All at Once.'"

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 was given final approval in a House vote Thursday. It ensures 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, had been picking up steam since June, when the Supreme Court overturned the federal right to an abortion. That 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 “ridicu-

lous" 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?"

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."

Ukraine: Russia put rocket launchers at nuclear power plant

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces have installed multiple rocket launchers at Ukraine's shut-down Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, Ukrainian officials claimed Thursday, raising fears Europe's largest atomic power station could be used as a base to fire on Ukrainian territory and heightening radiation dangers.

Ukraine's nuclear company Energoatom said in a statement that Russian forces occupying the plant have placed several Grad multiple rocket launchers near one of its six nuclear reactors. It said the offensive systems are located at new "protective structures" the Russians secretly built, "violating all conditions for nuclear and radiation safety."

The claim could not be independently verified.

The Soviet-built multiple rocket launchers are capable of firing rockets at ranges of up to 40 kilometers (25 miles), and Energoatom said they could enable Russian forces to hit the opposite bank of the Dnieper River, where each side blames the other for almost daily shelling in the cities of Nikopol and Marhanets. The plant is in a southern Ukrainian region the Kremlin has illegally annexed.

The Zaporizhzhia station has been under Russian control since the war's early days. Russia and Ukraine accuse each other of shelling the plant and risking a radiation release. Although the risk of a nuclear meltdown is greatly reduced because all six reactors have been shut down, experts have said a dangerous radiation release is still possible. The reactors were shut down because the fighting kept knocking out external power supplies needed to run the reactors' cooling systems and other safety systems.

The U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has stationed inspectors at the plant and has been trying to persuade both sides in the conflict to agree to a demilitarized zone around it. The agency did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the reported Grad installation. Ukraine has accused the Russians before of having heavy weapons at the plant. The Kremlin has said it needs to maintain control of the plant to defend it from alleged Ukrainian attacks.

With renewed focus on the dangers at Zaporizhzhia in the war, dragging on past nine months, the Kremlin is sending new signals about how to end it. It said Thursday it's up to Ukraine's president to end the military conflict, suggesting terms that Kyiv has repeatedly rejected, while Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed to press on with the fighting despite Western criticism.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that "(Ukrainian President Volodymyr) Zelenskyy knows when it may end. It may end tomorrow if he wishes so."

The Ukraine war has deteriorated relations between Russia and much of the rest of the world, but limited cooperation continues in some areas, such as exchanges of prisoners. On Thursday, in a dramatic swap that had been in the making for months, Russia freed American basketball star Brittney Griner while the

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United States released a jailed Russian arms dealer.

The Kremlin has long said that Ukraine must accept Russian conditions to end the fighting. It has demanded that Kyiv recognize Crimea — a Ukrainian peninsula that Moscow illegally annexed in 2014 — as part of Russia and also accept Moscow's other land gains in Ukraine.

Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian officials have repeatedly rejected those conditions, saying the war will end when the occupied territories are retaken or Russian forces leave them.

In an acknowledgement that it's taking longer than he expected to achieve his goals in the conflict, Putin said Wednesday that the fighting in Ukraine "could be a lengthy process" while describing Moscow's land gains as "a significant result for Russia."

During a conference call with reporters, Peskov said Moscow wasn't aiming to grab new land but will try to regain control of areas in Ukraine from which it withdrew just weeks after incorporating them into Russia in hastily called referendums — which Ukraine and the West reject as illegal shams. After earlier retreats from the Kyiv and Kharkiv areas, Russian troops last month left the city of Kherson and parts of the Kherson region, one of the four illegally annexed Ukrainian regions.

Putin vowed Thursday to achieve the declared goals in Ukraine regardless of the Western reaction.

"All we have to do is make a move and there is a lot of noise, chatter and outcry all across the universe. It will not stop us fulfilling combat tasks," Putin said.

He described Russian strikes on Ukraine's energy facilities and other key infrastructure as a legitimate response to an Oct. 8 truck bombing of a key bridge linking Crimea with Russia's mainland, and other attacks the Kremlin claimed Ukraine carried out. Putin also cited Ukraine's move to halt water supplies to the areas in eastern Ukraine that Russia controlled.

"There is a lot of noise now about our strikes on the energy infrastructure," Putin said at a meeting with soldiers whom he decorated with the country's top medals. "Yes, we are doing it. But who started it? Who struck the Crimean bridge? Who blew up power lines from the Kursk nuclear power station? Who is not supplying water to Donetsk?"

While stopping short of publicly claiming credit for the attacks, Ukrainian officials welcome their results and hint at Ukrainian involvement.

Heavy fighting continues, mostly in regions Russia annexed. Zelenskyy's office said 11 civilians were killed in Ukraine Wednesday.

The Donetsk region has been the epicenter of the recent fighting. Russian artillery struck the town of Yampil during distribution of humanitarian aid to civilians, Ukrainian officials said. Buildings were damaged in Kurakhove, 35 kilometers (22 miles) west of the regional capital, Donetsk, officials said.

More than ten cities and villages in the region were shelled, including the town of Bakhmut, which has remained in Ukrainian hands despite Moscow's goal of capturing the entire annexed Donbas region bordering Russia.

