

# Groton Daily Independent

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“Christmas is most truly Christmas when we celebrate it by giving the light of love to those who need it most.”

-RUTH CARTER STAPLETON



## Friday, Dec. 23

Senior Menu: Baked chicken, rice pilaf, cauliflower and pea salad, banana, whole wheat bread.

No School, Christmas Vacation begins

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

## Saturday, Dec. 24

St. John's Christmas Eve service, 5 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran Christmas Eve service with communion, 7 p.m.

Groton United Methodist service, 5 p.m.

Conde United Methodist service, 7 p.m.

Groton CM&A Candlelight service, 5 p.m.

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

## Groton Community Calendar

**NO SCHOOL**

### Thursday, Dec. 22

Senior Menu: Beef stroganoff with noodles, lettuce salad with dressing, peaches, whole wheat bread.

**Postponed to Jan. 13, 2:30 p.m.:** Elementary Christmas Concert, 1 p.m.

**Postponed:** Boys Basketball at Roncalli, 6 p.m.

**Postponed:** Wrestling Tri-angular at Redfield with Webster and Groton, 6 p.m.

**Groton Daily Independent**

**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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## **2023 DOG LICENSES due by Dec. 30, 2022**

**Fines start January 1, 2023**

Spayed/Neutered dogs are \$5 per dog, otherwise \$10 per dog

Proof of rabies shot information is **REQUIRED!!**

Email proof to [city.kellie@nvc.net](mailto:city.kellie@nvc.net),

fax to (605) 397-4498 or bring a copy to City Hall!!

Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have a dog(s) that were previously licensed!

**Questions call (605) 397-8422**

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## PUT WINTER IN ITS PLACE



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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
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- 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

Tak 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  
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\* 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  
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## **Governor Noem Closes State Government Offices Statewide for Winter Storm**

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Gov. Kristi Noem ordered all state government executive branch offices statewide to be closed Thursday, Dec. 22, because of the winter storm in South Dakota. With offices already closed on Friday and Monday for Christmas, state offices are planning to be open on Tuesday.

While executive branch offices in the rest of the state will be closed, employees will be working remotely.

Blizzard and near blizzard conditions will impact the entire state beginning today and through the day Thursday.

Citizens should be prepared to stay home Thursday if possible. Many state highways already have no travel advised, and numerous roads are physically blocked. If they get stranded or have vehicle maintenance issues, the situation may become life-threatening. If they must travel, they should check the [sd511.org](http://sd511.org) or the SD511 mobile app.



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**MIKE  
ROUNDS**  
U.S. SENATOR *for* SOUTH DAKOTA

**WEEKLY ROUND[S] UP  
DECEMBER 12-18, 2022**

**CONTACT: DEZMOND WARD**  
DEZMOND\_WARD@ROUNDS.SENATE.GOV

Well... at least a White Christmas has been secured. As families are wrapping up presents, we are wrapping up legislation in the Senate. We've had reasons for optimism this past week, including the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which passed in the Senate. We've worked hard on the NDAA all year, which authorizes funding for our national defense and includes many victories for South Dakota. Additionally, my legislation, the RESPECT Act, also passed in the House of Representatives. Both bills will now head to the president's desk for signature. More on both of these bills below in the Weekly Round[s] Up.

Meetings this past week: I met with Julie Smith, the United States Ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); Brandon Judd, President of the National Border Patrol Council; Chris Ruddy, CEO of Newsmax; Hakainde Hichilema, President of the Republic of Zambia; and Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia. I also attended a roundtable with sub-Saharan African leaders, Department of State officials and several members of Congress.

We also had our Senate Bible Study (Our verse of the week was Hebrews 4:12). This week at Senate Prayer Breakfast, instead of a traditional speaker, we gathered together and sang Christmas carols. We do this annually during the holiday season with one of my colleagues playing the piano (this year it was Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan). We also had Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia playing the harmonica!

Topics discussed: The NDAA, the B-21 Raider bomber coming to Ellsworth Air Force Base, the RESPECT Act and U.S.-African relations.

Votes taken: 13 – the most noteworthy was legislation that extended government funding for an additional week, which I did not support. Each year, Congress is expected to pass appropriations bills that fund government for the fiscal year beginning on October 1. This year, Congress did not do this, but instead passed a continuing resolution (CR) which kept government funding at its existing levels until December 16. I voted against this measure in September.

Even with an additional two months to work on appropriations bills, Congress has failed again to get its work done. CRs are no way to run a country. They're wasteful, ineffective, destabilize government programs and could end up hurting South Dakota families. They also jeopardize our military readiness. Military leaders continue to warn that CRs have a detrimental impact on our ability to train, equip and maintain the force. This is in part because out of date contracts remain enforced and new contracts are not in effect. This should concern us all.

If we're ever going to stop this reckless practice of not getting our work done on time, we need to send a strong message that enough is enough. The American people expect us to do our jobs, not continue to kick the can down the road.

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**NDAA:** The National Defense Authorization Act is something that deserves its own category this week. The Senate passed this legislation this past week 83-11. The Senate Armed Services committee, which I have served on since coming to the Senate, has worked all year to craft this legislation. I authored 47 pieces of legislation that were included in the NDAA. Many of these were provisions to enhance our offensive and defensive cyber capabilities, and could potentially benefit Dakota State University in Madison. Additionally, the NDAA included over \$335 million in military construction funding for projects at Ellsworth Air Force Base to help support the B-21 Raider stealth bomber bed down. I'm pleased to have the NDAA across the finish line in the Senate and heading to the president's desk to be signed into law. You can read more on the NDAA [here](#).

**Legislation passed:** The RESPECT Act. This is my bill to repeal discriminatory federal laws targeting Native Americans passed the House of Representatives this past week.

The RESPECT Act repeals 11 outdated federal laws, including laws that stripped Native American children from their families for the purpose of placing them in "Indian reform schools," such as the now-infamous Carlisle Indian Industrial School. It is long overdue to remove these immoral federal laws from our books. I've worked on this legislation for seven years, and I am pleased this bipartisan, commonsense legislation is heading to the president's desk to be signed into law. You can read more on the RESPECT Act [here](#).

**Hearings:** We had a Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee hearing on cryptocurrency and the fall of FTX. Kevin O'Leary from Shark Tank testified before our committee on this issue.

**Classified briefings:** I had a classified briefing with General Saltzman of the Space Force and a classified briefing with Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks. Additionally, I served as ranking member for a classified briefing on Russian activity in Africa for the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health Policy.

**Snow received:** Like most people in the state, my state offices were snowed in and talking to South Dakotans remotely this past week. My Sioux Falls office received about six inches of snow, and my Aberdeen office received nearly 11. Pierre received over 14 inches, while the Rapid City office received nearly eight. I know my staff is looking forward to getting back on the road soon!

Steps taken this week: 55,123 steps or 25.09 miles.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Regents creating 'minors on campus policy' in response to drag show controversy

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 21, 2022 11:45 AM

The board governing South Dakota's six public universities is developing a policy about minors on campus in response to complaints about a drag show.

The South Dakota Board of Regents voted Wednesday during a Zoom meeting to have its staff immediately begin creating the policy. The board plans to review the policy during its next scheduled meeting March 29-30 in Aberdeen.

"We want our campuses to be safe and welcoming places for students, staff and visitors of all ages," Board President Pam Roberts said in a written statement.

The new policy, Roberts said, will outline the requirements and protocols for events on campuses involving minors. In the interim, the board office will review all upcoming events involving the presence of minors on campus to confirm adequate protocol and safeguards are met, Roberts announced.

The drag show was 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 also criticized advertising that described the show as "kid friendly." A conservative media outlet recently criticized Republican Gov. Kristi Noem for not doing more to stop the show.

The drag show was sponsored by the student-run Gender & Sexualities Alliance.

During the public comment portion of a prior regents meeting on Dec. 8, numerous speakers criticized the drag show. Some pressed the board to support policy or law changes that would disallow future drag shows on university campuses entirely.

At that time, Board of Regents Executive Director Brian Maher said the board cannot discriminate against student groups "based on the content or viewpoint of their expressive activity." He also said advertising for on-campus events would be required to more clearly state whether events are sponsored by the university or a student group.



**JOSHUA HAIAR**  

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

## COMMENTARY

### **In South Dakota and elsewhere, voters spoke clearly on health care**

**Laura Packard ~ DECEMBER 21, 2022 5:19 PM**

In November, millions of voters in red, blue and purple states voted on the future of our health care directly on the ballot. And U.S. Sen. Warnock ran his re-election campaign and run-off on health care. Health care won decisively.

Voters decided to expand Medicaid in South Dakota, meaning more than 40,000 low-income South Dakotans will finally have the health care they should have had years ago. More than 17 million Americans have gained health coverage as a result of Medicaid expansion, part of the Affordable Care Act that became optional as a result of a 2012 Supreme Court decision. Every time expansion of health care through Medicaid is on the ballot, health care wins.

In Arizona, the voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 209, the Predatory Debt Collection Act, with a whopping 72% approval. This measure will protect Arizonans from predatory debt collection, including families suffering from medical debt.

Voters in states as varied as Michigan, Vermont, California, Kentucky and Montana supported abortion rights. In Michigan, Vermont and California, voters approved ballot measures enshrining abortion rights into their state constitutions. In Kentucky and Montana, voters rejected initiatives to restrict access to reproductive health care.

And in Oregon, Measure 111 passed. Voters there made Oregon the first state in the nation to guarantee affordable health care as a constitutional right, which now the state legislature needs to deliver on.

Health care was on the ballot across the country, and the results are clear: Americans want affordable, accessible health care.

This issue is personal for me, because I've been on the front lines fighting for my health care and for the health care of 135 million Americans with pre-existing conditions like me. I was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer in 2017. The day after my first chemotherapy treatment, Republicans in the U.S. House voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act — the insurance paying for the treatments I needed to survive. But health care voters fought to defend the Affordable Care Act from a Congress and president determined to repeal it. We won.

And in the past couple years, health care voters have finally seen progress from Congress: With the American Rescue Plan making health insurance more affordable than ever, and the Inflation Reduction Act lowering prescription drug costs for seniors and allowing Medicare at long last to negotiate drug prices. Yet already those gains are under attack.

Whether voting to expand health insurance through Medicaid, to protect families from medical debt, to preserve the right to reproductive freedom, or to guarantee health care as a human right, Americans showed up and made their priorities known. Health care is a winning issue, no matter the state or political party of the voter.

Voters in South Dakota and elsewhere also demonstrated that state legislatures are blocking overwhelmingly popular legislation. It's time for representatives in the remaining eleven hold-out states to do their jobs and represent the interests of their constituents by finally expanding Medicaid so low-income Americans can get health care too.

It's also time for Congress to get on board and work to expand lower drug prices to all, instead of threatening to take away what gains on affordable prescription drugs we made through the Inflation Reduction Act.

And once again, we are reminded that the majority of Americans support affordable, legal and accessible abortion access. Abortion is health care. We must continue to advocate for reproductive freedom and show our elected officials that their restrictions on our bodies are unwarranted and unwelcome.

Our fight for affordable, accessible health care continues. There's so much more to do, from tackling prescription drug costs for the rest of us not on Medicare, to ensuring lower health insurance costs to ensure everyone can get access to care.

Voters want health care. Listen up, elected officials.

This commentary was first published at Common Dreams.

**Laura Packard is a Denver-based health care advocate and founder of Health Care Voices, a non-profit grassroots organization for adults with serious medical conditions, senior adviser to Be a Hero and co-chair of Health Care Voter.**



## Zelenskyy pledges a fight for 'common victory' against Russian tyranny in visit to U.S.

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - DECEMBER 21, 2022 7:00 PM

WASHINGTON — President Volodymyr Zelenskyy evoked images of the “great American soldiers” of World War II as he appealed to Congress Wednesday night to continue U.S. assistance in defending Ukraine from deadly Russian shelling and targeting of civilian infrastructure.

The historic and surprise visit to the United States by the wartime Ukrainian leader marked his first known trip outside Ukraine’s borders since Russia launched a full-scale invasion in February.

“I know that everything depends on us, on Ukrainian armed forces. Yet so much depends on the world. So much in the world depends on you,” he told lawmakers.

At one point Zelenskyy referred to a Dec. 8, 1941 speech by President Franklin D. Roosevelt when Roosevelt asked Congress to declare a state of war between the United States and Japan and said the American people would “win through to absolute victory.” Zelenskyy said: “The Ukrainian people will win, too, absolutely.”

Zelenskyy’s appearance in front of the joint session of Congress came as Ukrainians marked the 300th day of the conflict and as lawmakers were on the cusp of approving a year-end omnibus spending package that is expected to include another \$45 billion in aid for his country.

Referring to Russian forces as “terrorists” attacking sovereign land, Zelenskyy told Congress that its “bicameral and bipartisan” support “is not charity. It’s an investment in global security.”

As lawmakers race to pass the massive funding bill before a Friday deadline, some House Republicans remain highly critical of sending another round of aid to the war-torn country. “I’m in DC but I won’t be attending the speech of the Ukrainian lobbyist,” tweeted Rep. Thomas Massie, a Kentucky Republican.

Zelenskyy closed his address by presenting to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Kamala Harris a Ukrainian flag signed by frontline soldiers fighting in the eastern city of Bakhmut.

“They asked me to bring this flag to you, to the U.S. Congress, to members of the House of Representatives and to senators whose decisions can save millions of people,” Zelenskyy said. “Let these decisions be taken, let this flag stay with you ladies and gentlemen. This flag is a symbol of our victory in this war. We stand, we fight and we will win because we are united. Ukraine, America and the entire free world.”

Lawmakers stood and applauded numerous times throughout his address. A small group of members unfurled and raised their own Ukrainian flag as Zelenskyy entered the chamber.

Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, of New York, said Zelenskyy “delivered a powerful, sobering, and moving address to Congress as his country fights for the right to exist.”

“I spoke with the President about my family’s ancestry in Chorkaiv, Ukraine and my deep personal connection to his country. I told him that where Winston Churchill stood generations ago, so too does he tonight not just as a president but as an ambassador for freedom itself,” Schumer said in a statement.

### Zelenskyy and Biden

The leader’s one-day trip to Washington began with an afternoon visit to the White House where Zelenskyy joined President Joe Biden for a joint press conference, where their friendly tone was punctuated by humor.

Biden declared that Ukraine would “never stand alone,” and both leaders signaled that the conflict may not have an imminent end.

“We understand in our bones that Ukraine’s fight is part of something much bigger,” Biden said. “The American people know that if we stand by in the face of such blatant attacks on liberty and democracy, and the core principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, the world would surely face worse consequences.”

The visit also coincided with the Pentagon announcement of \$1.85 billion in additional weapons and security assistance, including a coveted Patriot air defense system that the U.S. showed reluctance to hand over in the earlier months of the fight.

When pressed by a reporter on why the U.S. did not move quicker on deploying the sophisticated defense system, Biden emphasized the role of NATO and allied European nations, and replied “we’re looking to do

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more. We provided hundreds of advanced artillery systems from dozens of countries.”

The latest tranche of weapons and artillery assistance — the 28th from Department of Defense inventories since August 2021 — will also include ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or HIMARS, armored vehicles, grenade launchers and small artillery.

U.S. security assistance to Ukraine now stands at \$21.9 billion since the beginning of the Biden administration.

“We fight for our common victory against this tyranny,” Zelenskyy said as he briefly spoke in English. “I really want to win together ... Not want, sorry, I’m sure.”

The Ukrainian leader, dressed in his signature army green often seen during his frequent wartime video addresses, said he wanted to travel to the United States to “forward words of thanks to the people of America, people who do so much for Ukraine.”

## Humanitarian assistance

The administration also announced on Wednesday a \$374 million package from the U.S. Agency for International Development for food and cash assistance as Ukrainians face brutal winter temperatures and in some areas fuel shortages and electricity outages as Russia targets heating and electrical systems as temperatures plunge.

Zelenskyy arrived at the White House just after 2 p.m. Eastern and delivered opening remarks alongside Biden in the Oval Office before a closed-door bilateral meeting.

Prior to the meeting, Zelenskyy presented Biden with a military merit medal from a captain fighting in Bakhmut, a strategic location in Ukraine’s Donetsk region that has seen five months of intense fighting and shelling.

**Ashley Murray covers the nation’s capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.**

## Hundreds of US hospitals sue patients or threaten their credit, a KHN investigation finds

BY: NOAM N. LEVEY - DECEMBER 21, 2022 5:29 PM

Despite growing evidence of the harm caused by medical debt, hundreds of U.S. hospitals maintain policies to aggressively pursue patients for unpaid bills, using tactics such as lawsuits, selling patient accounts to debt buyers, and reporting patients to credit rating agencies, a KHN investigation shows.

The collection practices are commonplace among all types of hospitals in all regions of the country, including public university systems, leading academic institutions, small community hospitals, for-profit chains, and nonprofit Catholic systems.

Individual hospital systems have come under scrutiny in recent years for suing patients. But the KHN analysis shows the practice is widespread, suggesting most of the nation's approximately 5,100 hospitals serving the general public have policies to use legal action or other aggressive tactics against patients.

And although industry officials say they are careful about how they target patients for unpaid bills, few institutions have renounced what federal rules call "extraordinary collection actions," even as medical debt forces millions of Americans to cut back on food and other essentials, drain retirement savings, and make other difficult sacrifices.

At the same time, a majority of hospitals scrutinized by KHN effectively shroud their collection activities, publicly posting incomplete or in many cases no information about what can happen to patients if they can't pay.

These are among the findings of an examination of billing and financial aid at a diverse sample of 528 hospitals across the country. Over the past year, KHN investigated each of these hospitals, reviewing thousands of pages of policies and other documents. The reporting also included thousands of telephone and email inquiries and interviews to obtain and clarify how hospitals handle patients with unpaid bills.

Some hospitals did not respond to multiple requests for information. But KHN was able to gather details about most. From them, a picture emerges of a minefield for patients where a trip to the hospital can not only produce jaw-dropping bills but also expose patients to legal risks that jeopardize their livelihood. Among the findings:

More than two-thirds sue patients or take other legal action against them, such as garnishing wages or placing liens on property;

A similar share of the hospitals report patients with outstanding bills to credit rating agencies, putting patients' credit scores and their ability to rent an apartment, buy a car, or get a job at risk;

A quarter sell patients' debts to debt collectors, who in turn can pursue patients for years for unpaid bills;

About 1 in 5 deny nonemergency care to people with outstanding debt;

Nearly 40% of all hospitals researched make no information available on their websites about their collection activities, although KHN in some cases was able to obtain the information through repeated requests.

"People don't know what's going to happen to them. It can be terrifying," said Tracy Douglas, a consumer attorney at Bet Tzedek Legal Services in Los Angeles. Douglas described one older woman she worked with who was afraid to seek financial assistance from a hospital because she worried the hospital would seize her home if she couldn't pay.

### **'Taken Aback by How Callous They Have Been'**

The impact of these collection practices can be devastating.

Across the U.S. health care system, medical debt is taking a fearsome toll on patients, forcing more than half of adults with health-related debt to make difficult sacrifices, including taking on extra work, changing their living situation, or delaying their education, a KFF poll conducted for this project found.

Basit Balogun was a freshman at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania when a heart attack caused by a previously undetected birth defect landed him in the hospital. Because his insurance had lapsed, Balogun, whose family is from Nigeria, was hit with bills amounting to tens of thousands of dollars.

When he couldn't pay, the hospital reported him to a credit agency, which he discovered only after he'd graduated and was trying to rent an apartment in New York City. "I kept getting rejected and rejected,"

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Balogun recalled. "I was desperate."

Balogun, a prize-winning student, landed a job at banking giant Goldman Sachs and used his signing bonus to begin paying down the debt. Five years later, he's still making payments. Now Balogun said he thinks twice before going to the doctor.

Nick and Elizabeth Woodruff also had their faith shaken by hospital debt collectors. Nick was sued by Our Lady of Lourdes Memorial Hospital in Binghamton, New York, where he'd received care for a dangerous foot infection.

Despite having insurance through Nick's work at a truck dealership, the couple were buried in bills, forcing them to withdraw money from their retirement accounts and borrow from family. When they still couldn't make all the payments, the hospital, a Catholic institution owned by the Ascension chain, took them to court, and in 2018 they were ordered to pay more than \$9,300.

"This hospital boasts Catholic values and states they take pride in their charity work," said Elizabeth, a social worker, "but I am taken aback by how callous they have been."