In other developments:

— The International Committee of the Red Cross said that for the first time, its representatives visited Ukrainian prisoners of war that Russian forces are holding. Visits to Russian prisoners of war also took place. The Red Cross checked the prisoners' condition, gave them books, personal hygiene products, blankets and warm clothes, and contacted their relatives.

— A Russian ship-borne air defense system knocked down a drone in the area of Sevastopol, the Russian Black Sea Fleet's base, the regional governor said. Several attacks have been launched since the war began on Sevastopol, which is on the Crimean Peninsula, and the Black Sea Fleet.

— Russian officials said Ukrainian forces shelled the Belgorod province, which borders Ukraine. According to Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov, the shelling damaged power lines in Yakovlevo, 50 kilometers (31 miles) from the Ukrainian border. Though Gladkov did not report casualties or injuries, a local news Telegram channel reported a fire at a military base, with several Russian military personnel killed or wounded. Ukrainian officials maintained their policy of not commenting on cross-border attacks.

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Harry and Meghan slam British tabloids in new Netflix series

By DANICA KIRKA and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, stick to a familiar script in a new Netflix series that chronicles the couple's estrangement from the royal family, chastising Britain's media and the societal racism they believe has fueled coverage of their relationship.

The first three episodes of "Harry and Meghan," released Thursday, dissect the symbiotic relationship between tabloid newspapers and the royal family and examine the history of racism across the British Empire, and how it persists.

The storytelling relies on interviews with the couple, their friends, and experts on race and the media. The series does not include dissenting voices, and there is no response from any of the media organizations mentioned.

"In this family sometimes, you know, you're part of the problem rather than part of the solution," Harry says in one of the episodes. "There is a huge level of unconscious bias. The thing with unconscious bias is that it is actually no one's fault. But once it has been pointed out, or identified within yourself, you then need to make it right."

The media's treatment of Meghan — and what the couple felt was a lack of sympathy from royal institutions about the coverage — were at the heart of their complaints when they walked away from royal life almost three years ago and moved to Southern California. Lucrative contracts with Netflix and Spotify have helped bankroll their new life in the wealthy enclave of Montecito.

Promoted with two dramatically edited trailers that hinted at a "war against Meghan," the Netflix show is the couple's latest effort to tell their story after a series of interviews with U.S. media organizations, most notably a two-hour sit down in 2021 with Oprah Winfrey.

The first three episodes break little new ground on royal intrigue, leading one British-based analyst to conclude that the main audience Harry and Meghan are trying to reach is in the United States.

The series is an effort by Harry and Meghan to cement their place in American society, where fame and riches await, says David Haigh, chief executive of Brand Finance, which has analyzed the monarchy's value to the UK economy.

"They are trying to become the next Kardashian family. And they are using the fame and notoriety of the monarchy as their stepping stone to get there," he said. "No one would take the remotest bit of interest in either of them if they weren't strongly associated with the UK monarchy."

The series comes at a crucial moment for the monarchy. King Charles III is trying 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.

Harry's 2018 marriage to the former Meghan Markle, a biracial American actress, was once seen as a public relations coup for the royal family, boosting the monarchy's effort to move into the 21st century by 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 British media reports that Meghan was self-centered and bullied her staff.

The new series seeks to rebut that narrative in the three hour-long episodes released Thursday. Three more are due on Dec. 15.

It opens with video diaries recorded by Meghan and Harry — apparently on their phones — in March 2020, amid the couple's acrimonious split from the royal family.

It's "my duty to uncover the exploitation and bribery" that happens in British media, Harry says in one entry.

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

The couple then tell the story of their courtship and the initial enthusiasm that greeted the relationship. But the tone shifts as Harry recounts the intense media scrutiny faced by Meghan, reminding him of the way his mother, Princess Diana, was treated before she died in a car crash while being trailed by

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photographers.

"To see another woman in my life who I loved go through this feeding frenzy – that's hard," Harry says. "It is basically the hunter versus the prey."

Harry and the series' other narrators say the palace is partly to blame for this treatment because it has granted privileged access to six newspapers that feel they are entitled to learn intimate details about members of the royal family since British taxpayers fund their lives.

Harry and Meghan said they initially tried to follow palace advice to remain silent about the press coverage as other members of the royal family said it was a rite of passage. But the couple said they felt compelled to tell their story because there was something different about the way Meghan was treated.

"The difference here is the race element," Harry said.

That bias has deep roots in the history of the British empire, which was enriched by the enslavement of Black people and the extraction of wealth from colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, said historian and author David Olusoga in the program. It is only since World War II that large numbers of Black and Asian people moved to Britain, changing the face of the nation.

Those changes aren't reflected in the British media. While Black people make up about 3.5% of Britain's population, they account for just 0.2% of the journalists, Olusoga said.

"We have to recognize that this is a white industry..." he said. "So people who come up with these headlines, they are doing so in a newsroom that's almost entirely white, and they get to decide whether something has crossed the line of being racist."

King Charles III was asked if he had watched the series as he carried out an engagement on Thursday in London. He did not reply.

Race became a central issue for the monarchy following Harry and Meghan's interview with 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.

The Year of the Slap: Pop culture moments in 2022

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

Taylor Swift was up. Elon Musk was in, out, and in. Tom Cruise was back. BTS stepped aside, and so did Serena Williams, and Tom Brady too — oops, scratch that.

But the slap? The slap was everywhere.

Ok, so maybe it wasn't on the level of a moon landing, or selection of a pope. But henceforth all you need say is "the slap" and people will know what you mean — that moment Will Smith smacked Chris Rock at the Oscars and a global audience said, "Wait, did that happen?" Even in the room itself — maybe especially in the room itself — there was a sense that everyone had imagined it, which helps explain why things went on as normal, for a bit.

The pandemic was over in 2022, phew! Well, of course it wasn't. But live entertainment pushed forward, with mask mandates dropping, and people rushing to buy things like, oh, Taylor Swift tickets!

We'll take any segue to mention Swift, who already had a big year in 2021, but just got bigger — heck, she broke Billboard records and then she broke Ticketmaster. (No word if she got her scarf back).

It was a year of celebrity #MeToo cases like Harvey Weinstein (again), R. Kelly (again), Kevin Spacey, Paul Haggis, Danny Masterson. And the Johnny Depp-Amber Heard defamation trial, its every excruciating turn captured on TV.

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On the big screen, there were big comebacks. Mourning its dearly missed star, Chadwick Boseman, "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" was a box office triumph. James Cameron's "Avatar" planned a December return.

Then there was Tom Cruise, turning 60 in '22, just like the Rolling Stones, swooping into Cannes with his most successful movie, and showing, like those still-touring rockers, that when they tell you "The end is inevitable," as they do in "Top Gun: Maverick," you can always reply "Maybe so, sir, but not today."

Will audiences one day find Cruise – or the Stones, for that matter – too wrinkled and past the sell-by date? Maybe so, but not this year.

Our annual, totally selective journey through a year in pop culture:

JANUARY

It's GOLDEN GLOBES time. But is a Globes with no telecast, boozy celebs or red carpet a Globes at all? The embattled Hollywood Foreign Press Association, reeling from stunning failures over diversity, holds a private event and plans a comeback next year. Hey, remember the original wardrobe malfunction? Well, JANET JACKSON says she and JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE have moved on, and so should we. The New York Times buys Wordle, and we're all thinking in five-letter words (though W-O-R-D-L-E is six, just saying.) Meanwhile, it's a month of loss, heading off a year of loss: pioneering Black actor, director and activist SIDNEY POITIER dies at 94.

FEBRUARY

What would a year in pop culture be without BRITNEY? Just months after her liberation from her restrictive conservatorship, Spears is reported to have signed a mammoth book deal, but at year's end we're still waiting for news. RIHANNA is pregnant! TOM BRADY retires! (Stay tuned, on that one.) TAYLOR watch: JAKE GYLLENHAAL speaks out, saying he really has nothing to do with that song, that it's about an artist's relationship with her fans — but fans shouldn't be cyberbullying, either.

MARCH

Quick, who wins Oscars this month? Well, "CODA" does, a feel-good drama with a largely deaf cast, and TROY KOTSUR becomes the first deaf actor to win an acting Oscar. Alas, all anyone can talk about is — you know. SMITH, who wins the best actor award not long after slapping Rock over a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, won't truly address the issue until the end of the year, so keep reading. KARDASHIAN watch: Kim K is declared legally single again in her ongoing divorce with YE, the rapper formerly known as KANYE WEST. And BRADY, retired for 40 days, says, "Never mind!"

APRIL

It's GRAMMY time, and JON BATISTE wins big, taking five statuettes. The musician's huge year will later include performing at the first state dinner of the Biden administration, for French President Emmanuel Macron. The next day Macron will meet with MUSK (thanks for the segue, Monsieur le President) who begins his acquisition of TWITTER this month, leading to untold – and still unfolding – changes at the social media giant.

MAY

So imagine you're sipping cocktails at the MET GALA and a musician comes sauntering through, playing the melodica — of course it's BATISTE, because the Met Gala's that kind of crazy party. The biggest splash of the night, though, is KARDASHIAN, on the arm of boyfriend PETE DAVIDSON, wearing the same sequined, skin tight gown MARILYN MONROE wore to sing "Happy Birthday" to JFK in 1962. In movies, "Top Gun: Maverick" opens, the highest-grossing domestic debut in CRUISE'S career, and his first to surpass \$100 million on opening weekend. HARRY STYLES fans rejoice! His album, "Harry's House," is here.

JUNE

Stunning news for the global fanbase of BTS as the K-pop supergroup announces it's taking a break to focus on members' solo projects. On the legal front, a Virginia jury hands DEPP a victory in his very messy libel case over allegations of domestic abuse, finding that former wife HEARD defamed him in a 2018 op-ed. On a happier note, Britney gets married....

JULY

Only one wedding, Britney? BENNIFER has two! Maybe what happens usually stays in Vegas, but not

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when you have 227 million followers on Instagram. With a winking reference to being a "Sadie" (married lady) JENNIFER LOPEZ directs fans to her newsletter where she shares pics of her quickie wedding to BEN AFFLECK. "Love is beautiful," she writes. "And it turns out love is patient." Speaking of patience, fans of BEYONCÉ are rewarded for theirs, with the release of her long-awaited seventh studio album, "Renaissance," her first solo album in six years.