Ascension spokesperson Nick Ragone told KHN that the chain, America's second-largest Catholic system, "ceased taking legal action against patients for unpaid bills starting in October 2019." But New York court records show that Lourdes continued to file legal actions against patients until at least 2021.

Hospital spokesperson Lisa Donovan subsequently told KHN this was an "administrative oversight." "Lourdes is reviewing matters to ensure that all legal activities have been disposed/dismissed," she said in an email.

## Holes in the Charity Care System

Many hospital officials say they are obligated to collect what patients owe. "We don't want to promote the concept that medical bills just go away, especially for those who are able to pay," said Michael Beyer, who oversees patient accounts at Sanford Health, a South Dakota-based nonprofit with clinics and hospitals across the U.S. and abroad.

Hospital leaders also stress the industry's commitment to helping low-income patients and others who can't pay their bills. "Hospitals are doing a lot," said Melinda Hatton, general counsel at the American Hospital Association. "Is it perfect out there? No. But I think they should get credit for trying pretty hard."

Charity care is offered at most U.S. hospitals. And nonprofit medical systems must provide financial aid as a condition of not paying taxes, a benefit that saves the industry billions of dollars annually.

At many medical centers, however, information about financial assistance is difficult or impossible to find. About 1 in 5 hospitals researched by KHN, including public university systems in five states, don't post aid policies online.

The University of Mississippi Medical Center disclosed its policy only after KHN filed a public records request. Many hospitals prominently place a link on their homepages for patients to pay a bill, but then require people to click through multiple pages to find information about financial aid.

Visitors to the website of Opelousas General Health System in Louisiana who click on the "Patient Resources" tab can learn that the Lil' General Café serves panini and pancakes, but they won't find any information about getting help with medical bills.

Applying for aid can also be extremely complicated, requiring patients to produce exhaustive amounts of personal financial information, KHN found. Standards vary widely, with aid at some hospitals limited to patients with income as low as \$13,590 a year. At other hospitals, people making five or six times that much can get assistance.

About two-thirds of the hospitals researched by KHN require patients to report their assets, sometimes in great detail. Centura-St. Anthony Hospital, a Catholic medical center in suburban Denver, notes in its policy that in reviewing patient assets it may count crowdfunding or social media accounts patients have set up to help pay bills. Other hospitals ask patients to report the make, model, and year of cars they have.

"The system doesn't work," said Jared Walker, founder of Dollar For, a nonprofit that has helped thousands of people across the country apply for financial aid. "Patients can't find the information they need. Half the time, when they do apply for assistance, they never hear back. Basically, hospitals do what they



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want, and there is no accountability.”

## **Sent to Collections or Sued**

In many cases, patients who should qualify for assistance are instead targeted by bill collectors, whether by accident or by design.

“Every week or so we get a call from someone who should have qualified for aid, but they weren’t enrolled,” said Michele Johnson, executive director of the nonprofit Tennessee Justice Center.

A 2019 KHN analysis of hospital tax filings found that nearly half of nonprofit medical systems were billing patients with incomes low enough to qualify for charity care. Earlier this year, Washington state sued hospitals belonging to the nonprofit giant Providence after uncovering that the system trained its collectors to aggressively pursue even patients who should have qualified for aid.

In 2017, the state also successfully sued CHI Franciscan, another Catholic system that authorities found wasn’t properly offering charity care. To settle that case, CHI Franciscan, now part of the mammoth CommonSpirit Health chain, provided more than \$40 million in debt relief and refunds and helped patients repair their credit, according to the state attorney general’s office.

But CommonSpirit hospitals still report patients to credit rating agencies, according to the chain’s published policies.

Credit reporting, a threat that is supposed to induce patients to pay, is the most common collection tactic, KHN’s analysis and other data shows. Fewer patients are actually taken to court.

But more than two-thirds of policies obtained by KHN allow hospitals to sue patients or take other legal actions against them, such as garnishing wages or placing liens on property.

This includes half the hospitals earning top spots on the U.S. News & World Report’s annual scorecard — medical centers such as the Mayo Clinic, Cleveland Clinic, and Massachusetts General Hospital.

Patients at public university medical systems in at least 23 states, including Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Wisconsin, can be sued. In several states, including North Carolina, Ohio, and New York, public university systems refer patients to other state agencies for legal action or withholding tax refunds.

Major nonprofit systems such as Kaiser Permanente, Trinity Health, and Northwell Health will also take legal action against patients, according to their policies or spokespeople. America’s largest for-profit hospital chains — HCA Healthcare and Tenet Healthcare — don’t post collection policies, but don’t sue patients, according to spokespeople. Other investor-owned chains, such as Community Health Systems, will take patients to court.

Hospitals with policies allowing them to sue patients tend to have only slightly higher profits than those that don’t sue, KHN found by comparing financial data that hospitals submit annually to the federal government.

The same is true of hospitals that sell patient accounts, a practice in which medical providers typically package a group of outstanding bills and sell them to a debt-buying company, usually for a small percentage of what is owed. Debt buyers then keep whatever they can collect.

Officials at many hospitals that sue say they rarely take that step. And spokespeople at several medical systems said they have effectively stopped taking patients to court even if their policies still allow it.

But in many cases, hospital policies haven’t changed, leaving patients in legal jeopardy, as was the case at the Ascension hospital in New York that continued to file lawsuits against patients.

## **Barring Aggressive Collections**

A few hospitals have barred all aggressive collections, including two of California’s leading academic medical centers at UCLA and Stanford University. So too have the University of Vermont Medical Center and Ochsner Health, a large New Orleans-based health system.

That can make a difference for patients, data suggests. A recent analysis by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau found that while medical debt is widespread across the Appalachian region, one notable exception is western Pennsylvania.

Residents there have fewer past-due medical bills on their credit reports than the national average. This region is dominated by the Pittsburgh-based UPMC hospital system, which prohibits aggressive collection

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actions, including reporting patients to credit agencies.

In neighboring West Virginia, by contrast, the incidence of medical debt is more than 50% above the national average, the CFPB found. That state's largest hospital system — operated by West Virginia University — not only reports patients to credit agencies but will also sue patients, garnish their wages, and place liens on property.

Elected officials in some states have begun to put limits on hospital bill collecting. In 2021, Maryland barred hospitals from placing liens on patients' homes and protected low-income patients from wage garnishments. California recently restricted when hospitals could sell patient debt or report patients to credit bureaus.

But these states remain the exception. And hospitals that have voluntarily given up aggressive collections are in the minority: Just 19 of the 528 hospitals researched by KHN have publicly posted policies barring "extraordinary collection actions."

Mark Rukavina, who spent decades at the nonprofit Community Catalyst working to expand protections for patients with medical debt, said that is why federal action is needed to rein in hospitals and other medical providers everywhere.

"Nobody should be denied care because they have an outstanding medical bill," he said. "Nobody should have a lien on their home because they got sick."

The researchers who worked on this story were KHN writer Megan Kalata and Dr. Margaret Ferguson, Anna Back, and Amber Cole, who were students at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University.

**Noam N. Levey, Kaiser Health News senior correspondent, joined KHN in January 2021 after 17 years at the Los Angeles Times, the last 12 as the paper's national health care reporter based in Washington, D.C. Noam has reported on health care issues from more than three dozen states and four continents and won numerous honors, including the prestigious NIHCM award for his 2019 series "Inside America's High-Deductible Revolution." He has also been published in Health Affairs, JAMA, and The Milbank Quarterly. Noam started his career at newspapers in Duluth, Minnesota; Montgomery, Alabama; and the United Arab Emirates. Before his stint at the L.A. Times, he was an investigative reporter for the San Jose Mercury News. Noam has a degree in history and Near Eastern studies from Princeton University.**



Groton Community Transit  
Invites you to their

## **Holiday Bake Sale** **Thursday Dec. 22, 2022**

**9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.**

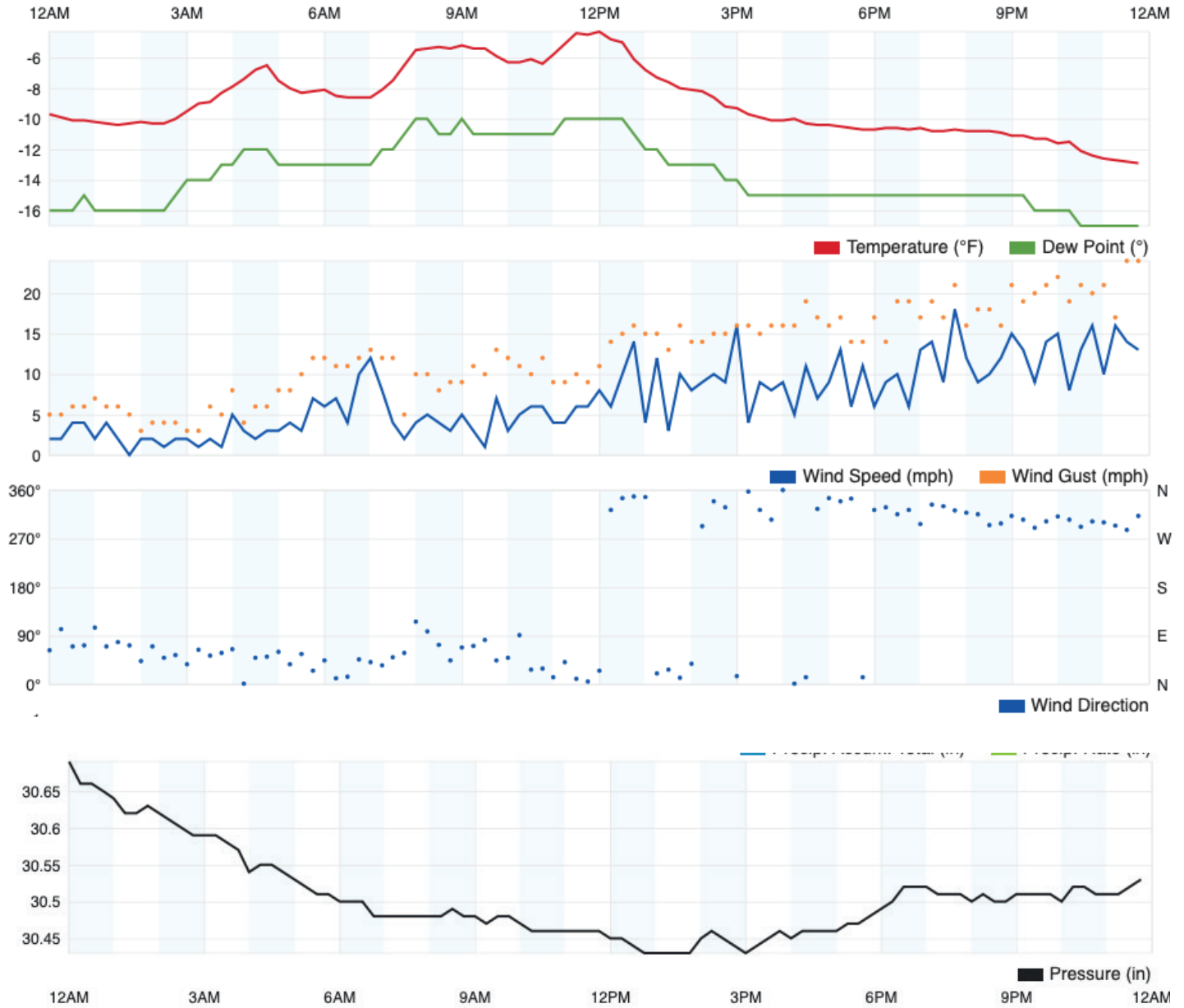
**Coffee, cider and Christmas  
goodies will be served!**

If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact Groton Community Transit office at 605-397-8661. Any and all donations are welcome!! We are looking forward to seeing you!!

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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**Wind Chill Warning**

**Blizzard Warning**

Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Christmas Day
Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery	Areas Blowing Snow and Blustery	Areas Blowing Snow and Blustery	Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery then Mostly Clear	Cold	Partly Cloudy	Slight Chance Snow then Chance Snow
High: -12 °F	Low: -11 °F	High: -8 °F	Low: -22 °F	High: -5 °F	Low: -23 °F	High: 7 °F

**Dangerous Winter Weather Continues** December 22, 2022 4:40 AM

### Key Messages

- **Ground Blizzard conditions** today, persisting into Friday.
- **Strong winds, extreme cold and dangerous wind chills** through Friday.
- **Stranded motorists will face the threat of frostbite, hypothermia and even life threatening exposure with these winds and temperatures!**

### NEW What Has Changed

- Blizzard warnings expanded.

### Next Scheduled Update

- Thursday Afternoon



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

	Maximum Wind Gust Forecast																	
	12/22 Thu					12/23 Fri					12/24 Sat							
	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm
Aberdeen	39	39	39	39	40	40	41	41	41	40	38	31	24	22	18	14	15	16
Britton	35	35	36	37	37	39	40	41	41	41	40	35	30	24	20	15	15	18
Eagle Butte	47	48	49	49	49	47	45	43	38	35	31	23	20	16	13	12	10	10
Eureka	40	43	43	40	40	40	41	41	39	38	36	26	22	18	16	14	13	13
Gettysburg	45	46	46	47	47	46	45	44	40	37	37	28	23	18	15	14	14	13
Kennebec	43	44	44	45	44	43	43	41	39	39	36	25	21	18	17	12	12	12
McIntosh	44	45	45	44	41	39	38	36	36	33	30	21	17	13	10	9	9	9
Milbank	33	35	37	39	40	44	47	47	46	46	46	47	46	39	35	31	24	26
Miller	40	43	44	44	44	44	45	45	43	40	37	30	25	22	21	18	18	14
Mobridge	43	44	45	45	45	43	43	40	36	33	31	20	16	13	10	10	10	10
Murdo	45	46	47	48	46	44	43	40	33	33	30	22	16	14	13	10	12	13
Pierre	40	41	44	45	44	39	36	33	31	31	30	17	15	14	10	8	8	9
Redfield	40	41	43	43	43	43	44	43	41	40	39	32	26	23	21	17	17	15
Sisseton	35	37	39	41	41	44	47	47	47	46	47	46	46	40	35	31	26	26
Watertown	36	38	39	40	40	41	45	45	45	45	46	44	40	33	31	28	24	25
Webster	38	39	41	45	45	46	49	49	47	47	47	45	41	36	30	28	23	22
Wheaton	30	32	35	36	36	39	41	43	43	44	43	41	35	32	29	26	24	24

Ground blizzard conditions are ongoing or will develop through the day. This will make for extremely hazardous travel. With extreme cold, stranded motorists risk frostbite and hypothermia. Do not take these conditions lightly

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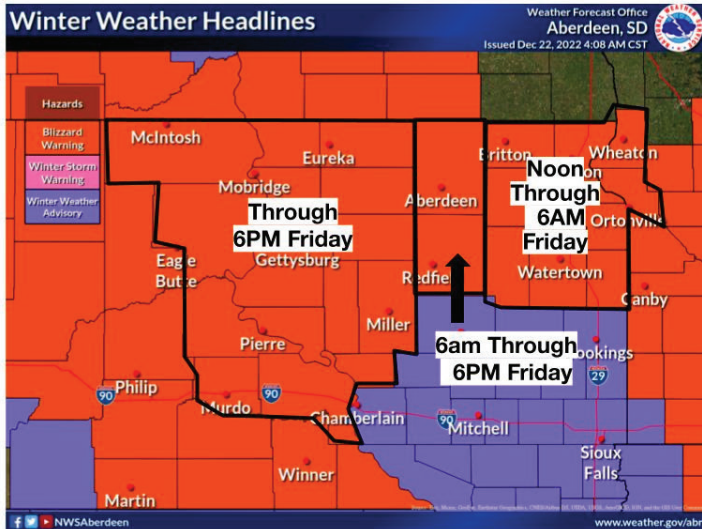


## Current Headlines

December 22, 2022

4:40 AM

Visit [weather.gov/abr](https://weather.gov/abr) and select your location for timing information



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

## Blizzard Warning Wind Chill Warning

**URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE**  
**National Weather Service Aberdeen SD**  
**404 AM CST Thu Dec 22 2022**

Brown-Spink-

Including the cities of Aberdeen and Redfield

...WIND CHILL WARNING REMAINS IN EFFECT UNTIL NOON CST SATURDAY...

...BLIZZARD WARNING IN EFFECT UNTIL 6 PM CST FRIDAY...

\* WHAT...For the Wind Chill Warning, dangerously cold windchills. Wind chills as low as 50 below zero. For the Blizzard Warning, blizzard conditions expected. Winds gusting as high as 45 mph.

\* WHERE...Brown and Spink Counties.

\* WHEN...For the Wind Chill Warning, until noon CST Saturday. For the Blizzard Warning, until 6 PM CST Friday.

\* IMPACTS...Plan on slippery road conditions. Areas of blowing snow could reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute. The dangerously cold wind chills could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes.

\* ADDITIONAL DETAILS...Pre-Holiday travel Thursday through Friday will be impacted. Stranded motorists will face the threat of frostbite, hypothermia and even life threatening exposure.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Avoid outside activities if possible. When outside, make sure you wear appropriate clothing, a hat, and gloves.

Travel should be restricted to emergencies only. If you must travel, have a winter survival kit with you. If you get stranded, stay with your vehicle.

The latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.



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## Minimum Wind Chills, High Temps

December 22, 2022  
4:40 AM

Don't see your city? Check out [weather.gov/forecastpoints](https://weather.gov/forecastpoints)

### Minimum Wind Chill Forecast

	12/22 Thu				12/23 Fri				12/24 Sat			
	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm
Aberdeen	-44	-39	-39	-37	-37	-38	-39	-38	-35	-34	-39	-40
Britton	-41	-38	-38	-37	-38	-38	-39	-38	-36	-34	-39	-40
Eagle Butte	-53	-48	-46	-48	-48	-49	-49	-46	-41	-35	-41	-42
Eureka	-47	-42	-43	-43	-42	-45	-44	-43	-38	-38	-44	-46
Gettysburg	-51	-46	-47	-48	-47	-47	-47	-45	-40	-36	-45	-46
Kennebec	-47	-43	-41	-44	-44	-43	-43	-42	-36	-32	-39	-41
McIntosh	-52	-49	-48	-46	-46	-47	-46	-47	-40	-37	-44	-45
Milbank	-39	-40	-39	-40	-38	-39	-39	-38	-36	-33	-38	-39
Miller	-45	-41	-42	-43	-43	-44	-44	-41	-35	-34	-41	-42
Mobridge	-43	-40	-41	-40	-39	-39	-39	-38	-32	-32	-37	-38
Murdo	-51	-46	-45	-45	-47	-47	-46	-45	-38	-34	-40	-42
Pierre	-42	-39	-39	-39	-38	-37	-37	-37	-32	-27	-34	-35
Redfield	-45	-41	-41	-41	-41	-41	-40	-40	-35	-33	-39	-41
Sisseton	-39	-36	-36	-37	-38	-38	-39	-39	-35	-35	-38	-39
Watertown	-46	-44	-44	-44	-42	-42	-43	-42	-39	-37	-41	-42
Webster	-47	-44	-45	-45	-42	-43	-43	-44	-39	-39	-43	-43
Wheaton	-38	-36	-35	-36	-36	-38	-38	-37	-37	-35	-34	-38

### Daily High Temperature Forecast

	12/22 Thu	12/23 Fri	12/24 Sat	12/25 Sun
Aberdeen	-11	-8	-5	8
Britton	-10	-7	-8	6
Eagle Butte	-13	-8	-1	30
Eureka	-13	-9	-5	15
Gettysburg	-15	-9	-2	21
Kennebec	-12	-6	-1	27
McIntosh	-14	-9	-2	28
Milbank	-12	-5	-3	5
Miller	-12	-6	-3	19
Mobridge	-11	-3	-1	23
Murdo	-14	-7	1	31
Pierre	-11	-5	2	28
Redfield	-12	-6	-6	13
Sisseton	-6	-5	-4	6
Watertown	-15	-8	-6	7
Webster	-14	-9	-8	6
Wheaton	-8	-5	-4	2

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

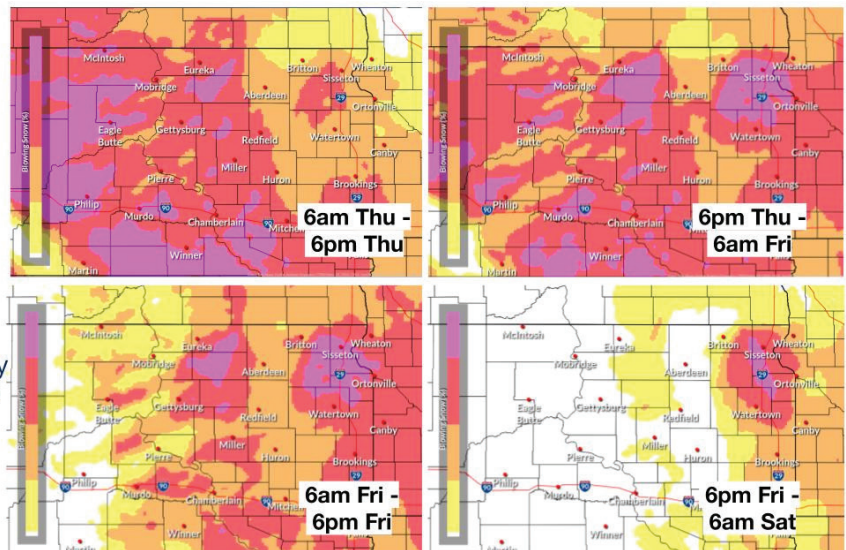


## Blowing Snow Potential

December 22, 2022  
4:40 AM

### Key Messages

- Persistent northwest winds will significantly impact travel through Christmas Eve morning.
- **RED** and **PINK** = Highest Likelihood of **Blizzard Conditions** (visibilities ¼ mile or less). Blowing snow with significant visibility reductions still possible elsewhere.
- Wind and thus blowing snow will slowly diminish from west to east Friday night into Saturday morning



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce

<b>Minor</b> ☁️ Patchy Blowing Snow with reduced visibilities expected	<b>Moderate</b> ☁️☁️ Areas of Blowing Snow with reduced visibilities expected	<b>Significant</b> ☁️☁️☁️ Widespread Blowing Snow and greatly reduced visibilities expected	<b>Blizzard</b> ☁️☁️☁️☁️ Significant Blowing Snow possible, travel may be impossible
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National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD



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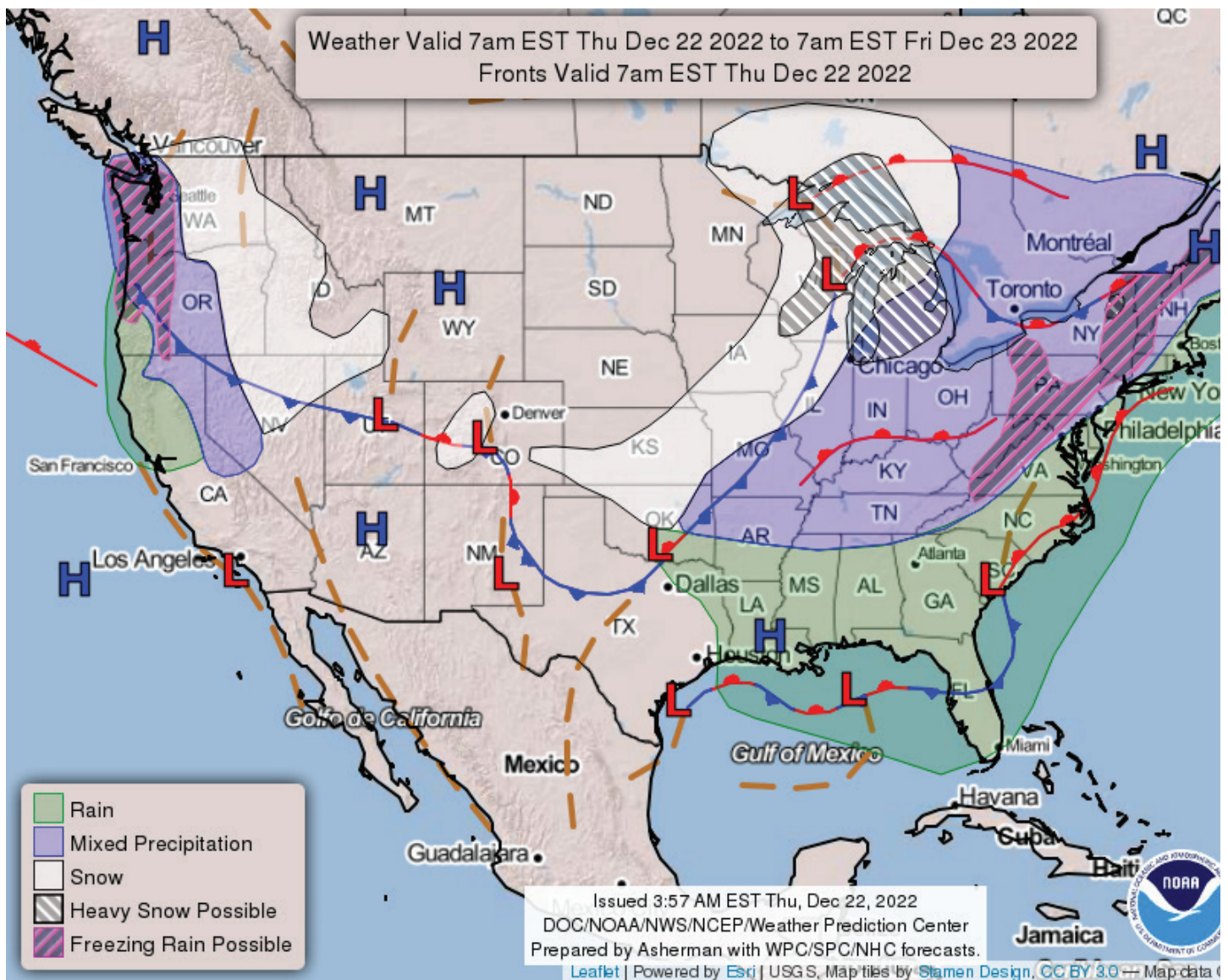
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: -4.3 °F at Noon**  
**Low Temp: -12.9 °F at 11:45 PM**  
**Wind: 24 mph at 11:30 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 50 in 1979  
Record Low: -31 in 1916  
Average High: 27°F  
Average Low: 6°F  
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.40  
Precip to date in Dec.: 1.85  
Average Precip to date: 21.61  
Precip Year to Date: 19.35  
Sunset Tonight: 4:54:11 PM  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:25 AM





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## Today in Weather History

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds, combined with air temperatures below zero, created wind chills from -40 to -65 degrees over west-central Minnesota early in the day on the 22nd. Air temperatures were generally in the -20 to -25 degree range, with afternoon highs around 15 below zero.

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds gusted to 35 miles per hour and caused near-whiteout conditions over a wide area of southwest and west-central Minnesota during the late afternoon on the 21st into the early morning of the 22nd. Several car accidents ensued. A 30-year old man was killed when he lost control of his truck and slid into a ditch in the near-blizzard conditions.

1989: The most significant cold spell of the century for the Deep South occurred from the 22 to the 26. New Orleans experienced 64 consecutive hours at or below 32 degrees Fahrenheit and a total of 81 out of 82 hours below freezing. A total of 15 hours was below 15 degrees with the lowest reading of 11 degrees on the morning of the 23rd. A low temperature of 8 degrees was recorded at Baton Rouge. Snow and sleet paralyzed transportation systems where as much as two to four inches of snow accumulated in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. Snow and ice-covered the ground in New Orleans. The most significant impact was the breaking of water pipes in homes and businesses. Over 100 fires resulted in the New Orleans area within 24 hours due to a loss of water pressure and improperly utilized heating sources. Ice formed over shallow lakes and waterways where commercial fishing took heavy losses. Five weather-related deaths occurred in the service area during this rare Arctic outbreak.

1989: Between December 22 and December 24, 1989, deepening low pressure pulled a frigid arctic air mass into the southeastern United States. This sequence of events produced a historic snowstorm and a rare white Christmas across the region. At Charleston, South Carolina, the storm deposited 8 inches of snow – the greatest snowfall in modern history. At Savannah, Georgia, the storm total accumulation of 3.6 inches tied the greatest snowfall in modern history. 2002: Heavy rains prompted flooding in the mountain city of Teresopolis, located about 90 km north of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. A mudslide was responsible for 9 deaths and 50 injuries.

2004: Tremendous snows occurred in the Ohio Valley. The following cities set new records for their most significant snowstorm ever: Evansville, Indiana 22.3 inches, Dayton, Ohio 16.4 inches, and Paducah, Kentucky 14.2 inches. Other big snowfall totals were 31 inches at Liberty, Indiana, 28 inches at Buena Vista, Indiana, 24 inches at Greenville, Ohio, and 23 inches at Mansfield, Ohio.

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### PROPHESIES FROM ISAIAH

"Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel – God with us!

"The people who walk in darkness

Will see a great light;

Those who live in a dark land,

The light will come to them.

For a child will be born to us, a  
son given to us;

And the government will rest on  
His shoulders!

And His name will be called:

Wonderful!

Counselor!

Mighty God!

Eternal Father!

Prince of Peace!

There will be no end to the increase  
of His government or of His peace.

"The spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,

The spirit of wisdom and understanding.

The spirit of counsel and strength,

The spirit of knowledge and

the fear of the Lord."

Prayer: Thank You, God, for keeping Your word! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Isaiah 11:2-3



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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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## Groton Daily Independent

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- 9 Months ..... \$42.60
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## News from the Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

04-10-14-24-33

(four, ten, fourteen, twenty-four, thirty-three)

Estimated jackpot: \$255,000

Lotto America

12-14-23-38-45, Star Ball: 2, ASB: 2

(twelve, fourteen, twenty-three, thirty-eight, forty-five; Star Ball: two; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$31,140,000

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: 510,000,000

Powerball

12-15-24-34-59, Powerball: 14, Power Play: 2

(twelve, fifteen, twenty-four, thirty-four, fifty-nine; Powerball: fourteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$186,000,000

### Gov. Noem: Investment review finds limited funds in China

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said Wednesday a recent review of the state's investment portfolio found the state did not hold any direct investments in China but has stakes in emerging markets funds that invest in the Asian economic power.

The Republican governor, who is seen as a potential contender for the 2024 White House, has taken aim at China with recent orders. Earlier this month, she gave the state's Investment Council a week to review its \$19 billion portfolio for ties to China, arguing that all companies in the country are tied to its Communist government. In letters released Wednesday, she called on Congress and The Vanguard Group to assist the state's efforts to divest from China.

In a series of hawkish steps and statements, Noem has sought to define China as a "nation that hates us," argued the country poses a threat to American food supplies and claimed in a letter to Congressional leaders that the Chinese government has "infiltrated the homes" of Americans who use TikTok, the popular video-sharing app that is owned by a Chinese company. The governor last month banned the platform from state-owned devices and over a dozen states have followed suit.

Matt Clark, the state's investment officer, said the state earlier this month sold off about \$1.4 million in holdings in the three companies that had headquarters in China. He added that the economy is "global and intertwined" and major companies, such as Apple, often have holdings in China, but the state will not divest from companies like that.

Noem's office said South Dakota has 1.3% of its portfolio invested in a Vanguard emerging markets exchange-traded fund, which in turn has one-third of its holdings in China. It also has 0.7% of its portfolio in real estate and private equity partnership funds that have Chinese holdings.

Clark said he couldn't discuss future investment options when asked about those investments.

Noem seems to be looking for a way to cleanse those kinds of investments of Chinese ties. She sent a letter to the CEO of The Vanguard Group requesting that it create an alternative fund without investments in China.

"This would provide states the opportunity to safely invest our state trust fund and pension dollars without exposure to the threat of the CCP," Noem wrote, referring to the Chinese Communist Party.

The governor is also asking the South Dakota Investment Council to come up with alternative investments. 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.

## South Dakota universities reviewing events after drag show

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's Board of Regents on Wednesday ordered a review of university campus events and its policy on minors attending them after a drag show at South Dakota State University last month faced criticism from conservative lawmakers for being advertised as family-friendly.

The Board of Regents met for over an hour with legal counsel in a private meeting before unanimously passing a motion to initiate the review and discuss it at the board's next meeting. Earlier this week, the Regents requested university presidents to place a moratorium on minors attending events held by campus student organizations.

The actions come after Republican lawmakers criticized a drag show event last month that was hosted by SDSU's Gender and Sexuality Alliance, which advertised the event as family-friendly and encouraged participants to tip performers.

Joe McCulley, who put on the show for the student organization and performs as Martina Shakers, said organizers received threats on social media leading up to the show. McCulley said it was frightening, but credited the university for increasing security and having a police presence at the event. Later that month, the campus also received a bomb threat, according to the campus police department.

"Is it worth going on stage and risking your life?" McCulley said. "We kind of put that behind us and stepped up and did our job. We were there to entertain the students and that's what we did."

Across the country, drag story times — meant to entertain children by appealing to their imaginations — have been targeted with anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, threats and protests.

Samantha Chapman, the advocacy manager for the ACLU of South Dakota said in a statement that drag is a visual expression and celebration of the LGBTQ+ and Two Spirit community that is protected by the First Amendment.

"Attempting to shape the narrative by implying that drag is intrinsically sexual or that gay and trans spaces shouldn't allow accompanied minors because it promotes sexual deviancy is textbook bigotry — not to mention counter to the conservative values of personal freedom," she said.

The show under scrutiny in South Dakota was held at a university campus, a space where the Republican-controlled Legislature moved in 2019 to clarify free speech protections. And, according to McCulley, did not have any young children in attendance.

McCulley said drag shows can range from "provocative" performances at nightclubs to "G-rated" performances with singing and dancing. The SDSU show was more "PG-13," McCulley said, and the only minors who attended appeared to be three high school students who came with a chaperone. McCulley suggested that parents screen drag shows with their children, just like they would any other entertainment.

But some Republican lawmakers are looking to ban minors from attending drag shows.

Republican state Rep. Chris Karr cautioned against the Republican-held Legislature crafting a law specifically for drag shows, saying it was akin to playing "whac-a-mole" and picking on a specific issue. But last month Karr, who chaired the House Appropriations Committee, issued a letter to the Board of Regents requesting it take action on university resources being used for the show. The campus has for years hosted perennial drag shows, but Karr took issue with the event's "kid-friendly" advertisement on a campus event calendar.

"It is hard to believe that the Board of Regents or SDSU feels it is appropriate to have an event where: 'drag show', 'bring money to tip', and 'kid friendly' are used in the same sentence," Karr wrote in a letter to the Regents and SDSU's president. "I don't believe that the taxpayers of South Dakota would find this appropriate, nor want their tax dollars spent on this event."

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Karr said Wednesday he condemned violent threats, but felt that the Regents acted only after wider pressure built in the conservative state.

In a meeting earlier this month, the Regent's executive director Brian Maher said public universities won't discriminate against student organizations based on their ideologies and will continue allowing equal access to campus facilities. But Wednesday's decision will mean a review of all campus events.

"We want our campuses to be safe and welcoming places for students, staff, and visitors of all ages," said Board of Regents President Pam Roberts in a statement Wednesday. "To provide our universities and campus organizations with guidance on events where minors are invited, we have directed staff to expedite the formation of a Minors on Campus policy."

The Board of Regents next meeting is scheduled in March.

## **EXPLAINER: Undoing of Roe quickly shifts abortion in states**

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Anti-abortion groups hoped and strategized for decades for a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that was delivered in June, ending a court-protected right to abortion after nearly 50 years.

The fallout was immediate and far-reaching — and it's not over yet.

The midyear ruling overturning the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which established the right to abortion, shaped the national political agenda for the rest of the year and put abortion access in flux. The shifts are expected to keep coming as lawmakers, voters and judges weigh in.

After the *Dobbs v. Jackson* ruling that left abortion up to the states, bans went into effect in some states. Elsewhere, officials enacted new protections for abortion.

With the bans, a generation of court battles has emerged over whether they square with state constitutions.

In a half-dozen statewide ballot measures this year, voters sided with abortion rights.

Here's a look at what has changed, what hasn't and what remains unclear six months after the landmark *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision.

### THE BANS

Abortion is currently considered illegal at all stages of pregnancy, with various exceptions, in 13 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

In Georgia, it's banned once cardiac activity can be detected — around six weeks, which is before women often realize they're pregnant.

Some of the bans are in "trigger laws" that were passed years ago in anticipation of a ruling like *Dobbs*. Some are in laws that predate *Roe v. Wade*.

Lawmakers in Indiana and West Virginia adopted new bans after this year's ruling. Enforcement of Indiana's is on hold because of a legal challenge.

In both states, there was little question about whether bans would be adopted, but there were emotional debates over whether to include exceptions in the cases of rape and incest. Both states ultimately included those exceptions — and for abortions in the case of medical emergencies.

Bans in Arizona, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, South Carolina, Utah and Wyoming are also not in effect, at least for now, as courts decide whether they can be enforced in the future.

Even in places where lawmakers favor bans, debates remain about which exceptions should be included. So far, states have been allowing later abortions to protect the woman's physical health but not always her mental health.

### THE PROTECTIONS

Before and soon after the Supreme Court ruling, Democratic-controlled state and local governments took steps to protect abortion access.

They have enacted laws and signed executive orders to protect those who provide abortions for out-of-state patients from extradition, bar state employees from helping abortion-related investigations from

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other states, pay for more security at abortion clinics and provide funding for abortion.

In November, voters in California, Michigan and Vermont approved ballot measures to declare that the right to abortion is protected by the state constitutions. Voters in Kansas — who went to the polls in August — and Kentucky rejected measures that would have done the opposite and found that the state constitutions did not ensure abortion rights. Montana voters rejected a ballot measure that would have forced medical workers to intercede in the rare case of a baby born after an attempted abortion.

In December, New Jersey officials announced a grant to train more medical professionals to provide abortions.

## THE IMPACT

It will take time to assess the full impact of the Dobbs ruling through data, including the number of abortions and births.

The number of abortions has dropped nearly to zero in states with bans and risen in neighboring states, according to a survey conducted for the Society of Family Planning. Overall, the study found, the number of abortions fell.

But the survey does not include self-managed abortions received outside of clinics, medical offices, hospitals and virtual providers.

Doctors and researchers say that the number of requests for medication abortion pills increased dramatically after a draft version of the Dobbs ruling was leaked in May.

It won't be clear for at least several months, though, whether the number of births has changed since the ruling.

Getting abortions has become increasingly difficult for women who live in states with bans, in some cases resulting in increased medical complications and in others forcing residents to travel for hours or even days to reach a facility that can provide abortions legally.

The ruling also sparked other changes to life in the U.S.: For some medical students, it meant that residencies in liberal states became a priority. Teens and parents considered birth control anew. Democrats intent on protecting abortion rights fared better than expected in elections across the U.S. in November, even retaining control of the U.S. Senate.

And concerns that Supreme Court rulings could undo other court-mandated protections regarding marriage, sex and contraception and led to passage of a new federal law further protecting same-sex and interracial marriages.

## THE ENFORCEMENT

There have been no well-publicized criminal charges alleging violations of abortion bans since they were put into place — and maybe none at all.

"It could be a situation where the fear of being prosecuted is going to be the bigger impact than actual prosecutions," said Mon Sahaf, a deputy director of Vera Institute of Justice.

Clinics in states with bans have closed or stopped providing abortions. Some have been extra cautious, halting abortions when the legality in the state in question was uncertain.

Sahaf says enforcement of abortion laws is tricky because it requires using medical records and could be seen as unfair in many communities.

Prosecutors have expressed reluctance about taking on the cases. Ninety of them across the country pledged as Dobbs was announced that they would not enforce abortion bans. The group includes those in some of the most populous jurisdictions in states with bans or deep restrictions, including the district attorneys who oversee prosecutions in Birmingham, Alabama; Atlanta; Columbus, Ohio; Dallas; Milwaukee; and Nashville, Tennessee.

That doesn't mean there are no legal repercussions for those who seek or provide abortion.

The attorney general in Indiana last month asked the state's medical licensing board to discipline a doctor who spoke publicly about providing an abortion to a 10-year-old rape victim who traveled from Ohio after that state's abortion ban took effect.

## THE ASSISTANCE



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Abortion funds have been around for decades, largely as scrappy volunteer-run groups with small budgets trying to help women pay for abortions.

The Dobbs ruling inspired more contributions to the groups, but also brought them more challenges and a bigger political and legal role, including suing over abortion bans in Texas.

The groups are now helping women travel to other states for abortions, which increases transportation, lodging, child care and other costs.