AUGUST

So, we were saying Bennifer's second wedding , on Affleck's compound in Georgia, is bigger and fancier. One wedding, one split: KARDASHIAN and DAVIDSON are no longer. In other summer news, the world remembers Princess Diana, whose shocking death in a car crash happened 25 years ago, and whose life is being rehashed for a new generation in the current season of "The Crown." And only days later, that same Netflix series will pause production briefly as a mark of respect for Queen Elizabeth II as Britain — and the world — mourn the beloved monarch, who dies at age 96 after more than 70 years on the throne.

SEPTEMBER

Mounting political intrigue in Europe, and by that we mean ... did spit fly at the Venice premiere of "Don't Worry Darling"? Either way the movie, directed by OLIVIA WILDE and starring her boyfriend (alleged spitter STYLES), is saddled – or blessed? – with more than its share of extracurricular drama. At the EMMYS, behold SHERYL LEE RALPH, who wins for "Abbott Elementary" and schools the crowd on the power of dreams and self-belief. "This is what believing looks like," she says. You know what else believing looks like? Rachel Berry from "Glee" – aka LEA MICHELE – at last getting to play Fanny Brice in "Funny Girl" on Broadway. In sports, with four rueful words that resonate with working moms everywhere, SERENA WILLIAMS says she's stepping aside from tennis, because: "Something's got to give."

OCTOBER

The second HARVEY WEINSTEIN trial opens in Los Angeles. ADIDAS drops YE, part of a cascade of companies that will sever ties with the rapper over his antisemitic and other troubling comments. The MUSK era begins at TWITTER as the world's richest man carries a sink into the office, to "let that sink in." HEIDI KLUM's Halloween costume is a slimy, glistening rain worm. But before the month worms away from us, let's cede it to SWIFT for dropping her new album, "Midnights" (Spotify's most-streamed album in a single day), then adding seven bonus tracks, then becoming the first artist to occupy all top 10 slots on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Let THAT sink in! P.S. Celebrity divorce watch: BRADY and wife GISELE BUNDCHEN split.

NOVEMBER

Did we say LAST month was Taylor Swift month? Well now, millions of eager fans crowd a presale for her much-awaited Eras Tour, resulting in crashes and endless waits. Ticketmaster cancels the general sale, citing insufficient stock. Multiple state attorneys general announce investigations. Takeaway: People want Taylor Swift tickets. At the multiplex, they also want their Wakanda. "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" meets the double challenge of following up one of the biggest blockbusters in history and losing its biggest star.

DECEMBER

Love 'em or hate 'em, here come HARRY and MEGHAN again, with a Netflix "documentary" being watched very, very closely by royalty across the pond. Cameron's "AVATAR" sequel finally appears, 13 years after the original broke records. Will viewers flock to Pandora once again? And bringing the year full circle, SMITH emerges to promote his new film, "EMANCIPATION," and hoping people will forget about ... what was it? ... at least enough to check out the movie.

In this year of comebacks, will Smith's be the biggest?

Check back with us in 2023.

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

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.

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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.

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"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.

Review: 'The Whale' is a hard but astounding film to watch

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

The center of gravity of "The Whale" is obviously the 600-pound man at its center. Look closely, though, and he's the one with a soul as light as a feather.

Charlie is a reclusive, morbidly obese English literature teacher unable and unwilling to stop eating himself to death. As his health woes mount and his life expectancy is put at just a week, Charlie struggles to reacquaint himself with his estranged daughter. We meet him on Monday and the film goes day by day to Friday.

Charlie is a gentle giant, not raging at his fast approaching demise. He's an optimist and a fierce believer in truth even though there is nothing in his world reinforcing either. "The Whale" is not always pleasant to watch but the payoff and performances make it an astounding film.

Stationary and wheezing on his couch, Charlie is repeatedly visited by a constellation of people — a friendly nurse, his teenage daughter and a young missionary from an apocalyptic church. They all need something from this well-meaning but broken man — spiritual, medical or familial. They are all broken, too.

The movie, based and adapted from the off-Broadway play of the same name by Samuel D. Hunter, is directed by Darren Aronofsky, who helmed such dark tales as "Requiem for a Dream" and "Black Swan." Hunter's depiction of the mortification of the flesh perfectly meets a director enamored by the grotesque.

Brendan Fraser has earned lots of Oscar buzz for playing Charlie, allowing his signature puppy dog face to remain despite a massive body suit and swelling prosthetics. And why not? It is one of the most moving performances in years, full of humanity and a redemptive triumph for an actor who hid his talent in quickly forgotten films like "Blast from the Past," "Hair Brained" and "Airheads."

The whole cast is perfect, from Sadie Sink as Charlie's spiky daughter, Hong Chau as his foul-mouthed nursing angel, Ty Simpkins as the missionary with a hidden past and Samantha Morton as his ex-wife with simmering anger and yet still love. There are steady references to Herman Melville's "Moby Dick," which gives the film the title and its doomed vibe.