"Rage giving" after the Supreme Court ruling helped make the groups less underfunded. Oriaku Njoku, executive director of the National Network of Abortion Funds, said an influx of donations this year has allowed some funds to bring on their first paid staff members.

Destini Spaeth, director of the North Dakota WIN Abortion Access Fund, said enough money rolled in at the fund in May, when a version of the Dobbs ruling was leaked, and June, when the final decision was released, to provide a year's worth of services.

The fund, like others, pays for abortion care and related services such as transportation, lodging, medical testing and birth control.

At another fund, Atlanta-based ARC Southeast, interim Executive Director Jalessah Jackson said that because of bans in the region, her organization is getting fewer callers after Dobbs. But the costs for travel, child care and other services has risen largely from people needing to go farther for abortion care.

## WHAT'S NEXT

With split partisan control in Washington, federal policy changes are unlikely in 2023. Even with Democrats in charge this year, President Joe Biden's administration's efforts to protect abortion hit roadblocks.

Still, state lawmakers are looking to strengthen both abortion bans and protections.

Among bills already introduced for 2023 state legislative sessions are measures in Texas that would take tax incentives away from businesses that help employees obtain abortions and in Missouri and Montana to ban bringing pills used to induce abortion into the state.

On the other side, there are pushes in red states including South Carolina, South Dakota and Texas to amend the state constitutions to ensure a right to abortion and plans by Minnesota Democrats, who will control the legislature in January, to codify abortion protections in state law.

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This story was first published on December 20, 2022. It was updated on December 21, 2022, to correct the name of the executive director of the National Network of Abortion Funds. It is Oriaku Njoku, not Oaiaku Njoku.

## Turkey, Saudi Arabia decry Taliban university ban for women

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Turkey and Saudi Arabia became the latest Muslim-majority countries to condemn a decision by Taliban authorities to bar women from universities, while about two dozen women staged a protest in the streets of Kabul on Thursday.

In another sign of domestic opposition, several Afghan cricketers condemned the university ban. Cricket is a hugely popular sport in Afghanistan, and players have hundreds of thousands of followers on social media.

The country's Taliban rulers earlier this week ordered women nationwide to stop attending private and public universities effective immediately and until further notice.

They have yet to publicly speak about the ban or react to the global backlash against it, although a spokesman for the Ministry of Higher Education, Ziaullah Hashmi, said in a tweet Thursday that a news conference would be held this week to explain the move.

Despite initially promising a more moderate rule respecting rights for women and minorities, the Taliban have widely implemented their interpretation of Islamic law, or Sharia, since they seized power in August 2021.

They have banned girls from middle school and high school, barred women from most fields of employment and ordered them to wear head-to-toe clothing in public. Women are also banned from parks and

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gyms. At the same time, Afghan society, while largely traditional, has increasingly embraced the education of girls and women over the past two decades.

The latest condemnations of the university ban came from Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Thursday that the ban was "neither Islamic nor humane."

Speaking at a joint news conference with his Yemeni counterpart, Cavusoglu called on the Taliban to reverse their decision.

"What harm is there in women's education? What harm does it do Afghanistan?" Cavusoglu said. "Is there an Islamic explanation? On the contrary, our religion, Islam, is not against education, on the contrary, it encourages education and science."

Saudi Arabia, which until 2019 enforced sweeping restrictions on women's travel, employment and other crucial aspects of their daily life including driving, also urged the Taliban to change course.

The Saudi foreign ministry expressed "astonishment and regret" at Afghan women being denied a university education. In a statement late Wednesday, the ministry said the decision was "astonishing in all Islamic countries."

Previously, Qatar, which has engaged with the Taliban authorities, also condemned the decision.

In the capital of Kabul, about two dozen women marched in the streets Thursday, chanting in Dari for freedom and equality. "All or none. Don't be afraid. We are together," they chanted.

In video obtained by The Associated Press, one woman said Taliban security forces used violence to disperse the group.

"The girls were beaten and whipped," she said. "They also brought military women with them, whipping the girls. We ran away, some girls were arrested. I don't know what will happen."

Several Afghan cricketers called for the ban to be lifted.

Player Rahmanullah Garbaz said in a tweet that every day of education wasted was a day wasted in the country's future.

Another cricketer, Rashid Khan, tweeted that women are the foundation of society. "A society that leaves its children in the hands of ignorant and illiterate women cannot expect its members to serve and work hard," he wrote.

Another show of support for female university students came at Nangarhar Medical University. Local media reported that male students walked out in solidarity and refused to sit exams until women's university access was reinstated.

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Associated Press writer Suzan Fraser contributed from Ankara, Turkey.

## **IRS mandatory presidential audit policy goes under spotlight**

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An IRS policy governing the audits of tax returns filed by U.S. presidents is under new scrutiny after a report published by a congressional panel found the agency failed to perform the mandatory inspection of Donald Trump's returns until Congress pressed for information about the process.

The three-point policy states that individual returns for the president and the vice president are subject to mandatory review, "should always be kept in an orange folder," should be kept from the eyes of IRS employees and "should be locked in a secure drawer or cabinet when the examiner or reviewer is away from the work area."

The report released Tuesday by the Democratic majority on the House Ways and Means Committee said the process, which dates to 1977, was "dormant, at best" during the early years of the Trump administration. Democrats in Congress are responding by introducing legislation that would codify the IRS policy into law with more stringent requirements.

Tax experts say the failure to launch the audit earlier is emblematic of a larger problem regarding the IRS' capacity to examine high-income taxpayers' returns — and a reminder of Trump as a norm-defying president.

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John Koskinen, who served as IRS commissioner during both the Obama and Trump administrations, said the policy has been out of the public eye because presidents have traditionally released their tax-return summaries to the public.

"It only became an issue with a president who refused to release his tax returns," Koskinen said. "If Trump had been releasing his returns, nobody would have raised this issue."

Trump's tax returns being handed over to Congress recently is the culmination of a yearslong legal fight between Trump and Democratic lawmakers.

Steve Rosenthal, senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, said the IRS' failure to audit Trump is a showing that "the mandatory auditing program is broken, we cannot rely on the current system to fairly audit the president, and there's a general problem of the IRS auditing sophisticated taxpayers."

Rosenthal added: "This is a much larger problem than Donald Trump — yes, he makes bad things worse, but the situation was bad to begin with."

A new \$80 billion infusion of funds through the so-called Inflation Reduction Act is supposed to remedy the beleaguered agency's low staffing levels, outdated technology and host of other issues. Republicans who are poised to take control of the House in less than two weeks, however, have said they want to cut that funding.

Tuesday's committee report revealed that the IRS only began to audit Trump's 2016 tax filings on April 3, 2019, more than two years into Trump's presidency and just months after Democrats took control of the House. That date coincides with Rep. Richard Neal, D-Mass., the panel chairman, asking the IRS for information related to Trump's tax returns.

The report's findings prompted lawmakers to recommend a statutory requirement for the mandatory examination of the president's taxes, with "disclosure of certain audit information and related returns in a timely manner."

Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said he will work to pass the bill through the Senate. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the chamber would "move swiftly" to advance the legislation.

The issue highlights frustration with the so-called tax gap, which is the difference between how much money is owed to the federal government and how much is paid. IRS data released in October projects that for 2017 to 2019, the estimated average gross tax gap will be \$540 billion per year.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in August, and has repeated at various speaking engagements, that the new funds allocated by Congress would be used to increase audits on high-wealth individuals, firms and complex pass-throughs.

"This is challenging work that requires a team of sophisticated revenue agents in place to spend thousands of hours poring over complicated returns, and it is also work that has huge revenue potential," she told former IRS Commissioner Chuck Rettig in August.

In an application of the IRS policy on mandatory presidential audits, well-trained agents, forensic experts, tax attorneys and others would be required to oversee a presidential audit as complicated as Trump's, which included hundreds of businesses, properties and complex business interests.

The congressional report highlighted the lack of staffing and availability of experts to examine Trump's taxes. The report states that the IRS believed that accuracy of his filings was ensured because he had legal counsel and an accounting firm representing him.

The question of whether presidential tax documents should be disclosed is another matter of debate among tax experts and advocates.

Rep. Kevin Brady of Texas, the top Republican on the Ways and Means Committee, said Congress would be setting a "dangerous new precedent" by releasing the presidential records. Koskinen said that "it's a significant serious precedent for a committee to seek returns and then release them."

"I see two big issues here — what is the IRS going to do to ensure presidents are audited regularly, and what's the rationale for releasing these returns," Koskinen said.

Rosenthal said he thinks presidential returns should be publicly disclosed to ensure proper oversight.

"When this information is made public, the president is going to be more wary about cheating on their

taxes and making them public — the results would put both the IRS and president on their best behavior,” he said.

## High school football incidents spark racism talks, programs

By CLIFF BRUNT AP Sports Writer

Superintendent Torie Gibson felt she had no choice but to make the unpopular decision. When learning Amador High’s football team had a group chat titled, “Kill the Blacks,” filled with derogatory language and racial slurs, she ended the Northern California school’s varsity season.

That meant the 100-year anniversary game between rivals Amador and Argonaut was called off.

“We canceled the football season, and we did it for all the right reasons because the behavior is not acceptable,” said Gibson, who oversees the Amador County Unified School District. “However, football is an extracurricular activity. It is not a given. It is not a right. It is strictly extra.”

The discipline was swift and abrupt. Moments before Amador was to play Rosemont — a predominantly Black and Latino school in nearby Sacramento — the game was called off.

There was more fallout. Amador’s football coach, athletic director and principal were put on leave.

In Gibson’s mind, the discipline was the easy part. The hard part will be setting the table for real change, and the key will be presentation. The school is based in a mostly white, rural area an hour’s drive east of Sacramento. Amador has just four Black students out of about 750.

“I think if we roll it out correctly and we provide the necessary support and we don’t shame people for who they are and we work it out so that we celebrate everyone, but really, truly look at our blind spots and our differences, I think it’ll make a big difference,” said Gibson, who is white.

The incident at Amador was one of several alarming examples of racism against Black people that occurred this fall in high school football around the nation. Athletes in the past were able to leave racism and other issues off the field, but today not even sports settings are immune from real world problems.

Administrators in some cases have used these incidents to start conversations about race that have been hard for them to bring up before and roll out programs they hope will have lasting impact.

A TikTok video created by players at River Valley High School in Yuba City, California, featured a mock slave auction. A social media post circulated showing five white males from West Laurens High School, a central Georgia school a little more than a two-hour drive southeast of Atlanta, at a football game wearing shirts that spelled out a racial slur targeting Black people. And at Guilderland High School in New York, about a half-hour’s drive west of Albany, several classmates showed up to a football game wearing black facepaint, prompting about 100 students to walk out of classes days later.

Richard Lapchick, the founder of The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at Central Florida, is using social media to draw attention to weekly examples of racism in sports and elsewhere. He said the institute, also known as TIDES, found 58 articles in its first week of searching, and he highlighted 11 on his Twitter feed.

“White supremacist acts have been unleashed across the nation in the current political climate,” Lapchick said. “I don’t think the general public knows how extensive it is.”

Gibson, the superintendent in Northern California, feels she has to start with implicit bias work in her district. She said she was encouraged by the fact that the school already has strong transgender and gay and lesbian advocacy groups.

“I think we are going to have a great opportunity to really make some change and to do some great work,” she said.

The mock slave auction at River Valley was done as a prank, but there was nothing funny about the repercussions. The varsity football team forfeited the remainder of its season after suspensions left it with too few players to continue.

The Greater Sacramento NAACP chapter hosted a meeting calling for systemic change and players apologized for their involvement. During the meeting, a Black player said he did not want to participate in the mock slave auction, but he was the only Black player left in the locker room and everyone focused on



him. He said he tried to leave, but could not. He was told the video would not be published, but it was. River Valley Principal Lee McPeak said the district is working with a professional to implement programs to help learn from the incident.

"There are vital messages about race, discrimination and systemic changes that are necessary to help us turn important corners toward equity, respect and compassion, critical for our schools today," he said.

At Guilderland High in New York, some students were outraged when some of their classmates showed up to a game in blackface. Administrators met with students through small group, roundtable discussions. The school said it was a "culminating moment" for students who had experienced discriminatory issues and injustices.

In the wake of all the incidents, the work toward learning and changing is just starting.

"It's going to take us time," Gibson said. "It's going to be years of work. There's no magic button to just fix it."

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Follow Cliff Brunt on Twitter: [twitter.com/CliffBruntAP](https://twitter.com/CliffBruntAP)

## Russia scrubs Mariupol's Ukraine identity, builds on death

By LORI HINNANT, VASILISA STEPANENKO, SARAH EL DEEB and ELIZAVETA TILNA Associated Press

Throughout Mariupol, Russian workers are tearing down bombed-out buildings at a rate of at least one a day, hauling away shattered bodies with the debris.

Russian military convoys are rumbling down the broad avenues of what is swiftly becoming a garrison city, and Russian soldiers, builders, administrators and doctors are replacing the thousands of Ukrainians who have died or left.

Many of the city's Ukrainian street names are reverting to Soviet ones, with the Avenue of Peace that cuts through Mariupol to be labeled Lenin Avenue. Even the large sign that announces the name of the city at its entrance has been Russified, repainted with the red, white and blue of the Russian flag and the Russian spelling.

Eight months after Mariupol fell into Russian hands, Russia is eradicating all vestiges of Ukraine from it – along with the evidence of war crimes buried in its buildings. The few open schools teach a Russian curriculum, phone and television networks are Russian, the Ukrainian currency is dying out, and Mariupol is now in the Moscow time zone. On the ruins of the old Mariupol, a new Russian city is rising, with materials from at least one European company, The Associated Press found.

But the AP investigation into life in occupied Mariupol also underlines what its residents already know all too well: No matter what the Russians do, they are building upon a city of death. More than 10,000 new graves now scar Mariupol, the AP found, and the death toll might run three times higher than an early estimate of at least 25,000. The former Ukrainian city has also hollowed out, with Russian plans to demolish well over 50,000 homes, the AP calculated.

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Associated Press journalists were the last international media in Mariupol to escape heavy shelling in March, before Russian forces took the city over. This is the story of what has happened since. AP reconnected with many people whose tragedies were captured in photos and video during the deadliest days of the Russian siege.

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Death surrounds Mariupol in the rapidly growing cemeteries on its outskirts, and its stench lingered over the city into the autumn. It haunts the memories of survivors, both in Mariupol and in exile.

Every one of the dozens of residents the AP spoke with knew someone killed during the siege of Mariupol, which began with the Feb. 24 invasion. As many as 30 people arrive at the morgue each day in hopes of tracking down a loved one.

Lydia Erashova watched her 5-year-old son Artem and her 7-year-old niece Angelina die after a Rus-

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sian shelling in March. The family hastily buried the young cousins in a makeshift grave in a yard and fled Mariupol.

They returned in July to rebury the children, only to learn while on the road that the bodies had already been dug up and taken to a warehouse. As they approached the city center, each block was bleaker than the last.

"It is horror. Wherever you look, whichever way you look," said Erashova. "Everything is black, is destroyed."

Neither she nor her sister-in-law could bear to go inside the warehouse to identify the bodies of their children. Their husbands, who are brothers, chose the tiny coffins – one pink and one blue – to be placed together in a single grave.

Erashova, who is now in Canada, said no Russian rebuilding plan could possibly bring back what Mariupol lost.

"Our lives have been taken from us. Our child was taken from us," she said. "It's so ridiculous and stupid. How do you restore a dead city where people were killed at every turn?"

## RECKONING WITH DEATH

The AP investigation drew on interviews with 30 residents from Mariupol, including 13 living under Russian occupation; satellite imagery; hundreds of videos gathered from inside the city, and Russian documents showing a master plan. Taken together, they chronicle a comprehensive effort to suppress Mariupol's collective history and memory as a Ukrainian city.

Mariupol was in the crosshairs of the Kremlin from the first day of the invasion. Just 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Russian border, the city is a port on the Sea of Azov and crucial for Russian supply lines.

The city was hit relentlessly with airstrikes and artillery, its communications severed, its food and water cut off. Yet Mariupol refused to give in for 86 days. By the time the last Ukrainian fighters holed up in the Azovstal steel mill surrendered in May, Mariupol had become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

That resistance came at a high price. The thoroughness of Russia's destruction of Mariupol can still be seen today. Videos taken across the city and satellite images show that munitions have left their mark on nearly every building across its 166 square kilometers (64 square miles).

Large swaths of the city are devoid of color and life, with fire-blackened walls, grey demolition dust and dead trees with shredded foliage. But the worst destruction Mariupol suffered may be measured in its death toll, which will never be fully known.

An AP analysis of satellite imagery taken over the past eight months of occupation shows 8,500 new graves in the outlying Staryi Krym cemetery alone, with possibly multiple bodies beneath each mound. There are at least three other trench gravesites around the city, including one created by Ukrainians themselves at the beginning of the siege.

In all, a total at least 10,300 new graves are scattered around Mariupol, according to AP's methodology, confirmed by three forensic pathologists with expertise in mass graves. Thousands more bodies likely never even made it to the graveyard.

Back in May, when the city finally fell, the municipal government in exile estimated 25,000 people at a minimum had died. But at least three people in the city since June say the number killed is triple that or more, based on conversations with workers documenting body collection from the streets for the Russian occupation authorities.

Svitlana Chebotareva, a Mariupol resident who fled in March, said her neighbor died in a flat nearby, and the body is still there. Chebotareva returned home this autumn for just long enough to retrieve her belongings, since residents are free to come and go so long as they pass checkpoints. She said the Russians expect gratitude with their offer of a few new apartments.

"I don't know how it's possible now to give us 'candies' in exchange for destroyed homes and killed people," she said in Kyiv. "And they still believe it anyway."

## ERASING A UKRAINIAN CITY

The notices are taped to peeling, pockmarked walls by the entry, and addressed to "DEAR RESIDENTS."

This is how those who remained in Mariupol learn their buildings are scheduled for imminent demolition.

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Often, despite shattered windows, frozen pipes and no electricity, they are still living inside because they have nowhere else to go.

In a review of hundreds of photos and video clips along with documents from occupation authorities, the AP found that more than 300 buildings in Mariupol have been or are about to be demolished. Some are individual homes, but most are multistory apartment blocks in the khrushchyovka style, launched by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in a housing crisis in the 1960s. With around 180 apartments inside or more, each building was designed to house as many families as possible.

That means in all, the demolitions will remove well over 50,000 homes, according to AP calculations.

"There is no discussion, people aren't prepared," said an activist in Mariupol, who like all inside Mariupol requested anonymity for fear of retribution. "People still live in the basements. Where they can go is unclear."

Only Russians handle the debris itself, according to another resident still in the city who works on the sites. The stated reason is to avoid accidents, he said.

But Petro Andryushchenko, an aide to Mariupol's mayor who is exiled in Dnipro, believes the real reason is to ensure that people don't see the rotting corpses being hauled away. He said many of the buildings, especially in the neighborhood around Azovstal, contain 50 to 100 bodies each that will never get a decent burial. Those deaths will go unrecorded.

110 Mytropolytska is one of the buildings on Russia's demolition list, scheduled to come down any day.

The smell of fresh-baked bread still brings Inna Nepomnyshaya, a doctor, back to her last night in March in her sixth-floor apartment there. When she saw the street price of bread in her besieged city, she decided to bake her own.

The smell warmed the air the next morning when her son-in-law arrived. It was time to leave, he insisted. Russian forces were closing in.

Nepomnyshaya was at her daughter's building when Russian tanks rolled up to her own at dusk on March 11. As AP journalists watched and recorded from the upper floor of nearby Hospital No. 2, one tank raised its gun at 110 Mytropolytska and fired.

The shell shattered the walls of Nepomnyshaya's apartment and obliterated those of the neighbors above, below and behind her. Most of the neighbors were huddled in the basement, but two elderly women, Lydia and Nataliya, couldn't make the trip up and down the stairs.

Their bodies would be buried in the courtyard soon after. Weeks later, AP video showed the rough graves still there.

With communications to the city cut, Nepomnyshaya did not learn of the fate of her apartment until her family had escaped to Ukrainian-held territory. Like many who left Mariupol, she still speaks of the city in the present tense.

"I live in Mariupol, this is my home," she said, speaking by candlelight in a café in Dnipro, another city that had lost power. "This house was my fortress, and they took it away from me."

Also on the demolition list are the buildings on either side. One was hit by at least one airstrike on March 11; the walls of another are in ruins.

Russia is now moving into the historic city center. Russian authorities in October dismantled Mariupol's memorial to victims of the Holodomor, the Soviet-engineered famine in the 1930s that killed millions of Ukrainians, according to video posted on Russian television. They also painted over two murals commemorating victims of Russia's 2014 attack on Ukraine, images obtained by the AP show.

"They spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on things like erasing demonstrations of Ukrainian identity and very little time tending to the needs of the Mariupol people," said Michael Carpenter, U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which for years monitored eastern Ukraine. "It's really a very brutal inhuman colonial experiment unfolding before our eyes."

## BUILDING A RUSSIAN CITY

As it tries to raze the remains of Ukraine, Russia has laid out a plan for a new city with a new population. At its heart will lie the historic Mariupol theater, according to the master plan first reported by the Russian site The Village in August and seen by The Associated Press.

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The majestic Drama Theater became the city's main bomb shelter until twin Russian airstrikes hit on March 16. Hundreds died, an AP investigation found, and residents said the site reeked of bodies all summer. To mask the ruins, Russian authorities have put up a screen so tall it can be seen from space, etching the theater's outline on the paneling in a ghostly reminder of its previous life.

Also in the document are plans to restore the ruins of the obliterated Azovstal steel mill, the last Ukrainian holdout. The site is slated to be transformed into an industrial park by the end of next year, though there are no signs that any work has begun.

But a Russian military compound went up in record time, according to satellite imagery from Maxar Technologies that showed the vast U-shaped building with the Russian Army slogan emblazoned on the rooftop.

Russia already has constructed at least 14 new apartment buildings — a small fraction of the number coming down — and is repairing at least two of the hospitals it damaged by shelling. Video obtained by The Associated Press showed rows of pallets stacked with insulation from the Danish company Rockwool, which maintains its division in Russia despite criticism. Construction materials are not subject to sanctions.

In a statement, Rockwool's Vice President of Communications Michael Zarin said the insulation panels were distributed without the company's "knowledge or consent," and that he hopes its products help restore health care, warmth and shelter to Ukrainians.

Videos show no furniture visible in the windows of the new apartments and few people on the sidewalks outside. Only pensioners, the disabled and those affiliated with the occupation seem to be getting them, according to multiple people still in Mariupol.

One man applied to the list in September and found himself in 11,700th place. He has friends in the 2,000 range who are still waiting, like him. And an old man he knows, whose number was in the 9,000s has already moved into one of the new buildings.

"I don't know how it happens. I won't speculate," he said.

However, the man said he has no issue with the demolition of buildings that aren't fit to live in. He is cautiously relaunching his own company in the new city.

But the plans for a Russian Mariupol depend on a population that simply no longer exists.

Thousands of Mariupol's former residents were sent to Russia with little or no choice, and thousands more fled into other areas of Ukraine. Of Mariupol's former population of around 425,000, just over a quarter stayed, according to estimates from Andryushchenko.

The Russian master plan for Mariupol calls for a population of 212,000 in 2022, and back to 425,000 by 2030. Right now, about 15,000 of the people in Mariupol are Russian troops, said Andryushchenko, who drew his estimate from information about the soldiers taking over homes and public buildings. He said Russian riot police have begun patrolling the city to head off protests over the lack of heat, electricity and water.

Videos seen by the AP showed military convoys, along with construction trucks, clogging the streets. The activist the AP spoke with also confirmed an increase in the number of soldiers since Russian forces retreated from the Kharkiv and Kherson regions.

Construction workers from Russia show no signs of leaving, and tents were visible outside the Port City mall until the winter. Doctors and city administrators also have come in from Russia, according to Russian government announcements and physicians who left the city after refusing to work for the occupation authorities.

"There is no more Russian city now than Mariupol," Dmitry Sablin, a Russian lawmaker born in Mariupol, said in an interview with Russian media in June after visiting the city.

The Kremlin is moving as swiftly as it can to ensure that those Ukrainians who stay see their future as Russians.

On Nov. 15, Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded Mariupol the title of "City of Military Glory" for the heroism of people he described as its defenders. On Dec. 7, Putin said his war against Ukraine had turned the Sea of Azov into "Russia's internal sea."



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This suits many of those who remained behind just fine. Mariupol has always had some residents who considered themselves Russian.

"Whoever doesn't like it, doesn't come back," one woman said.

## NO FUTURE IN SIGHT

Russia's occupation of Mariupol has divided families and friends into two categories: Those who stayed and those who fled. Both grapple with what Mariupol once was and will be.

When Ivan Kalinin escaped, he left behind the body of his wife Iryna and their unborn first child, both killed in the March 9 Russian airstrike on the maternity hospital. His parents and hers stayed in Mariupol.

He last saw his wife that morning when her labor began, and she sent him to fetch clothes and diapers. He learned about the airstrike at a military blockade on the way to the hospital. He and his father found her body the next day at another hospital.

"I do not even know how I survived it," he said quietly. "I was drinking every day to fall asleep."

Kalinin, who now lives in Wales, cannot imagine going home. Nor can he imagine life anywhere else.

"It is too painful for me to be there. I might return at some point — it is my hometown, after all," he said. "I fall asleep every day hoping this is a dream. And I wake up with understanding that it is a reality."

Mariupol is now torn between Russia and Ukraine. Some people who stayed are waiting for Russian citizenship just to get on with their lives. Yet the Ukrainian letter *ї*, which is not found in Russian, is appearing as graffiti around the city — a small act of defiance in a place many described as full of fear.

Nepomnyshaya, whose apartment was struck by a Russian shell, dreamed recently that she'd returned home and smelled bread. But she is not sure if she ever can or will go back.

"I believe that Mariupol will be rebuilt, that it will be Ukraine after all," she said. "But I know that this smell is just a memory."

Hinnant and Stepanenko reported from Dnipro, Ukraine. El Deeb reported from Beirut. Tilna reported from Lviv, Ukraine. Marshall Ritzel in New York, Michael Biesecker in Washington, and Mstyslav Chernov, Jamey Keaten, Evgeniy Maloletka and Inna Varenysia in Kyiv, Ukraine, contributed.

## Real coffee, but a fake 'Starbucks' in piracy-ridden Iraq

By SAMYA KULLAB and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Everything from the signboard outside down to the napkins bears the official emblem of the top international coffee chain. But in Baghdad, looks are deceiving: The "Starbucks" in the Iraqi capital is unlicensed.

Real Starbucks merchandise is imported from neighboring countries to stock the three cafes in the city, but all are operating illegally. Starbucks filed a lawsuit in an attempt to shut down the trademark violation, but the case was halted after the owner allegedly threatened lawyers hired by the coffee house.

Be careful, he told them — and boasted of ties to militias and powerful political figures, according to U.S. officials and Iraqi legal sources.

"I am a businessman," Amin Makhsusi, the owner of the fake branches, said in a rare interview in September. He denied making the threats. "I had this ambition to open Starbucks in Iraq."

After his requests to obtain a license from Starbucks' official agent in the Middle East were denied, "I decided to do it anyway, and bear the consequences." In October, he said he sold the business; the cafes continued to operate.

Starbucks is "evaluating next steps," a spokesman wrote Wednesday, in response to a request for comment by The Associated Press. "We have an obligation to protect our intellectual property from infringement to retain our exclusive rights to it."

The Starbucks saga is just one example of what U.S. officials and companies believe is a growing problem. Iraq has emerged as a hub for trademark violation and piracy that cuts across sectors, from retail to broadcasting and pharmaceuticals. Regulation is weak, they say, while perpetrators of intellectual property violations can continue doing business largely because they enjoy cover by powerful groups.

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Counterfeiting is compromising well-known brands, costing companies billions in lost revenue and even putting lives at risk, according to businesses affected by the violations and U.S. officials following their cases.

Qatari broadcaster beIN estimated it has lost \$1.2 billion to piracy in the region, and said more than a third of all internet piracy of beIN channels originated from companies based in northern Iraq. The complaint was part of a public submission this year to the U.S. Special 301 Report, which publicly lists countries that do not provide adequate IP rights.

Iraq is seeking foreign investment away from its oil-based economy, and intellectual property will likely take center stage in negotiations with companies. Yet working to enforce laws and clamp down on the vast web of violations has historically been derailed by more urgent developments in the crisis-hit country or thwarted by well-connected business people.

"As Iraq endeavors to diversify its economy beyond the energy sector and attract foreign investment in knowledge-based sectors, it is critical that companies know their patents and intellectual property will be respected and protected by the government," said Steve Lutes, vice president of Middle East Affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Makhsusi insists he tried the legal route but was denied a license from Starbucks' regional agent based in Kuwait. He also said he attempted to reach Starbucks through contacts in the United States, but that these were also unsuccessful.

He depicts his decision to open a branch anyway as a triumph over adversity.

Cups, stir sticks and other Starbucks merchandise are obtained in Turkey and Europe, using his contacts, he said. "The coffee, everything is authentic Starbucks," Makhsusi added.

Makhsusi said he "had a session" with a lawyer in Baghdad to come to an understanding with the coffee company, "but so far we have not reached a solution."

The law firm recounts a different version of events.

Confidentiality agreements prevent the firm from divulging details of the case to third parties, but the AP spoke to three Iraqi legal sources close to the case. They spoke on condition of anonymity in order to provide details. They also asked the name of the firm not be mentioned for security reasons.

They said that in early 2020, the firm was hired by Starbucks and sent a cease-and-desist notice to Makhsusi. They said that the businessman then told one of the lawyers on the case that he ought to be careful, warning that he had backing from a prominent Iranian-backed armed group and support from Iraqi political parties.

"They decided it was too risky, and they stopped the case," the Iraqi legal source said. Makhsusi denied that he threatened Starbucks' lawyers.

Makhsusi said doing business in Iraq requires good relations with armed groups, the bulk of whom are part of the official state security apparatus.

"I have friendly relations with everyone in Iraq, including the armed factions," he said. "I am a working man, I need these relationships to avoid problems, especially given that the situation in Iraq is not stable for business."

He did not name particular armed groups he was in contact with. The AP contacted two groups known to have business dealings in the areas where the cafes are located, and both said they had not worked with Makhsusi.

Counterfeiters and pirates have stepped up activity in Iraq in the past five years, particularly as Gulf countries have responded to U.S. pressure and become more stringent regulators, said a U.S. official in the State Department, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk about the trends.

The broadcaster beIN has sent cease-and-desist letters to Earthlink, Iraq's largest internet service provider. Earthlink offers subscribers a free streaming service, Shabakaty, which beIN alleges is composed almost entirely of pirated content. Iraq's Communications Ministry, which partners with Earthlink, did not respond to a request for comment.

"It's unheard of and completely outrageous," said Cameron Andrews, director of beIN's anti-piracy department. "It's a huge market, so it's a great deal of commercial loss."

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But the larger issue for beIN is the piracy that originates inside Iraq and bleeds into the rest of the region and the world, he said. After being copied by these companies, beIN's channels are re-streamed on pirate IPTV services, and become accessible all over the region, according to beIN. The company's investigation found that some Iraqi operators even distribute pirated content in the U.S.

At least two U.S. pharmaceutical companies have approached the U.S. Chamber of Commerce with complaints that their trademark was being used to sell counterfeit life-saving medication by Iraqi companies.

"I worry if regulatory lapses or infringements in IP protection are allowed, then U.S. companies will be deterred from doing business in Iraq and quality of care could be dangerously jeopardized for Iraqi patients," said Lutes.

The companies did not accept to be named in this report or detail the types of medications.

Successive Iraqi governments promised to fight graft since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion reset Iraq's political order, but none has taken serious steps to dismantle the vast internal machinery that enables state-sanctioned corruption.

Intellectual property has also historically been a low priority for Iraq. Limited bilateral talks with the U.S. over the issue have been on and off for the past five years.

The challenge is to find a "clear leader in the Iraqi government that is interested in IP issues as a way to attract foreign investment," said a U.S. State Department official. "Until that person exists, it is difficult for us to engage."

## **Fiji calls in military after close election is disputed**

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Fijian police on Thursday said they were calling in the military to help maintain security following a close election last week that is now being disputed.

It was an alarming development in a Pacific nation where democracy remains fragile and there have been four military coups in the past 35 years. The two main contenders for prime minister this year were former coup leaders themselves.

Police Commissioner Brig. Gen. Sitiveni Qiliho said in a statement that after police and military leaders met with Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama they collectively decided to call in army and navy personnel to assist.

The commissioner said there had been threats made against minority groups who were "now living in fear following recent political developments."

Reporters in the capital, Suva, said there were no immediate signs of any military presence on city streets.

The military move came after Bainimarama's Fiji First party refused to concede the election, despite rival Sitiveni Rabuka's party and two other parties announcing they had the numbers to form a majority coalition and would serve as the next government.

Fiji First Gen. Sec. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum told media Wednesday that under the nation's constitution, Bainimarama would remain prime minister until lawmakers returned to Parliament within two weeks to vote on the next leader.

Sayed-Khaiyum questioned the validity of the internal voting which had led to one of the parties joining Rabuka's coalition. And he lashed out at Rabuka, accusing him of sowing division in Fiji.

"The entire rationale of this man has been to divide Fiji to gain political supremacy," Sayed-Khaiyum said. "And we can see that simmering through again. In fact it's not simmering, it's boiling."

A day earlier, Rabuka and two other party leaders announced they were forming a coalition with a total of 29 seats against Fiji First's 26 and would form the next government.

"A government we hope that will bring the change that people had been calling out for over the last few years," Rabuka said at a news conference. "It's going to be an onerous task. It will not be easy, and it was never easy to try and dislodge an incumbent government. We have done that, collectively."

Rabuka's announcement prompted New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta to send her congratulations on Twitter, saying New Zealand "looks forward to working together to continue strengthening our

warm relationship.”

But New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern took a more cautious approach, saying she was waiting until the dust settled.

Bainimarama has been in power for 16 years. He led a 2006 military coup and later refashioned himself as a democratic leader by introducing a new constitution and winning elections in 2014 and 2018.

Rabuka, meanwhile, led Fiji’s first military takeover in 1987 and later served seven years as an elected prime minister in the 1990s.

Bainimarama and Rabuka were initially deadlocked after the election. Rabuka’s People’s Alliance Party won 21 seats and the affiliated National Federation Party won five seats, while Bainimarama’s Fiji First party secured 26 seats.

That left the Social Democratic Liberal Party, which won three seats, holding the balance of power. The party decided Tuesday in a close 16-14 internal vote to go with Rabuka — a vote that Fiji First is now questioning.

## Final tally: Nearly 107,000 US overdose deaths last year

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Nearly 107,000 Americans died of drug overdoses last year, according to final figures released Thursday.

The official number was 106,699, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. That’s nearly 16% higher than the nearly 92,000 overdose deaths in 2020.

Earlier, provisional data suggested there were more than 107,000 overdose deaths last year. The numbers may have changed as some additional death records have come in, a CDC spokesman said. Also, provisional data includes all overdose deaths, while the final numbers are limited to U.S. residents, he noted.

The CDC on Thursday also released a final report for overall U.S. deaths in 2021. As previously reported, more than 3.4 million Americans died that year, or more than 80,000 than the year before. Accidental injuries — which include drug overdoses — was the fourth leading cause of death, after heart disease, cancer and COVID-19. Life expectancy fell to about 76 years, 5 months.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Science and Educational Media Group. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## Associates of FTX founder plead guilty to criminal charges

By KEN SWEET, REBECCA BLACKWELL and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Two of Sam Bankman-Fried’s top associates secretly pleaded guilty to criminal charges in the collapse of the cryptocurrency exchange FTX and are cooperating with investigators, a federal prosecutor announced Wednesday as the digital coin entrepreneur was being flown in FBI custody to the U.S. from the Bahamas.

Carolyn Ellison, the 28-year-old former CEO of Alameda Research, a trading firm started by Bankman-Fried, and Gary Wang, the 29-year-old who co-founded FTX, pleaded guilty to charges including wire fraud, securities fraud and commodities fraud.

“They are both cooperating with the Southern District of New York,” U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said Wednesday night in a video statement released on social media.

He added that anyone else who participated in the fraud should reach out to his office because “our patience is not eternal” and further criminal charges against others were possible.

The surprise guilty pleas were announced as Bankman-Fried was being extradited from the Bahamas by U.S. law enforcement to answer to charges tied to his role in FTX’s failure. He was expected to appear in a federal court in New York City on Thursday.

Before Bankman-Fried was in the air, U.S. prosecutors hadn’t publicly revealed that Ellison and Wang



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were facing potential criminal charges or that they had pledged to work with investigators.

It was unclear whether Bankman-Fried, who has apologized for FTX's collapse but denied defrauding anyone, was also in the dark.

Ellison and Wang signed plea agreements on Dec. 19, partially in exchange for a promise that prosecutors would recommend a reduction in their sentences if they cooperate fully in the investigation.

Without such a deal, Ellison, who also faces a money laundering conspiracy charge, could face up to 110 years in prison. Wang could get up to 50 years.

Both were released on \$250,000 bail after their secret court appearances with travel restricted to the continental United States.

"Gary has accepted responsibility for his actions and takes seriously his obligations as a cooperating witness," said Wang's lawyer, Ilan Graff.

A lawyer for Ellison did not immediately return messages seeking comment.

In a parallel civil complaint filed Wednesday, the Securities and Exchange Commission said Wang and Ellison were "active participants" in what it said was Bankman-Fried's scheme to defraud FTX investors and swindle its customers.

Wang created the software code that allowed Alameda to divert FTX customer funds. Ellison then used the misappropriated funds for Alameda's trading activity, the SEC said.

Bahamian authorities arrested Bankman-Fried last week at the request of the U.S. government. U.S. prosecutors allege he played a central role in the rapid collapse of FTX and hid its problems from the public and investors.

The SEC and prosecutors said Bankman-Fried illegally siphoned off customer deposits on the FTX platform and used it to enable Alameda's trading, buy real estate and make huge campaign donations to U.S. politicians.

The 30-year-old could potentially spend the rest of his life in jail.

Bankman-Fried was initially denied bail by a Bahamian judge. The founder and former CEO of FTX, once worth tens of billions of dollars on paper, was then held in the Bahamas' Fox Hill prison, which has been cited by human rights activists as having poor sanitation and as being infested with rats and insects.

On Wednesday, Bahamian Attorney General Ryan Pinder said Bankman-Fried had agreed to be transferred to the U.S.

Reporters witnessed Bankman-Fried leaving a Magistrate Court in Nassau in a dark SUV earlier Wednesday after waiving his right to challenge the extradition.

At his initial appearance in a U.S. courtroom, Bankman-Fried's attorney will be able to request that he be released on bail.

Bankman-Fried was one of the world's wealthiest people on paper, with an estimated net worth of \$32 billion. He was a prominent personality in Washington, donating millions of dollars toward mostly left-leaning political causes and Democratic political campaigns. FTX grew to become the second-largest cryptocurrency exchange in the world.

He has said that he did not "knowingly" misuse customers' funds, and said he believes his millions of angry customers will eventually be made whole.

At a congressional hearing last week, the new FTX CEO John Ray III, who is tasked with taking the company through bankruptcy, bluntly disputed those assertions: "We will never get all these assets back," Ray said.

Sweet reported from Charlotte, North Carolina. Associated Press writer Deepti Hajela contributed in New York.

## Senate hits snag in bid to pass \$1.7 trillion spending bill

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Momentum toward passing a \$1.7 trillion government funding bill with more aid for

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Ukraine slowed considerably Wednesday as lawmakers struggled to reach an agreement on amendments needed to get to a final vote and avoid a partial government shutdown at midnight Friday.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said the Senate was making progress, but lawmakers exited the chamber late in the evening looking glum and talking of a standoff.

"This bill is hanging by a thread," said Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del.

At issue is a proposed amendment from Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, seeking to extend pandemic-era restrictions on asylum seekers at the border, also referred to as Title 42.

"Sen. Schumer doesn't want to have a vote on Title 42 because he presumably knows it will pass," Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, said. But the House won't go along, he said, and "everything falls apart."

The impasse came just hours after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sought to assure lawmakers during a joint meeting of Congress that the aid the U.S. is providing was much appreciated and could "speed up our victory." He projected confidence throughout and even told lawmakers in his closing: "Merry Christmas and a happy victorious New Year."

"Your money is not charity. It's an investment in the global security and democracy that we handle in the most responsible way," Zelenskyy said.

The measure includes \$44.9 billion in emergency assistance to Ukraine and NATO allies, above even President Joe Biden's request, and ensures that funding flows to the war effort for months to come. The measure would also boost U.S. defense spending by about 10% to \$858 billion, addressing concerns from some lawmakers that more investment in the nation's military is needed to ensure America's security.