Charlie has ballooned ever since the death of his same-sex partner, who apparently willed himself to death by wasting away in starvation after their relationship was condemned by his church-leading father. Charlie has apparently decided to die the opposite way.

He is sadly apologetic to his nurse — "I'm sorry," he says continually — and shuts the video camera on his laptop during his online classes. Even the pizza delivery man doesn't know what he looks like. "Who would want me to be part of their life?" he asks.

There has been fear that the film might be fatphobic and it's true that cinematographer Matthew Libatique often leans into unflattering ways to show Charlie, soaping in a shower, straining to stand up or touch the floor, covered in sweat and shoving pizza or fried chicken into his mouth. Maybe some of that could have been touched on instead of lingered on.

But body weight is not what the writer and director want to focus on here. It's more the weight of guilt and love and faith. "I just want to know I did one good thing in my life!" Charlie shouts. One feels that the underlying issue in "The Whale" could have been obesity as easily as cancer or alcoholism or a blood disorder. Hunter is exploring salvation, redemption, determinism and family.

The play has been sharpened for the screen but there's no escaping the fact that it is rooted inside

Charlie's Idaho apartment, which he shuffles about in on a walker or later a wheelchair. This doesn't make for sweeping cinema. Sometimes the apartment feels confining like a ship, adding to the Melville theme.

Some of the filmic attempts are forced, like the symbolically heavy bird that Charlie feeds outside his window, the three times actors rush to leave the apartment only to stop and turn back, and the heavy rain that builds as the film's climax nears. But this is a film that stays with you and changes you. It is heavy, indeed.

"The Whale," a A24 release that is in movie theaters on Friday, is rated R for "language, some drug use and sexual content." Running time: 117 minutes. Four stars out of four.

EU court: Google must delete inaccurate search info if asked

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Google has to delete search results about people in Europe if they can prove that the information is clearly wrong, the European Union's top court said Thursday.

The European Court of Justice ruled that search engines must "dereference information" if the person making the request can demonstrate that the material is "manifestly inaccurate."

People in Europe have the right to ask Google and other search engines to delete links to outdated or embarrassing information about themselves, even if it is true, under a principle known as "right to be forgotten."

Strict data protection rules in the 27-nation bloc give people the right to control what appears when their name is searched online, but the regulations frequently pit data privacy concerns against the public's right to know.

Google said it welcomed the decision.

"Since 2014, we've worked hard to implement the right to be forgotten in Europe, and to strike a sensible balance between people's rights of access to information and privacy," the company said in a statement.

The case stems from a complaint filed in Germany's highest court by two managers at a group of investment companies who asked Google to remove search results based on their names that linked to articles criticizing the group's investment model.

They said the articles made false claims. Neither the managers nor the company were identified.

The pair also asked Google to remove thumbnail photos of them that came up in image searches without any context.

Google refused because it didn't know whether the articles were accurate or not, according to a press summary of the ruling.

The court disagreed, saying that if someone submits relevant and sufficient evidence proving the "manifest inaccuracy" of the information, the search engine must grant the request.

The judges said the right to freedom of expression and information can't be taken into account if "at the very least, a part — which is not of minor importance — of the information" turns out to be wrong.

To avoid making it too hard to get false results removed, the ruling said a court decision isn't needed and that people can "provide only evidence that can reasonably be required."

Google said the links and thumbnails in question in this particular case aren't available through web and image search anymore. "The content at issue has been offline for a long time," it said.

Search engines wouldn't have to investigate the facts of each case to determine whether content is accurate, the court said, because it could amount to extra work that companies would be able get around by proactively removing results.

"This will hopefully push Google and similar Big Tech firms to invest in a sufficiently trained and well-employed workforce capable of handling such requests, instead of outsourcing crucial content curation work to underpaid workers or an unaccountable algorithm," said Jan Penfrat, senior policy advisor at digital rights group EDRi.

In a previous ruling, the court sided with Google in deciding that the "right to be forgotten" doesn't apply outside the 27-nation EU. France's privacy regulator had wanted the rule applied to all of Google's search

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engines, even those outside Europe.

Google has deleted 5.25 million weblinks since it started handling “right to be forgotten” requests in 2014, or nearly half of all requests processed, according to the company’s latest transparency report.

When Google receives a takedown request, it doesn’t remove the links from all web searches, just when a person’s name is typed in. It will still show up when other search terms are used.

PHOTOS: The highs and lows of entertainment’s 2022 comeback

By The Associated Press undefined

After keeping the world at arm’s length for roughly two years, the entertainment world could finally get more personal again in 2022.

Fans unfettered from pandemic restrictions flocked to film festivals and concerts to get glimpses of their favorite stars, whether Timothée Chalamet in Italy, Harry Styles in Toronto or Paul McCartney and Kendrick Lamar returning to the stage in triumphant form at the Glastonbury Festival.

Months before her tour broke Ticketmaster, Taylor Swift donned a cap and gown and greeted New York University graduates at Yankee Stadium, receiving a hero’s welcome.