Schumer's hope was that the chamber would approve the bill as soon as Wednesday night, but several lawmakers exited the chamber saying they didn't expect any more votes that night. Once the Senate votes, the House will then have to take it up and pass the measure before midnight Friday to avoid a partial-government shutdown.

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., emerged from a late-night meeting in Schumer's office saying she was optimistic "about putting together a path" that would lead to the bill's passage in the Senate on Thursday.

Schumer and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., took to the floor Wednesday morning urging colleagues to vote for the measure, though they emphasized different priorities.

Schumer said the worst thing Congress could do now is give Russian President Vladimir Putin any signal that the U.S. was wavering in its commitment to defend Ukraine.

He doubled down on that message in the evening, saying he had just met with Zelenskyy.

"He made it clear that without this aid package, the Ukrainians will be in real trouble and could even lose the war," Schumer said. "So that makes the urgency of getting this legislation done all the more important."

McConnell is facing pushback from many Republicans who don't support the spending bill and resent being forced to vote on such a massive package with so little time before a potential shutdown and the Christmas holiday. He highlighted the bill's spending boost for defense and said that non-defense spending, when excluding a big boost for veterans health care, would increase below the rate of inflation.

"If Republicans controlled this chamber, we would have handled the appropriations process entirely differently from top to bottom," McConnell said. "But given the reality of where we stand today, senators have two options this week, just two: we will either give our Armed Forces the resources and the certainty that they need, or we will deny it to them."

The bill, which runs for 4,155 pages, includes about \$772.5 billion for non-defense, discretionary programs and \$858 billion for defense and would finance agencies through September.

Lawmakers worked to stuff as many priorities as they could into the sprawling package, likely the last major bill of the current Congress. That includes \$27 billion in disaster funding to help communities recovering from disasters and extreme weather events as well as an overhaul of federal election law that aims to prevent any future presidents or presidential candidates from trying to overturn an election.

The bipartisan electoral overhaul was a direct response to former President Donald Trump's efforts to convince Republican lawmakers and then-Vice President Mike Pence to object to the certification of Biden's victory on Jan. 6, 2021.

The spending bill also contains scores of policy changes that lawmakers worked furiously to include to

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avoid having to start over in the new Congress next year.

Examples include a provision from Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., that bans TikTok on government cell phones due to security concerns. Another provision supported by the Maine delegation was added to aid the state's lobster and Jonah crab fisheries, delaying regulations proposed to help save endangered North Atlantic right whales. And, on the health care front, the bill requires states to keep children enrolled in Medicaid on coverage for at least a year, which advocates say increases access to preventative care.

However, millions who enrolled in the health care program for low-income Americans could start to lose coverage on April 1 because the bill sunsets a requirement of the COVID-19 public health emergency that prohibited states from booting people off Medicaid.

The bill also provides roughly \$15.3 billion for more than 7,200 projects that lawmakers sought for their home states and districts. Under revamped rules for community project funding, also referred to as earmarks, lawmakers must post their requests online and attest they have no financial interest in the projects. Still, many fiscal conservatives criticize the earmarking as leading to unnecessary spending.

Some Republican senators are raising objections to the measure, not only because the amount of spending but because of Congress's habit of placing 12 separate appropriations bills into one massive package long after the fiscal year has begun and just before critical deadlines approach.

"Giving us a bill at 1:28 in the morning, that's over 4,000 pages, that nobody will have an opportunity to read, that we'll have no idea what's in it, is not the way to run your personal life, your business life or your government," said Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla. "This has to stop."

House Republicans, including Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., likely the next speaker of the House, are encouraging their colleagues in the Senate to only support a short-term extension. That way, they would have more ability to shape the legislation. McCarthy spoke to senators during their caucus lunch Wednesday. A notice sent by GOP leadership to House members urged them to vote against the measure when it comes to the House.

"This deal is designed to sideline the incoming Republican House Majority by extending many programs for multiple years and providing large funding increases for Democrat priorities on top of the exorbitant spending that has already been appropriated this year," the notice stated.

## China sends 39 warplanes, 3 ships toward Taiwan in 24 hours

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — China's military sent 39 planes and three ships toward Taiwan in a 24-hour display of force directed at the island, Taiwan's defense ministry said Thursday.

China's military harassment of self-ruled Taiwan, which it claims is its own territory, has intensified in recent years, and the Communist Party's People's Liberation Army has sent planes or ships toward the island on a near-daily basis.

Between 6 a.m. Wednesday and 6 a.m. Thursday, 30 of the Chinese planes crossed the median of the Taiwan Strait, an unofficial boundary once tacitly accepted by both sides, according to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense.

Those planes flew to the island's southwest and then horizontally all the way to the southeastern side before doubling back, according to a diagram of the flight patterns provided by Taiwan. Among the planes were 21 J-16 fighter jets, 4 H-6 bombers and two early-warning aircraft.

Taiwan said it monitored the Chinese moves through its land-based missile systems, as well as on its own navy vessels.

China's military held large military exercises in August in response to U.S. House speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. Beijing views visits from foreign governments to the island as de facto recognition of the island as independent and a challenge to China's claim of sovereignty.

In its largest military exercises aimed at Taiwan in decades, China sailed ships and flew aircraft regularly across the median of the strait and even fired missiles over Taiwan itself that ended up landing in Japan's exclusive economic zone.

## Storm adds uncertainty to strong holiday travel demand

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Concerns about illness or inflation aren't stopping Americans from hitting the roads and airports this holiday season. But a massive winter storm might.

Forecasters predict an onslaught of heavy snow, ice, flooding and powerful winds from Thursday to Saturday in a broad swath of the country, from the Plains and Midwest to the East Coast. A surge of Arctic air will follow. The Christmas weekend could be the coldest in decades.

The National Weather Service said Wednesday the storm was so large and encompassing that around 190 million people are currently under some type of winter weather advisory.

Southwest Airlines said it has canceled 500 of its 4,000 scheduled flights on Thursday and Friday. The company said it wanted to maintain safe operations for both passengers and crew.

At least 145 flights into or out of Denver International Airport were canceled Wednesday as the city was hit with snow, gusty winds and freezing temperatures, according to FlightAware, a flight tracking company. At least 219 flights into or out of Denver were expected to be canceled Thursday.

FlightAware was also expecting at least 364 flights to be canceled Thursday at O'Hare and Midway airports in Chicago. Earlier this week, those two airports said they had 350 pieces of snow removal equipment and 400,000 gallons of pavement de-icing fluid on hand for the storm.

Delta, American, United, Frontier, Alaska, Southwest and other airlines were waiving change fees and offering travelers the option of choosing new flights to avoid the bad weather.

Jean-Paul Blancq got to Boston's Logan Airport a day early for his Thursday flight home to New Orleans. Blancq had to take a bus to Logan from his seasonal job in New Hampshire and was unsure of the storm's path.

"I hope that my flight doesn't get canceled because I don't know what I'll do," Blancq said.

Bianca Thrasher-Starobin, a consultant and lobbyist in Atlanta, flew into New York Wednesday morning for an event and planned to fly out the same night.

"I'm trying to get out of this weather. I would have stayed longer but I just can't take that chance," she said as she raced through LaGuardia Airport.

Bus and train travelers were also bracing for cancellations and delays.

As of late Wednesday, Amtrak had canceled train service on around 30 routes, some through Dec. 25. Greyhound canceled bus service on 25 routes for Wednesday and Thursday, including service from Las Vegas to Denver, Denver to St. Louis and Chicago to Minneapolis, Memphis and Nashville.

The weather added uncertainty to what was expected to be a busy travel season. Earlier this month, AAA estimated that nearly 113 million people would travel 50 miles from home or more between Dec. 23 and Jan. 2. That's 4% higher than last year, although still short of the record 119 million in 2019.

Most planned to travel by car. About 6% will travel by air, AAA said. Either way, many travelers found themselves hastily changing their itineraries.

Joel Lustre originally planned to drive from Bloomington, Indiana, to McGregor, Iowa, on Thursday. But he shifted his work schedule, and his wife canceled an appointment so they could leave Wednesday and beat the storm.

In Montana, several ski areas announced closures Wednesday and Thursday due to the extremely cold temperatures and sustained winds. Others scaled back offerings. Schools were also closed due to the cold.

Authorities across the country are worried about the potential for power outages and warned people to take precautions to protect the elderly, the homeless and livestock — and, if possible, to postpone travel.

"If you don't have to be out driving, especially on Friday, we ask that you don't be out there," said Ron Brundidge, Detroit's public works director. Brundidge said 50 trucks will be out salting major roads on around-the-clock shifts once expected rain turns to snow on Friday.

Kelli Larkin arrived Wednesday from Florida for a holiday trip to New York. She plans to fly back Saturday night but said she'll watch the forecast and change her return flight if she has to.



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"It's a little concerning," she said. "We've got to play it by ear."

Kurt Ebenhoch, a consumer travel advocate and former airline executive, said fee waivers give airline passengers valuable time ahead of a storm to figure out alternate days and routes. But consumers should read the fine print carefully. Airlines might charge the difference in fares if passengers book beyond a certain window, for example.

Ebenhoch stressed that passengers have the right to ask the airline to book them on a different airline's flight if there are no options that meet their needs. And if the airline cancels the flight, consumers have the right to a full refund, not just credits for future travel.

The urge to travel and visit family and friends over the holidays appeared to outweigh concerns about illness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said coronavirus cases and deaths have increased in recent weeks, and the trio of COVID-19, seasonal flu and respiratory syncytial virus, known as RSV, continues to stress the health care system.

Inflation also didn't seem to be cutting into holiday travel demand. The average round-trip airfare rose 22% to \$397 in the second quarter of this year — the most recent period available — according to U.S. government data. That was higher than overall U.S. price inflation, which peaked at 9% in June.

Lindsey Roeschke, a travel and hospitality analyst with Morning Consult, a market research company, said travelers appear to be cutting back in other ways.

In a recent survey, Morning Consult found that 28% of U.S. travelers were planning a one-day trip for the holidays, up from 14% last year. There was also an uptick in the number of people planning to stay with friends or family instead of at hotels. Roeschke thinks higher prices were a factor.

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Associated Press Photographer Julie Nihinson in New York and Associated Press Writers Steve LeBlanc in Boston, Corey Williams in Detroit, Julie Walker in New York, Amy Hanson in Helena, Montana, and Amancai Biraben in Los Angeles contributed.

## Zelenskyy thanks 'every American,' sees 'turning point'

By ZEKE MILLER, LISA MASCARO and E. EDUARDO CASTILLO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy told cheering U.S. legislators during a defiant wartime visit to the nation's capital on Wednesday that against all odds his country still stands, thanking Americans for helping to fund the war effort with money that is "not charity," but an "investment" in global security and democracy.

The whirlwind stop in Washington — his first known trip outside his country since Russia invaded in February — was aimed at reinvigorating support for his country in the U.S. and around the world at a time when there is concern that allies are growing weary of the costly war and its disruption to global food and energy supplies.

Zelenskyy called the tens of billions of dollars in U.S. military and economic assistance provided over the past year vital to Ukraine's efforts to beat back Russia and appealed for even more in the future.

"Your money is not charity," he sought to reassure both those in the room and those watching at home. "It's an investment in the global security and democracy that we handle in the most responsible way."

Just before his arrival, the U.S. announced a new \$1.8 billion military aid package, including for the first time Patriot surface-to-air missiles. And Congress planned to vote this week on a fresh spending package that includes about \$45 billion in additional emergency assistance to Ukraine.

The speech to Congress came after President Joe Biden hosted Zelenskyy in the Oval Office for strategy consultations, saying the U.S. and Ukraine would maintain their "united defense" as Russia wages a "brutal assault on Ukraine's right to exist as a nation." Biden pledged to help bring about a "just peace."

Zelenskyy told Biden that he had wanted to visit sooner and his visit now demonstrates that the "situation is under control, because of your support."

The highly sensitive trip came after 10 months of a brutal war that has seen tens of thousands of casualties on both sides and devastation for Ukrainian civilians.

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Zelenskyy traveled to Washington aboard a U.S. Air Force jet. The visit had been long sought by both sides, but the right conditions only came together in the last 10 days, U.S. officials said, after high-level discussions about the security both of Zelenskyy and of his people while he was outside of Ukraine. Zelenskyy spent less than 10 hours in Washington before beginning the journey back to Ukraine.

In his remarks to lawmakers, Zelenskyy harked back to U.S. victories in the Battle of the Bulge, a turning point against Nazi Germany in World War II, and the Revolutionary War Battle of Saratoga, an American victory that helped draw France's aid for U.S. independence. The Ukrainian leader predicted that next year would be a "turning point" in the conflict, "when Ukrainian courage and American resolve must guarantee the future of our common freedom — the freedom of people who stand for their values."

Zelenskyy received thunderous applause from members of Congress and presented lawmakers with a Ukrainian flag autographed by front-line troops in Bakhmut, in Ukraine's contested Donetsk province. The flag was displayed behind him on the rostrum by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Kamala Harris. Pelosi, in turn, presented Zelenskyy with an American flag that had flown over the Capitol that day, and Zelenskyy pumped it up and down as he exited the chamber.

Declaring in his speech that Ukraine "will never surrender," Zelenskyy warned that the stakes of the conflict were greater than just the fate of his nation — that democracy worldwide is being tested.

"This battle cannot be ignored, hoping that the ocean or something else will provide protection," he said, speaking in English for what he had billed as a "speech to Americans."

Earlier, in a joint news conference with Biden, Zelenskyy was pressed on how Ukraine would try to bring an end to the conflict. He rejected Biden's framing of finding a "just peace," saying, "For me as a president, 'just peace' is no compromises." He said the war would end once Ukraine's sovereignty, freedom and territorial integrity were restored, and Russia had paid back Ukraine for all the damage inflicted by its forces.

"There can't be any 'just peace' in the war that was imposed on us," he added.

Biden, for his part, said Russia was "trying to use winter as a weapon, but Ukrainian people continue to inspire the world." During the news conference, he said Russian President Vladimir Putin had "no intention of stopping this cruel war."

The two leaders appeared to share a warm rapport, laughing at each other's comments and patting each other on the back throughout the visit, though Zelenskyy made clear he will continue to press Biden and other Western leaders for ever more support.

He said that after the Patriot system was up and running, "we will send another signal to President Biden that we would like to get more Patriots."

"We are in the war," Zelenskyy added with a smile, as Biden chuckled at the direct request. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Biden told Zelenskyy that it was "important for the American people, and for the world, to hear directly from you, Mr. President, about Ukraine's fight, and the need to continue to stand together through 2023."

Zelenskyy had headed to Washington after making a daring and dangerous trip Tuesday to what he called the hottest spot on the 1,300-kilometer (800-mile) front line of the war, the city of Bakhmut.

Poland's private broadcaster, TVN24, said Zelenskyy crossed into Poland early Wednesday on his way to Washington. The station showed footage of what appeared to be Zelenskyy arriving at a train station and being escorted to a motorcade of American SUVs. TVN24 said the video, partially blurred for security reasons, was shot in Przemysl, a Polish border town that has been the arrival point for many refugees fleeing the war.

Officials, citing security concerns, were cagey about Zelenskyy's travel plans, but a U.S. official confirmed that Zelenskyy arrived on a U.S. Air Force jet that landed at Joint Base Andrews, just outside the capital, from the Polish city of Rzeszow.

Biden told Zelenskyy, who wore a combat-green sweatshirt and boots, that "it's an honor to be by your side."

U.S. and Ukrainian officials have made clear they do not envision an imminent resolution to the war and are preparing for fighting to continue for some time. The latest infusion of U.S. money would be the biggest yet — and exceed Biden's \$37 billion request.

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Biden repeated that while the U.S. will arm and train Ukraine, American forces will not be directly engaged in the war.

The latest U.S. military aid package includes not only a Patriot missile battery but precision guided bombs for fighter jets, U.S. officials said. It represents an expansion in the kinds of advanced weaponry intended to bolster Ukraine's air defenses against what has been an increasing barrage of Russian missiles.

Russia's Foreign Ministry has said the delivery of the advanced surface-to-air missile system would be considered a provocative step and that the system and any crews accompanying it would be a legitimate target for Moscow's military.

"It's a defensive system," Biden said of sending the missile system. "It's not escalatory — it's defensive."

The visit comes at an important moment, with the White House bracing for greater resistance when Republicans take control of the House in January and give more scrutiny to aid for Ukraine. GOP leader Kevin McCarthy of California has said his party will not write a "blank check" for Ukraine.

Zelenskyy appeared well aware of political divisions in the U.S. over prolonged overseas spending, and called on the House and Senate lawmakers to ensure American leadership remains "bicameral and bipartisan."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer opened the chamber's session on Wednesday by saying that passage of the aid package and confirmation of the new U.S. ambassador to Russia, Lynne M. Tracy, would send a strong signal that Americans stand "unequivocally" with Ukraine. Tracy was confirmed later on a 93-2 vote.

The Senate's top Republican, Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell, said "the most basic reasons for continuing to help Ukraine degrade and defeat the Russian invaders are cold, hard, practical American interests." He said "defeating Russia's aggression will help prevent further security crises in Europe."

Russia's invasion, which began Feb. 24, has lost momentum. The illegally annexed provinces of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia remain fiercely contested.

With the fighting in the east at a stalemate, Moscow has used missiles and drones to attack Ukraine's power equipment, hoping to leave people without electricity as freezing weather sets in.

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Castillo reported from Kyiv, Ukraine. Associated Press writers Farnoush Amiri, Lolita C. Baldor, Tara Copp, Kevin Freking, Amer Madhani, Chris Megerian and Seung Min Kim contributed to this report.

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Follow the AP's coverage of Russia's war in Ukraine at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

## **EXPLAINER: How Correa lost Giants deal, ended up with Mets**

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Baseball Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Fans of the San Francisco Giants spent a week reveling in the good news: Carlos Correa was coming to the Bay Area, lured by a megadeal worth \$350 million over 13 years.

And then, just like that, the two-time All-Star was gone, poached by the New York Mets and deep-pocketed owner Steve Cohen.

For fans of both teams, it was a stunning, topsy-turvy 24 hours. San Francisco woke up Tuesday morning expecting the Giants to introduce the 28-year-old in black and orange. Then the news conference was canceled without explanation.

When The Associated Press reported a few hours later that there had been a medical concern flagged during Correa's physical, fans elsewhere — but especially in New York — began licking their chops.

The next shoe dropped while most fans were asleep. Correa's agent, Scott Boras, had quickly gotten to work finding new suitors, and New York's \$315 million, 12-year offer was enough to attract Correa to the Big Apple instead.

News of Correa's agreement with the Giants broke Dec. 13. Here's a look at how that deal never came to pass.

WHAT HAPPENED TO CORREA'S \$350 MILLION CONTRACT WITH SAN FRANCISCO?

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The Associated Press reported on Correa's late-night agreement with San Francisco after baseball's winter meetings, citing a person familiar with the negotiations. The person was granted anonymity because the agreement was subject to a successful physical and had not been announced by the team.

That practice is common in baseball. News of big free-agent signings frequently breaks when an agreement is reached, but teams and players rarely confirm the deal until the ink is dry on the contract. And all player contracts are subject to physicals. Usually, those exams are treated as a formality. Occasionally, a real issue arises.

The Mets dealt with their own physical hiccup in 2021, when they declined to sign first-round draft pick Kumar Rocker over concerns with his medical scans.

But never has a free agent of Correa's ilk had an entire deal scrapped like this.

"The Giants throughout indicated that they wanted to negotiate further with Carlos, and we understood that," Boras said. "We negotiated with teams for 12 hours and we never heard from the Giants during that time."

Farhan Zaidi, the Giants' president of baseball operations, issued only a brief statement Wednesday.

"While we are prohibited from disclosing confidential medical information, as Scott Boras stated publicly, there was a difference of opinion over the results of Carlos' physical examination," Zaidi said. "We wish Carlos the best."

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE GIANTS?

It's yet another big free-agency whiff for Zaidi's front office. Another tough winter for the jilted Giants and their increasingly impatient fan base, too. San Francisco went 81-81 last season to miss the playoffs a year after a franchise-record 107 wins and an NL West title.

The Giants were determined to create some long-term stability in the middle infield and might be reeling from this blow for a while. Zaidi has taken heat for failing to land a top free agent, and San Francisco already swung and missed on Aaron Judge this offseason — he was re-introduced by the New York Yankees on Wednesday after finalizing a \$360 million, nine-year contract.