Movies roared back to life: Tom Cruise provided a huge jolt with “Top Gun: Maverick,” complete with a high-flying promotional tour that spanned the globe and got even reluctant moviegoers back in theaters. Jeff Goldblum returned too, this time to the “Jurassic World” franchise that confirmed that yes, movies would find a way. That path often meant a mix of theaters and streaming, as Daniel Radcliffe and “Weird Al” Yankovic showed with their good-natured biopic of the comedian-musician.

For all the highlights, there were plenty of darker moments:

Will Smith upended the Oscars by slapping Chris Rock on live television, yielding one of the year’s most indelible images.

Johnny Depp and Amber Heard’s defamation trial provided an unsightly window into their marriage and many ugly moments as rapt television audiences watched.

Jimmy Kimmel, pretending to be unconscious on the Emmys stage, overshadowed a win by beloved “Abbott Elementary” creator and star Quinta Brunson.

But there was plenty else about which to smile, like Steven Spielberg did while walking the Oscars carpet as Rita Moreno and Ariana DeBose – actors linked in Oscars glory for their roles as Anita in wildly differently versions of “West Side Story” – shared a sweet moment on the carpet.

On fashion runways and starry premieres, elegant, vibrant and sometimes whimsical fashion was on display – patches of light after a long stretch of uncertainty and gloom.

Messi resumes World Cup quest as Argentina plays Netherlands

By STEVE DOUGLAS AP Sports Writer

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — Lionel Messi up against Virgil van Dijk. The youngest coach at the World Cup taking on the oldest. South America versus Europe. A back catalog of famous meetings.

The quarterfinal match between Argentina and the Netherlands on Friday has all the ingredients of a classic.

And the possibility of it being Messi’s final game on soccer’s biggest stage just adds to the anticipation.

The seven-time world player of the year is three wins away from achieving his ultimate dream but he has two people, in particular, blocking his path.

First, the not inconsiderable frame of Van Dijk, who has been one of the world’s best defenders over the past five years. If there’s anyone able to stop Messi on one of his trademark dribbles, it is the graceful Liverpool center back who combines pace with a great reading of the game.

And then there’s Louis van Gaal, the wily tactician who is 71, has recently undergone successful treatment for prostate cancer, and is now plotting to win the World Cup in perhaps the final job of his 26-year coaching career.

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Van Gaal, who has long been one of the most charismatic characters in soccer, is approaching this task with a lot of fun — even on the eve of one of the biggest matches of his career.

On Thursday, he was told that Angel Di Maria, who plays for Argentina, thinks he is the worst coach he has ever played under following their time together at Manchester United in 2014-15.

Van Gaal said it was a pity Di Maria felt this way — “he is one of the few players to have said that,” he remarked, “as usually it is the other way round” — and added he once had a falling-out with Netherlands captain Memphis Depay, who was sitting next to him.

“Now we kiss each other,” Van Gaal said, leaning toward Depay with his arms out.

Van Gaal was also asked how he was planning to stop Messi — a question for which many coaches down the years have failed to come up with an answer.

“It’d be pretty stupid to reveal your own tactics,” he said, smiling. “But it’s not that difficult to come up with any answer. You could have come up with an answer yourself. You may want to block and close the passing lines. Am I right, Memphis?”

As for his Argentina counterpart, the 44-year-old Lionel Scaloni is a comparative novice after taking charge of his country in 2018 for his first senior coaching role. Still, he has already led Argentina to the Copa America title last year — the country’s first major trophy since 1993 — and has managed to steady his team after a shocking loss to Saudi Arabia in its opening group game.

While Van Gaal was predicting a tight match that will be settled by a “decisive moment,” Scaloni said it will be a “beautiful game because we are talking about two national teams willing to attack but who can also defend.”

It’s set to be a clash of styles between two of soccer’s historic powerhouses, with Argentina — a two-time champion — preferring to play a possession game and the Dutch — three times a beaten finalist — now typically playing on the counterattack under Van Gaal.

They have met in some high-profile World Cup games, none bigger than the 1978 final won by Argentina on home soil. There was also a last-16 match in 1998, won by the Netherlands thanks to a wonderful 90th-minute goal by Dennis Bergkamp, and then a penalty-shootout win by Argentina in the semifinals in 2014.

Messi played in that game and was kept relatively quiet by a team also coached by Van Gaal. Eight years later, Messi is still Argentina’s star player and put in his best performance in this World Cup in the 2-1 win over Australia in the round of 16.

“The tournament is starting tomorrow for us, for real,” Van Gaal said. “Although I don’t want to downplay the importance of the other countries we have beaten, Argentina and then potentially Brazil in the next round are different countries than those we played up to now.”

Scaloni was pressed on the fitness of midfielder Rodrigo De Paul, who might be a doubt according to some reports in the Argentine media, but gave little away.

‘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 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

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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 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

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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.

Jewish Americans confront antisemitism with resolve, worry

By DAVID CRARY, HOLLY MEYER and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Jewish Americans are closely following the recent upsurge in antisemitic rhetoric and actions with a mix of anxiety and resolve — along with a yearning that a broader swath of Americans, including leaders across the political spectrum, speak out against anti-Jewish hatred.

New Yorker Rizy Horowitz, who runs a program in Brooklyn providing meals and activities for Holocaust survivors, says the widespread vitriol prompts her to ask: "When can I pack up my suitcase and run away?"

"It's a very frightening moment. There is no other word," said Horowitz. "We're all frightened because we've seen the past and we don't want to relive it."

As for those spewing the hate, she says: "Have I done something? No. It's just I'm a Jew."

Rabbi Seth Adelson of Congregation Beth Shalom in Pittsburgh, located near the Tree of Life synagogue where 11 worshippers were killed in 2018 in the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history, said anxiety has intensified as anti-Jewish vitriol abounds on social media, embraced by some widely followed celebrities.

The rapper Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, expressed love for Adolf Hitler in an interview. Former President Donald Trump hosted Ye and a Holocaust-denying white supremacist at Mar-a-Lago. Basketball star Kyrie Irving was suspended after posting a link to an antisemitic film

"The antisemitic cat is out of the bag," said Adelson. "I don't think it's reached a place where we feel it's time to go hide in the basement. But it certainly has increased everybody's anxiety."

"We feel it whenever we go in and out of buildings, because now we have security in a way that we didn't before," he said. "There are armed security guards at most, if not all, Jewish buildings and metal detectors and all of those things."

"People who hate Jews want us to cower in fear," he added. "What I hope for is that Jewish people will understand that the way to respond to antisemitism is to be loudly and proudly Jewish, to be proud of

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our traditions.”

A prominent Los Angeles rabbi, David Wolpe, has wrestled with his response to the antisemitism upsurge.

“When I began my career, I thought antisemitism was an issue in my father’s generation — it won’t be in mine,” he said. “I was sadly and unforgivingly wrong.”

He strives to put the recent events in perspective.

“We are still — in America — as safe and free as Jews have been in all of human history,” he said. “It’s so easy to be alarmist, ... to lose perspective, to scare our kids. I don’t want to do that.”

Asked what makes this moment different, Wolpe was succinct.

“It’s the volume, the persistence, the permissibility.”

The expanding use of social media by antisemites is a major concern.

“This hateful rhetoric is being promoted by people who unfortunately influence hundreds of thousands of people,” said Pat Halper, a community activist in Nashville, Tennessee. “We never know if one of those followers, or many of them, will take the next hateful or violent step.”

Yet Halper’s outlook is resolute.

“We’ve been in bad places before and found our way,” she said. “I have to believe we’ll find our way through this too.”

Texas author Anna Salton Eisen, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, has been sharing her late parents’ stories for years.

“When I started speaking in schools more than 20 years ago, the Holocaust was a history lesson. Now it has become a lesson in current events,” she said. “Students who used to ask me questions about Hitler now want me to address the statements by Kanye that put Hitler in a positive light.”

Eisen, author of two Holocaust memoirs, has undergone active shooter training due to worries over potential threats to synagogues and Holocaust museums she frequently speaks at. Recently she’s received antisemitic threats on social media.

Eisen hopes Christian churches show solidarity by inviting Jews into their spaces for Hanukkah. She’ll be at the White House for its Hanukkah party, which she says “feels like an act of defiance more than just a social event.”

“It’s my way of saying, ‘Here I am, a Jew and free to worship God in my chosen faith and I will not live in fear nor be defeated by those who hate me.’”

In Fort Myers, Florida, Rabbi Nicole Luna of Temple Beth El said antisemitism discussions occur frequently — in the theology class she teaches and in event planning where extra security measures are considered.

“I tell my congregants the people who hate ... have no problem putting it out in the open, so we want to put our Jewish joy and our Jewish pride out in the open,” she said.

Amid the recent surge of antisemitism, there have been expressions of outrage — and vows to combat hate — from an array of prominent politicians, including President Joe Biden, as well as leaders of major Jewish organizations. Doug Emhoff, the husband of Vice President Kamala Harris, hosted a White House discussion with Jewish leaders on Wednesday.

However, several Jewish Americans interviewed by The Associated Press said strong statements against antisemitism were needed from a broader range of civic and political leaders.

“It’s not enough to hope or wish it away,” said Elisia Cohen, director of the University of Minnesota’s Hubbard School of Journalism & Mass Communication. “It’s a time for leaders to form coalitions across communities in a very strong movement against hate.”

Diane Brown, a retired pharmacist who moved from Massachusetts to Minnesota’s Twin Cities a few months ago, is struck by how Jewish communities 1,100 miles apart are troubled by similar anxieties.

“We can’t go to temple without being screened — there are police, plainclothes security,” she said.

She’s appalled at how antisemites use social media “to post stuff online that they’d never say to anyone’s face.”

Some Jewish college students have reported increasing on-campus antisemitism. At Brandeis University in suburban Boston, which has a substantial Jewish enrollment, rabbi and chaplain Seth Winberg says he feels fortunate to be in a setting where Jewish identity can be celebrated.

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"My students can learn to respond to antisemitism in proactive ways: building relationships, learning how to listen to others, and when necessary, taking action," he said via email.

Rachel Timoner, senior rabbi at Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, sees the surge of hateful rhetoric as a test for America — "a contest between two sets of ideas."

"What white nationalists want is to spread that Hitler was right and Jews are a threat — that's gaining traction in certain quarters of our society," she said. "Who is going to speak up and say that is unacceptable?"