San Francisco has veteran shortstop Brandon Crawford signed through 2023, but he has hinted this could be it. He also has dealt with injuries in recent years and was limited to 118 games last season.

Correa was to be his heir apparent and the face of the franchise for the next decade-plus.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE METS?

Cohen is going for it like no other owner has done before.

A year after the 101-win club lost in the NL wild-card round to San Diego, the Mets feel they've added the missing piece to make them a World Series contender — thanks to Cohen's ability to foot the bill.

Correa's addition, pending a successful physical, would increase the Mets' luxury tax payroll next year to \$394 million, putting them on track to pay a record tax of about \$120 million — nearly triple the current high of \$44 million set by the 2015 Los Angeles Dodgers. The estimates would change if Correa's deal contains deferred money or if New York trades players.

Correa would cost the Mets \$49.88 million next year in salary and tax, if there is no deferred money in the deal.

The Mets' offseason haul has also included bringing back outfielder Brandon Nimmo on a \$162 million, eight-year deal, adding AL Cy Young Award winner Justin Verlander on an \$86.7 million, two-year contract and signing Japanese pitcher Kodai Senga on Saturday to a \$75 million, five-year deal.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The top shortstops are signed, leaving limited choices remaining on the market. Trea Turner joined the Phillies and Xander Bogaerts signed in San Diego.

The Chicago Cubs introduced their new shortstop, Dansby Swanson, on Wednesday after he finalized a \$177 million, seven-year contract.

Cubs President Jed Hoyer has learned to never get ahead of himself, and like so many others, he was shocked to hear of the Giants' about-face. He wouldn't address San Francisco's situation directly.

"Medical processes, I feel like in this job over time you start never thinking about anything until ... not only are you in the end zone, but like they've done the review process and the booth has confirmed it,"



Hoyer said. "I just think you don't celebrate until things are done, in part because we've all, if you do this long enough, you end up a part of a situation where what seems to be done may not be."

AP Baseball Writers Ronald Blum, Mike Fitzpatrick and Jay Cohen contributed to this report.

AP MLB: <https://apnews.com/hub/mlb> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Sports](https://twitter.com/AP_Sports)

## As flu rages, US releases medicine from national stockpile

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration said Wednesday it will release doses of prescription flu medicine from the Strategic National Stockpile to states as flu-sickened patients continue to flock to hospitals and doctors' offices around the country.

This year's flu season has hit hard and early. Some people are even noticing bare shelves at pharmacies and grocery stores when they make a run for over-the-counter medicines as cases have spiked. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the flu has resulted in 150,000 hospitalizations and 9,300 deaths so far this season.

"Jurisdictions will be able to get the support they need to keep Americans healthy as flu cases rise this winter," Dawn O'Connell, an assistant secretary for preparedness and response at the Health and Human Services Department, which oversees the CDC, said in a statement.

States will be able to request doses of the prescription flu medication Tamiflu kept in the Strategic National Stockpile from HHS. The administration is not releasing how many doses will be made available. Antiviral medications were released from the stockpile more than a decade ago during the H1N1, also known as swine flu, pandemic.

Last week, the federal agency also announced it would allow states to dip into statewide stockpiles for Tamiflu, making millions of treatment courses available. Tamiflu can be prescribed to treat flu in people over the age of 2 weeks old.

This flu season is coming on the heels of a nasty spike of RSV, or respiratory syncytial virus, cases in children and just as COVID-19 cases are climbing — again.

Spot shortages of over-the-counter pain relievers and medicines have been reported at stores around the country, particularly for children.

HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra and Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Robert Califf hosted conversations Tuesday with leaders representing pharmaceutical companies to discuss how manufacturers are working to keep in-demand remedies available. The companies told the agencies that they are not seeing widespread shortages. Meanwhile, major drug makers like Johnson & Johnson and Perrigo report their production lines are running around the clock.

Pharmacies, however, are limiting purchases of certain medicines, the Associated Press reported Monday. CVS Health, for example, has placed a two-product limit on all children's pain relief products bought through its pharmacies or online. Walgreens is limiting customers online to six purchases of children's over-the-counter fever reducing products.

The FDA has not reported a shortage of Tamiflu. However, the federal agency says the prescription antibiotic amoxicillin is in short supply due to increased demand.

AP Medical Writer Mike Stobbe in New York contributed to this report.

## Jan. 6 panel prepares to unveil final report on insurrection

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An 800-page report set to be released Thursday by House investigators will conclude that then-President Donald Trump criminally plotted to overturn his 2020 election defeat and "provoked his supporters to violence" at the Capitol with false claims of widespread voter fraud.

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The resulting Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection of Trump's followers threatened democracy with "horrific" brutality toward law enforcement and "put the lives of American lawmakers at risk," according to the report's executive summary.

"The central cause of January 6th was one man, former President Donald Trump, who many others followed," reads the report from the House Jan. 6 committee, which is expected to be released in full on Thursday. "None of the events of January 6th would have happened without him."

Ahead of the report's release, the committee on Wednesday evening released 34 transcripts from the 1,000 interviews it conducted over the last 18 months. Most of those released are of witnesses who invoked their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination.

The report's eight chapters of findings will largely mirror nine hearings this year that presented evidence from the private interviews and millions of pages of documents. They tell the story of Trump's extraordinary and unprecedented campaign to overturn his defeat and his pressure campaign on state officials, the Justice Department, members of Congress and his own vice president to change the vote.

A 154-page summary of the report released Monday detailed how Trump, a Republican, amplified the false claims on social media and in public appearances, encouraging his supporters to travel to Washington and protest Democrat Joe Biden's presidential election win. And how he told them to "fight like hell" at a huge rally in front of the White House that morning and then did little to stop the violence as they beat police, broke into the Capitol and sent lawmakers running for their lives.

It was a "multi-part conspiracy," the committee concludes.

The massive, damning report comes as Trump is running again for the presidency and also facing multiple federal investigations, including probes of his role in the insurrection and the presence of classified documents at his Florida estate. A House committee is expected to release his tax returns in the coming days — documents he has fought for years to keep private. And he has been blamed by Republicans for a worse-than-expected showing in the midterm elections, leaving him in his most politically vulnerable state since he won the 2016 election.

It is also a culmination of four years of a House Democratic majority that has spent much of its time and energy investigating Trump and that is ceding power to Republicans in two weeks. Democrats impeached Trump twice — both times he was acquitted by the Senate — and investigated his finances, his businesses, his foreign ties and his family.

But the Jan. 6 probe has been the most personal for the lawmakers, most of whom were in the Capitol when Trump's supporters stormed the building and interrupted the certification of Biden's victory.

While the lasting impact of the probes remains to be seen — most Republicans have stayed loyal to the former president — the committee's hearings were watched by tens of millions of people over the summer. And 44% of voters in November's midterm elections said the future of democracy was their primary consideration at the polls, according to AP VoteCast, a national survey of the electorate.

"This committee is nearing the end of its work, but as a country we remain in strange and uncharted waters," said the panel's chairman, Democratic Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, at the meeting Monday to adopt the report and recommend criminal charges against Trump. "We've never had a president of the United States stir up a violent attempt to block the transfer of power. I believe nearly two years later, this is still a time of reflection and reckoning."

The "reckoning" committee members are hoping for is criminal charges against Trump and key allies. But only the Justice Department has the power to prosecute, so the panel sent referrals recommending the department investigate the former president on four crimes, including aiding an insurrection.

While its main points are familiar, the Jan. 6 report will provide new detail from the hundreds of interviews and thousands of documents the committee has collected. Transcripts and some video are expected to be released as well over the coming two weeks. Republicans take over the House on Jan. 3, when the panel will be dissolved.

"I guarantee there'll be some very interesting new information in the report and even more so in the transcripts," Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., told "CBS Mornings."

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The transcripts released Wednesday include Jeffrey Clark, a senior official in the Trump Justice Department who worked to advance Trump's efforts to overturn the election, and John Eastman, a conservative lawyer and an architect of Trump's last-ditch efforts to stay in office. Each invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination.

Also included in the release is testimony from witnesses associated with extremist groups that were involved in planning ahead of the attack. Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes, who was convicted last month of seditious conspiracy for his role in the planning, and former Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrío both spoke to the committee. Tarrío and four other members of the extremist group are in court on similar charges this month.

The summary of the report describes how Trump refused to accept the lawful result of the 2020 election and plotted to overturn his defeat. Trump pressured state legislators to hold votes invalidating Biden's electors, sought to "corrupt the U.S. Department of Justice" by urging department officials to make false statements about the election and repeatedly, personally tried to persuade Vice President Mike Pence to upend democracy with unprecedented objections at the congressional joint session, it says.

Trump has tried to discredit the report, slamming members of the committee as "thugs and scoundrels" as he has continued to falsely dispute his 2020 loss.

In response to the panel's criminal referrals, Trump said that "These folks don't get it that when they come after me, people who love freedom rally around me. It strengthens me."

The report will give minute-by-minute detail of what Trump was doing — and not doing — for around three hours as his supporters beat police and broke into the Capitol. Trump riled up the crowd at the rally that morning and then did little to stop his supporters for several hours as he watched the violence unfold on television inside the White House and ignored pleas from aides to stop it.

Lawmakers point out the evidence about Trump's actions they still do not have from that time, including call logs, entries in the official daily diary or calls to any security officials.

"President Trump did not contact a single top national security official during the day. Not at the Pentagon, nor at the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, the F.B.I., the Capitol Police Department, or the D.C. Mayor's office," the report says.

There is also a lack of official photographs of the president in those hours.

"President Trump appears to have instructed that the White House photographer was not to take any photographs," the committee wrote in its summary, citing an interview with chief White House photographer Shealah Craighead.

The panel also raised questions about whether some aides were pressured by Trump or his remaining allies not to be forthcoming during their interviews with the committee.

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Associated Press writers Eric Tucker, Jill Colvin, Farnoush Amiri, Lisa Mascaro and Michael Balsamo contributed to this report.

Follow the AP's coverage of the Capitol insurrection at <https://apnews.com/hub/capitol-siege>.

## 20-year church abuse probe ends with monsignor's quiet plea

By MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

Twenty years after city prosecutors convened a grand jury to investigate the handling of priest-abuse complaints within the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the tortuous legal case came to an end with a cleric's misdemeanor no contest plea in a near-empty City Hall courtroom.

Monsignor William Lynn, 71, had served nearly three years in state prison as appeals courts reviewed the fiery three-month trial that led to his felony child endangerment conviction in 2012. The verdict was twice overturned, leaving prosecutors pursuing the thinning case in recent years with a single alleged victim whose appearance in court was in doubt.

In the end, they said Lynn could end the two-decade ordeal by pleading no contest to a charge of fail-

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ing to turn over records to the 2002 grand jury. A judge took the plea during a short break from her civil caseload last month, and imposed no further punishment.

"He lost 10 years of his life, 10 years of his priestly life," said defense lawyer Thomas Bergstrom, speaking of the decade since Lynn's conviction. "It's a travesty. It's an absolute travesty."

"You're fighting an uphill battle because the public at large misunderstood what he was convicted of. They thought he was an abuser," Bergstrom said.

Lynn was the first U.S. church official ever charged, convicted or imprisoned over their handling of priest-abuse complaints.

His trial attracted a packed courtroom full of press, priest-abuse victims and outraged Catholics, along with a few church loyalists. Lynn, the longtime secretary for clergy, was accused of sending a known predator — named on a list of problem priests he had prepared for Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua — to an accuser's northeast Philadelphia parish.

The trial judge allowed nearly two dozen other priest-abuse victims to testify about abuse they had suffered in the archdiocese over a half century. An appeals court later said their weeks of testimony over uncharged acts were unfair to Lynn — who some saw as a scapegoat for the church, given that the bishops and cardinals above him were never charged.

"This is one defendant, one count of endangering the welfare of children, with one group of children," Judge Gwendolyn Bright said before his retrial was set to start in March 2020. "We're not bringing in the so-called or alleged 'sins of the Catholic Church.'"

The pandemic closed the courthouse, and the case against Lynn stalled yet again until the recent plea offer.

A spokesperson for District Attorney Larry Krasner, who inherited the case from his predecessors, called Lynn's unannounced Nov. 2 plea "the appropriate path for bringing finality and closure to the victims, who have endured retraumatization throughout the legal process for years" and said they did not want to face another trial.

The archdiocese did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

Lynn, who remains a priest, has been saying Mass for retired nuns and hopes to assume more duties, according to Bergstrom, who declined to make his client available to the press on Wednesday.

At his trial, Lynn said he had made a list of 35 suspected predator priests so Bevilacqua would address the matter, only to have the list be destroyed.

"I did not intend any harm to come to (the victim). The fact is, my best was not good enough to stop that harm," Lynn testified.

In recent years, prosecutors were not sure they could get the trial accuser — a policeman's son who testified to his long struggle with addiction — back in court for the retrial, complicating their trial strategy. Assistant District Attorney Patrick Blessington, the lead trial prosecutor in 2012, had said he could try the case without a victim by arguing that Lynn had placed "a bomb" in the parish, whether or not it went off.

Blessington is now retired. And, ultimately, District Attorney Krasner decided not to try that strategy.

"The victims in this matter expressed to the commonwealth that proceeding (with another trial) ... would cause irreparable harm and further victimize them," his office said in its statement.

The trial accuser said that he had been abused by two priests and his Catholic school teacher. One of them, defrocked priest Edward Avery, took a plea offer days before trial. The Rev. Charles Engelhardt, who said he had never met the accuser, was convicted at a 2013 trial and died in prison. Teacher Bernard Shero was released in 2017 after his conviction was overturned and, like Lynn, pleaded no contest to lesser charges.

The priest-abuse scandal has cost the Roman Catholic church an estimated \$3 billion or more, and plunged dioceses around the world into bankruptcy.

\_\_\_ Follow Maryclaire Dale on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/Maryclairedale>

**Israel's Netanyahu says he has formed new government**



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By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Designated Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced late Wednesday that he has successfully formed a new coalition, setting the stage for him to return to power as head of the most right-wing Israeli government ever to hold office.

Netanyahu made the announcement in a phone call to President Isaac Herzog moments before a mid-night deadline. His Likud Party released a brief video clip of the smiling Netanyahu and a recording of the conversation.

“I wanted to announce to you that thanks to the amazing public support we received in the elections, I have succeeded in forming a government that will take care of all the citizens of Israel,” Netanyahu said.

The move came after weeks of surprisingly difficult negotiations with his partners — who still have need to finalize their power-sharing deals with Netanyahu’s Likud Party. Nonetheless, Netanyahu said he intends to complete the process “as soon as possible next week” A date for its swearing-in wasn’t immediately announced.

Even if he is successful, Netanyahu faces a difficult task ahead. He will preside over a coalition dominated by far-right and ultra-Orthodox partners pushing for dramatic changes that could alienate large swaths of the Israeli public, raise the risk of conflict with the Palestinians and put Israel on a collision course with some of its closest supporters, including the United States and the Jewish American community.

Netanyahu already has reached agreements with some of the most controversial figures in Israeli politics.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, who once was convicted of incitement to racism and supporting a terrorist organization, has been appointed security minister — a new position that will place him in charge of the national police force.

His running mate, Bezalel Smotrich, a West Bank settler leader who believes Israel should annex the occupied territory, is set to receive widespread authority over West Bank settlement construction, in addition to serving as finance minister.

Another ally, Avi Maoz, head of a small religious, anti-LGBTQ faction, has been placed in control of parts of the country’s national education system. Maoz, who is openly hostile to the liberal streams of Judaism popular in the U.S., also has been appointed a deputy minister in charge of “Jewish identity.”

In the Nov. 1 election, Netanyahu and his allies captured a majority of 64 seats in the 120-member Knesset, and he vowed to quickly put together a coalition. But that process turned out to be more complicated than anticipated, in part because his ultra-Orthodox and far-right partners demanded firm guarantees on the scope of their powers.

Before the government is sworn in, Netanyahu will try to push through a series of laws needed to expand Ben-Gvir’s authority over the police and to create a new ministerial position granting Smotrich powers in the West Bank that in the past were held by the defense minister.

The parliament will also try to approve legislation to allow Aryeh Deri, a veteran politician who once served a prison sentence in a bribery case, to serve as a government minister while he is on probation for another conviction earlier this year on tax offenses.

The ultra-Orthodox, meanwhile, are seeking increases in subsidies for their autonomous education system, which has drawn heavy criticism for focusing on religious studies while providing its students few skills for the employment world.

Likud lawmakers have been competing for a shrinking collection of assignments after Netanyahu gave away many plumb jobs to his governing partners.

Netanyahu, who himself is on trial for alleged corruption, is eager to return to office after spending the past year and a half as opposition leader. He and his partners are expected to push through a series of laws shaking up the country’s judiciary and potentially clearing Netanyahu of any charges.

Netanyahu is Israel’s longest-serving prime minister, serving a total of 15 years before he was ousted last year. He has claimed he is a victim of overzealous police, prosecutors and judges. But critics say the plans, including an expected proposal that would allow parliament to overturn Supreme Court decisions, will destroy the country’s democratic institutions and system of checks and balances.

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Netanyahu has sought to portray himself as the responsible adult in the emerging government, saying in interviews that he will set policies. But his partners are likely to test his limits at every chance.

Ben-Gvir, for instance, who is known for his anti-Arab rhetoric and provocative stunts such as brandishing a pistol in a tense Palestinian neighborhood, has called for loosening the rules of engagement allowing security forces to shoot at suspected Palestinian assailants. He also wants to grant soldiers immunity from prosecution in such cases.

He also wants to ease restrictions on Jewish visits to Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site — a hilltop compound revered by Jews and Muslims. Even the smallest changes at the site have in the past sparked violent clashes, and Ben-Gvir's plans already have drawn warnings from the Hamas militant group in the Gaza Strip.

Smotrich's plans to expand West Bank settlement construction and legalize dozens of illegally built outposts could also raise tensions with the Palestinians and the international community. His partners' animosity toward the Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism have rankled Jewish American groups.

At home, Netanyahu's expected concessions to the ultra-Orthodox and plans to overhaul the country's legal system could infuriate many in the country's secular middle class. Dozens of executives from the powerful high-tech sector last week signed a petition warning that the proposals could drive away investors, and protests against the incoming coalition have already begun.

The U.S. and European Union have both said they will judge the new government by its policies, not its personalities. But in a recent speech, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken made clear he expects it to uphold "shared values" and not take actions that could preclude the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Yohanan Plesner, a former Knesset member who is now president of the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank, said he expects to see a stable coalition take power in the coming days.

"It's in the interest of all members of the new coalition to form this government," he said. "All of them have a lot to gain and much to lose if it's not formed."

## **An Iranian masterwork opens with its director behind bars**

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — After being arrested for creating antigovernment propaganda in 2010, the Iranian director Jafar Panahi was banned from making films for 20 years. Since then, he's made five widely acclaimed features.

His latest, "No Bears," opens soon in U.S. theaters while Panahi is in prison.

In July, Panahi went to the Tehran prosecutor's office to inquire about the arrest of Mohammad Rasoulof, a filmmaker detained in the government's crackdown on protests. Panahi himself was arrested and, on a decade-old charge, sentenced to six years in jail.

Panahi's films, made in Iran without government approval, are sly feats of artistic resistance. He plays himself in meta self-portraits that clandestinely capture the mechanics of Iranian society with a humanity both playful and devastating. Panahi made "This is Not a Film" in his apartment. "Taxi" was shot almost entirely inside a car, with a smiling Panahi playing the driver and picking up passengers along the way.

In "No Bears," Panahi plays a fictionalized version of himself while making a film in a rural town along the Iran-Turkey border. It's one of the most acclaimed films of the year. The New York Times and The Associated Press named it one of the top 10 films of the year. Film critic Justin Chang of The Los Angeles Times called "No Bears" 2022's best movie.

"No Bears" is landing at a time when the Iranian film community is increasingly ensnarled in a harsh government crackdown. A week after "No Bears" premiered at the Venice Film Festival, with Panahi already behind bars, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died while being held by Iran's morality police. Her death sparked three months of women-led protests, still ongoing, that have rocked Iran's theocracy.

More than 500 protesters have been killed in the crackdown since Sept. 17, according to the group Human Rights Activists in Iran. More than 18,200 people have been detained.