"If people are silent, the threat and the danger will only grow," she added.

"Everyone in every neighborhood has a role. That's the contest we're in — every voice matters."

Today in History: December 9, Charles and Diana's separation

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 9, the 343rd day of 2022. There are 22 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 9, 2014, U.S. Senate investigators concluded the United States had brutalized scores of terror suspects with interrogation tactics that turned secret CIA prisons into chambers of suffering and did nothing to make Americans safer after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

On this date:

In 1854, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's famous poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," was published in England.

In 1911, an explosion inside the Cross Mountain coal mine near Briceville, Tennessee, killed 84 workers. (Five were rescued.)

In 1917, British forces captured Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks.

In 1965, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," the first animated TV special featuring characters from the "Peanuts" comic strip by Charles M. Schulz, premiered on CBS.

In 1987, the first Palestinian intefadeh, or uprising, began as riots broke out in Gaza and spread to the West Bank, triggering a strong Israeli response.

In 1990, Solidarity founder Lech Walesa (lek vah-WEN'-sah) won Poland's presidential runoff by a landslide.

In 1992, Britain's Prince Charles and Princess Diana announced their separation. (The couple's divorce became final in August 1996.)

In 2000, the U-S Supreme Court ordered a temporary halt in the Florida vote count on which Al Gore pinned his best hopes of winning the White House.

In 2006, a fire broke out at a Moscow drug treatment hospital, killing 46 women trapped by barred windows and a locked gate.

In 2011, the European Union said 26 of its 27 member countries were open to joining a new treaty tying their finances together to solve the euro crisis; Britain remained opposed.

In 2013, scientists revealed that NASA's Curiosity rover had uncovered signs of an ancient freshwater lake on Mars.

In 2020, commercial flights with Boeing 737 Max jetliners resumed for the first time since they were grounded worldwide nearly two years earlier following two deadly accidents; Brazil's Gol Airlines became the first in the world to return the planes to its active fleet.

Ten years ago: U.S. special forces rescued an American doctor captured by the Taliban in Afghanistan; a Navy SEAL, Petty Officer 1st Class Nicolas D. Checque, was killed during the rescue of Dr. Dilip Joseph. Same-sex couples in Washington state began exchanging vows just after midnight under a new state law allowing gay marriage. Mexican-American singer Jenni Rivera, 43, and six others were killed in a plane crash in northern Mexico.

Five years ago: After more than three years of combat operations, Iraq announced that the fight against the Islamic State group was over, and that Iraq's security forces had driven the extremists from all of the

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territory they once held. Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield became the sixth Sooner to win college football's Heisman Trophy.

One year ago: A jury in Chicago convicted former "Empire" actor Jussie Smollett on charges he staged an anti-gay, racist attack on himself and then lied to Chicago police about it. (Smollett was sentenced to 150 days in jail; he was allowed to go free after six days while he appealed the conviction.) A federal appeals court ruled against an effort by former President Donald Trump to shield documents from the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. Starbucks workers at a store in Buffalo, New York, voted to unionize, a first for the 50-year-old coffee retailer in the U.S. A federal jury in Arkansas convicted former reality TV star Josh Duggar of downloading and possessing child pornography. (Duggar would be sentenced to more than 12 years in prison.) Al Unser, one of only four drivers to win the Indianapolis 500 four times, died following years of health issues; he was 82. Provocative Italian filmmaker Lina Wertmüller died in Rome at 93.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Dame Judi Dench is 88. Actor Beau Bridges is 81. Football Hall of Famer Dick Butkus is 80. Actor Michael Nouri is 77. Former Sen. Thomas Daschle, D-S.D., is 75. World Golf Hall of Famer Tom Kite is 73. Singer Joan Armatrading is 72. Actor Michael Dorn is 70. Actor John Malkovich is 69. Country singer Sylvia is 66. Singer Donny Osmond is 65. Rock musician Nick Seymour (Crowded House) is 64. Comedian Mario Cantone is 63. Actor David Anthony Higgins is 61. Actor Joe Lando is 61. Actor Felicity Huffman is 60. Empress Masako of Japan is 59. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., is 56. Rock singer-musician Thomas Flowers (Oleander) is 55. Rock musician Brian Bell (Weezer) is 54. Rock singer-musician Jakob Dylan (Wallflowers) is 53. TV personality-businessperson Lori Greiner (TV: "Shark Tank") is 53. Actor Allison Smith is 53. Songwriter and former "American Idol" judge Kara DioGuardi (dee-oh-GWAHR'-dee) is 52. Country singer David Kersh is 52. Actor Reiko (RAY'-koh) Aylesworth is 50. Rock musician Tre Cool (Green Day) is 50. Rapper Canibus is 48. Actor Kevin Daniels is 46. Actor-writer-director Mark Duplass is 46. Rock singer Imogen Heap is 45. Actor Jesse Metcalfe is 44. Actor Simon Helberg is 42. Actor Jolene Purdy is 39. Actor Joshua Sasse is 35. Actor Ashleigh Brewer is 32. Olympic gold and silver medal gymnast McKayla Maroney is 27. Olympic silver medal gymnast MyKayla Skinner is 26.