On Saturday, the prominent Iranian actress Taraneh Alidoosti, star of Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning "The

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Salesman," was arrested after posting an Instagram message expressing solidarity with a man recently executed for crimes allegedly committed during the protests.

In the outcry that followed Alidoosti's arrest, Farhadi — the director of "A Separation" and "A Hero" — called for Alidoosti's release "alongside that of my other fellow cineastes Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof and all the other less-known prisoners whose only crime is the attempt for a better life."

"If showing such support is a crime, then tens of millions of people of this land are criminals," Farhadi wrote on Instagram.

Panahi's absence has been acutely felt on the world's top movie stages. At Venice, where "No Bears" was given a special jury prize, a red-carpet walkout was staged at the film's premiere. Festival director Alberto Barbera and jury president Julianne Moore were among the throngs silently protesting the imprisonment of Panahi and other filmmakers.

"No Bears" will also again test a long-criticized Academy Awards policy. Submissions for the Oscars' best international film category are made only by a country's government. Critics have said that allows authoritative regimes to dictate which films compete for the sought-after prize.

Arthouse distributors Sideshow and Janus Films, which helped lead Ryusuke Hamaguchi's Japanese drama "Drive My Car" to four Oscar nominations a year ago, acquired "No Bears" with the hope that its merit and Panahi's cause would outshine that restriction.

"He puts himself at risk every time he does something like this," says Jonathan Sehring, Sideshow founder and a veteran independent film executive. "When you have regimes that won't even let a filmmaker make a movie and in spite of it they do, it's inspiring."

"We knew it wasn't going to be the Iranian submission, obviously," adds Sehring. "But we wanted to position Jafar as a potential best director, best screenplay, a number of different categories. And we also believe the film can work theatrically."

The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences declined to comment on possible reforms to the international film category. Among the 15 shortlisted films for the award announced Wednesday was the Danish entry "Holy Spider," set in Iran. After Iranian authorities declined to authorize it, director Ali Abbasi shot the film, based on real-life serial killings, in Jordan.

"No Bears" opens in New York on Dec. 23 and Los Angeles on Jan. 10 before rolling out nationally.

In it, Panahi rents an apartment from which he, with a fitful internet signal, directs a film with the help of assistants. Their handing off cameras and memory cards gives, perhaps, an illuminating window into how Panahi has worked under government restrictions. In "No Bears," he comes under increasing pressure from village authorities who believe he's accidentally captured a compromising image.

"It's not easy to make a movie to begin with, but to make it secretly is very difficult, especially in Iran where a totalitarian government with such tight control over the country and spies everywhere," says Iranian film scholar and documentarian Jamsheed Akrami-Ghorveh. "It's really a triumph. I can't compare him with any other filmmaker."

In one of the film's most moving scenes, Panahi stands along the border at night. Gazing at the lights in the distance, he contemplates crossing it — a life in exile that Panahi in real life steadfastly refused to ever adopt.

Some aspects of the film are incredibly close to reality. Parts of "No Bears" were shot in Turkey just like the film within the film. In Turkey, an Iranian couple (played by Mina Kavani and Bakhiyar Panjeei) are trying to obtain stolen passports to reach Europe.

Kavani herself has been living in exile for the last seven years. She starred in Sepideh Farsi's 2014 romance "Red Rose." When nudity in the film led to media harassment, Kavani chose to live in Paris. Kavani was struck by the profound irony of Panahi directing her by video chat from over the border.

"This is the genius of his art. The idea that we were both in exile but on a different side was magic," says Kavani. "He was the first person that talked about that, what's happening to exiled Iranian people outside of Iran. This is very interesting to me, that he is in exile in his own country, but he's talking about those who left his country."

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Many of Panahi's colleagues imagine that even in his jail cell, Panahi is probably thinking through his next film — whether he ever gets to make it or not. When "No Bears" played at the New York Film Festival, Kavani read a statement from Panahi.

"The history of Iranian cinema witnesses the constant and active presence of independent directors who have struggled to push back censorship and to ensure the survival of this art," it said. "While on this path, some were banned from making films, others were forced into exile or reduced to isolation. And yet, the hope of creating again is a reason for existence. No matter where, when, or under what circumstances, an independent filmmaker is either creating or thinking."

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

## **Franco Harris, Steeler who caught Immaculate Reception, dies**

By WILL GRAVES AP Sports Writer

PITTSBURGH (AP) — The ball fluttered in the air and all but one of the 22 players on the Three Rivers Stadium turf on that cold December day 50 years ago essentially stopped.

Franco Harris never did.

The Pittsburgh Steelers running back kept right on going, the instincts that carried him through his life both on and off the field during his Hall of Fame career taking over, shifting the perception of a moribund franchise and a reeling region in the process.

The Steelers rarely won before his arrival in 1972. The moment his shoe-top grab eternally known as the "Immaculate Reception" entered the lexicon, they rarely lost.

Harris, whose heads-up thinking authored the most iconic play in NFL history, has died. He was 72. Harris' son, Dok, told The Associated Press on Wednesday that his father died overnight. No cause of death was given.

His death comes two days before the 50th anniversary of the play that provided the jolt that helped transform the Steelers from also-rans into the NFL's elite, and three days before Pittsburgh is scheduled to retire his No. 32 during a ceremony at halftime of its game against the Las Vegas Raiders. Harris had been busy in the run-up to the celebration, doing media interviews Monday to talk about a moment to which he is forever linked.

"It is difficult to find the appropriate words to describe Franco Harris' impact on the Pittsburgh Steelers, his teammates, the City of Pittsburgh and Steelers Nation," team President Art Rooney II said in a statement. "From his rookie season, which included the Immaculate Reception, through the next 50 years, Franco brought joy to people on and off the field. He never stopped giving back in so many ways. He touched so many, and he was loved by so many."

Even in retirement, Harris remained a fixture in the community and a team whose standard of excellence began with a young kid from New Jersey who saw the ball in the air and kept on running. It wasn't uncommon for Harris to stop by the Steelers' practice facility to chat with players who weren't even born before his fateful play.

"I just admire and love the man," coach Mike Tomlin said. "There's so much to be learned from him in terms of how he conducted himself, how he embraced the responsibilities of being Franco for Steeler Nation, for this community ... He embraced it all and did it with such grace and class and patience and time for people."

Harris ran for 12,120 yards and won four Super Bowl rings with the Steelers in the 1970s, a dynasty that began in earnest when Harris decided to keep running during a last-second heave by Pittsburgh quarterback Terry Bradshaw in a playoff game against Oakland in 1972.

With Pittsburgh trailing 7-6 and facing fourth-and-10 from its own 40-yard line and 22 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter, Bradshaw drifted back and threw deep to running back Frenchy Fuqua. Fuqua and Oakland defensive back Jack Tatum collided, sending the ball careening back toward midfield in the direction of Harris. Game officials weren't sure who deflected the pass; replays were inconclusive.



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While nearly everyone else on the field stopped, Harris kept his legs churning, snatching the ball just inches above the turf near the Oakland 45, then outracing several stunned Raider defenders to give the Steelers their first playoff victory some four decades after founder Art Rooney Sr. brought the still-fledgling NFL to western Pennsylvania.

"That play really represents our teams of the '70s," Harris said after the "Immaculate Reception" was voted the greatest play in the league's first 100 years in 2020.

Though the Raiders cried foul in the moment, over time they somewhat embraced their role in NFL lore. Oakland linebacker Phil Villapiano, who was covering Harris on the play, even attended a 40th-anniversary celebration of the play in 2012, when a small monument commemorating the exact location of Harris' catch was unveiled. Villapiano still plans to attend Saturday night's jersey retirement ceremony for his former rival-turned-friend, and is just fine with the mystery that still surrounds what actually happened at 3:29 p.m. on Dec. 23, 1972.

"There's so many angles and so many things. Nobody will ever figure that out," Villapiano said. "Let's let it go on forever."

While the Steelers fell the next week to Miami in the AFC championship, Pittsburgh was on its way to becoming the dominant team of the 1970s, twice winning back-to-back Super Bowls, first after the 1974 and 1975 seasons and again after the 1978 and 1979 seasons.

And it all began with a play that shifted the fortunes of a franchise and, in some ways, a region.

"It's hard to believe it's been 50 years, that's a long time," Harris said in September when the team announced it would retire his number. "And to have it so alive, you know, is still thrilling and exciting. It really says a lot. It means a lot."

Harris, a 6-foot-2, 230-pound workhorse from Penn State, found himself in the center of it all. He churned for a then-record 158 yards rushing and a touchdown in Pittsburgh's 16-6 victory over Minnesota in Super Bowl IX on his way to winning the game's Most Valuable Player award. He scored at least once in three of the four Super Bowls he played in, and his 354 career yards rushing on the NFL's biggest stage remains a record nearly four decades after his retirement.

"One of the kindest, gentlest men I have ever known," Hall of Famer Tony Dungy, a teammate of Harris' in Pittsburgh in the late 1970s, posted on Twitter. "He was a great person & great teammate. Hall of Fame player but so much more than that. A tremendous role model for me!"

Born in Fort Dix, New Jersey, on March 7, 1950, Harris played collegiately at Penn State, where his primary job was to open holes for backfield mate Lydell Mitchell. The Steelers, in the final stages of a rebuild led by Hall of Fame coach Chuck Noll, saw enough in Harris to make him the 13th overall pick in the 1972 draft.

"When (Noll) drafted Franco Harris, he gave the offense heart, he gave it discipline, he gave it desire, he gave it the ability to win a championship in Pittsburgh," Hall of Fame wide receiver Lynn Swann said of his frequent roommate on team road trips.

Harris' impact was immediate. He won the NFL's Rookie of the Year award in 1972 after rushing for a then-team-rookie record 1,055 yards and 10 touchdowns as the Steelers reached the postseason for just the second time.

The city's large Italian-American population embraced Harris immediately, led by two local businessmen who founded what became known as "Franco's Italian Army," a nod to Harris' roots as the son of an African-American father and an Italian mother.

Though the "Immaculate Reception" made Harris a star, he typically preferred to let his play and not his mouth do the talking. On a team that featured big personalities in Bradshaw, defensive tackle Joe Greene and linebacker Jack Lambert among others, the intensely quiet Harris spent 12 seasons as the engine that helped Pittsburgh's offense go.

Eight times he topped 1,000 yards rushing in a season, including five times while playing a 14-game schedule. He piled up an additional 1,556 yards rushing and 16 rushing touchdowns in the playoffs, both second all-time behind Emmitt Smith.

Despite his gaudy numbers, Harris stressed that he was just one cog in an extraordinary machine that

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redefined greatness.

"You see, during that era, each player brought their own little piece with them to make that wonderful decade happen," Harris said during his Hall of Fame speech in 1990. "Each player had their strengths and weaknesses, each their own thinking, each their own method, just each, each had their own. But then it was amazing, it all came together, and it stayed together to forge the greatest team of all times."

Harris also made it a habit to stick up for his teammates. When Bradshaw took what Harris felt was an illegal late hit from Dallas linebacker Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson in the second half of their meeting in the Super Bowl following the 1978 season, Harris basically demanded that Bradshaw give him the ball on the next play. All Harris did was sprint up the middle 22 yards — right by Henderson — for a touchdown that gave the Steelers an 11-point lead they would not relinquish on their way to their third championship in six years.

Despite all of his success, his time in Pittsburgh ended acrimoniously when the Steelers cut him after he held out during training camp before the 1984 season. Noll, who leaned on Harris so heavily for so long, famously answered "Franco who?" when asked about Harris' absence from the team's camp.

Harris signed with Seattle, running for just 170 yards in eight games before being released in midseason. He retired as the NFL's third all-time leading rusher behind Walter Payton and Jim Brown.

"I don't even think about that (anymore)," Harris said in 2006. "I'm still black and gold."

Harris remained in Pittsburgh following his retirement, opening a bakery and becoming heavily involved in several charities, including serving as the chairman of "Pittsburgh Promise," which provides college scholarship opportunities for Pittsburgh Public School students.

"I think everybody knows Franco, not just for the work he did on the field but off the field," Steelers defensive lineman Cam Heyward said Wednesday. "I think he was there making change, being involved in everything he could."

Harris is survived by his wife, Dana Dokmanovich, and son Dok.

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AP Pro Football Writer Josh Dubow in San Francisco contributed to this report.

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## 'Top Gun,' 'Black Panther' advance in Oscars shortlist

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Blockbusters like "Top Gun: Maverick," "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" and "Avatar: The Way of Water" and pop stars like Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift and Rihanna just got one step closer to getting Oscar nominations.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on Wednesday announced shortlists in 10 categories for the 95th Oscars, including documentary feature, international film, makeup and hairstyling, score, original song, sound, visual effects and shorts.

Alejandro González Iñárritu's "Bardo, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths" was along the 15 films shortlisted in the international film category, one of the most competitive. The category also includes already decorated films like "Holy Spider" (Denmark), "All Quiet on the Western Front" (Germany), "Saint Omer" (France), "Corsage" (Austria), "EO" (Poland), "Return to Seoul" (Cambodia), "Decision to Leave" (South Korea), "Close" (Belgium) and "Argentina, 1985" (Argentina).

The inclusion of "Joyland" marks the first time Pakistan has ever made the shortlist. Most of the directors are first-timers on the shortlist too, with the exception being Iñárritu.

India's official submission was not S.S. Rajamouli's popular action epic "RRR," but rather Pan Nalin's "Last Film Show" which made the cut becoming the first film from the country to do so in over 20 years. "RRR" could get nominations in other categories, including for the shortlisted original song "Naatu Naatu."

Jafar Panahi was also not put forward to represent Iran, whose selection was not among the 15 and

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Russia did not submit a film this year.

Documentaries advancing to the next stage of voting include Laura Poitras's Venice-winning "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed," about photographer Nan Goldin's work and activism, Brett Morgen's David Bowie film "Moonage Daydream," Daniel Roher's "Navalny," about the Russian opposition leader, "The Janes" about pre-Roe v. Wade activists, "All that Breathes," "Descendant," "Fire of Love" and "Hallelujah: Leonard Cohen, a Journey, a Song." It is a rather diverse group of stories and filmmakers: Eight were directed by women and four by people of color.

With many below-the-line categories at hand, big budget sequels like "Avatar," "Top Gun," and "Black Panther" were well represented in the effects and sound categories, as well as original song which included Gaga's "Hold My Hand," The Weeknd's "Nothing is Lost" from "Avatar: The Way of Water" and Rihanna's "Lift Me Up" from "Black Panther."

Also on the original song shortlist are Swift's "Carolina" from "Where the Crawdads Sing," Drake's "Time" from "Amsterdam," LCD Soundsystem's "New Body Rhumba" from "White Noise," Selena Gomez's "My Mind and Me" from the documentary of the same name and Rita Wilson's "Til You're Home" from "A Man Called Otto." Diane Warren also gets another shot at a competitive Oscar with "Applause" from "Tell It Like a Woman." Doja Cat's song from "Elvis" was not eligible.

For the most part shortlists are determined by members in their respective categories, though the specifics vary from branch to branch: Some have committees, some have minimum viewing requirements.

"All Quiet on the Western Front" got quite a few spots on the shortlist, including original score, makeup and hair, sound and visual effects.

Among the visual effects selections were "Jurassic World Dominion," "Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness" and "Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore," while makeup and hairstyling includes films David Cronenberg's body horror "Crimes of the Future."

Other films advancing in makeup and hairstyling include "The Whale," in which Brendan Fraser transforms into a 600-pound man, "Elvis," "Emancipation," "The Batman" and the Marilyn Monroe film "Blonde."

The 15 original scores selected were winnowed for from 147 eligible and include "Women Talking" from Hildur Guðnadóttir, "The Fabelmans" from John Williams, "The Banshees of Inisherin" from Carter Burwell, "Babylon" from Justin Hurwitz, "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio" from Alexandre Desplat and "The Woman King" from Terence Blanchard. Also in the mix are Ludwig Göransson ("Black Panther: Wakanda Forever"), Nicholas Britell ("She Said") and Son Lux ("Everything Everywhere All At Once").

Guðnadóttir's "Tár" score was not eligible, nor was the "Top Gun: Maverick" score, written by Hans Zimmer, Harold Faltermeyer, Lorne Balfé and Gaga.

Nominations for all categories will be announced on Jan. 24. The 95th Oscars will be held on Sunday, March 12 and broadcast live on ABC.

## EXPLAINER: Arctic blast sweeps US, bomb cyclone possible

By MADDIE BURAKOFF AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — An arctic blast is bringing extreme cold, heavy snow and intense wind across much of the U.S. this week — just in time for the holidays.

The weather system, which may build into a "bomb cyclone," is expected to move east in the days leading up to Christmas, disrupting travel and causing hazardous winter conditions. Where is this winter weather coming from, and what's in store for the coming days?

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

A front of cold air is moving down from the Arctic, sending temperatures plunging.

Much of the U.S. will see below-average temperatures through the middle and end of the week, said Bob Oravec, lead forecaster for the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland.

Temperatures may drop by more than 20 degrees Fahrenheit (11 degrees Celsius) in just a few hours, the National Weather Service predicts.

And with winds also expected to pick up, wind chill temperatures could drop to dangerous lows far below

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zero — enough to cause frostbite within minutes. In parts of the Plains, the wind chill could dip as low as minus 70 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 57 Celsius).

On top of the frigid cold, the weather system is expected to send a snowstorm through the Midwest near the end of the week.

Those in the Plains, the Upper Midwest and the Great Lakes should expect blizzard conditions as heavy winds whip up the snow, according to the National Weather Service.

## WHO WILL BE AFFECTED?

Pretty much everyone east of the Rockies — around two-thirds of the country — will see extreme weather in the coming days, said Ryan Maue, a private meteorologist in the Atlanta area.

Though much of the West Coast will be shielded from the cold, the Arctic front is expected to pass east and south all the way through Florida.

As for the snow, those in the Midwest will probably see a “heck of a storm,” though blizzard conditions aren’t expected to hit the East Coast, Maue said. Some spots around the Great Lakes may see upwards of a foot of snow by Friday, the National Weather Service predicted.

Heavy snowfall and intense winds could be bad news for travel, Oravec said. Airports in the Midwest, including the travel hub of Chicago, will likely face shutdowns as the blizzard comes through later in the week.

And for those planning to hit the road for the holidays, “you’re going to have pretty serious whiteout conditions,” Maue cautioned.

## HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

This weather system is expected to bring some major “weather whiplash,” said Judah Cohen, a winter storm expert for Atmospheric Environmental Research.

The cold isn’t going to stick around for long. After the dramatic plunge that will keep temperatures low for about a week, “everything will snap back to normal,” Cohen said.

Shortly after Christmas, temperatures will start to warm up again, moving from west to east. They are likely to remain near normal through the end of the year in most of the U.S.

## WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

It all started farther north, as frigid air collected over the snow-covered ground in the Arctic, Maue said.

Then the jet stream — wobbling air currents in the middle and upper parts of the atmosphere — began pushing this cold pool down into the U.S.

As this arctic air is pushed into the warmer, moister air ahead of it, the system can quickly develop into serious weather — including what’s known as a “bomb cyclone,” a fast-developing storm in which atmospheric pressure falls very quickly over 24 hours.

These severe weather events usually form over bodies of water, which have lots of warmth and moisture to feed the storm, Maue said. But with the huge amount of cold air coming through, we could see a rare bomb cyclone forming over land.

Whether this storm technically qualifies as a bomb cyclone depends on how quickly the pressure drops — but either way, the snowfall plus high winds will make for an intense bout of winter weather.

## IS THIS NORMAL?

The storm is definitely a strong one, but “not unheard of for the winter seasons,” Oravec said.

It’s pretty normal to have cold air build up in the winter. This week, though, shifts in the jet stream are pushing the air more to the southeast than usual, Oravec said — sweeping the freeze across the country and making storm conditions more intense.

The U.S. probably won’t reach record-breaking lows, like those seen in the cold snap of 1983 or the polar vortex of 2014, Maue said.

Still, “for most people alive, this will be a memorable, top-10 extreme cold event,” Maue said.

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## Chance the Rapper to bring free concert, festival to Ghana

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — When Chance the Rapper visited West Africa earlier this year, he initially thought his trip with fellow Chicago hip-hop artist Vic Mensa would be just another vacation getaway.

Instead, the Grammy winner connected with Mensa's father's family in Ghana and other natives from the Motherland on a deeper level. He saw Ghana's beautiful ocean coastline and waterfalls, engulfed himself in the musical culture and art scene and learned more about the country's rich history of being the first sub-Saharan African country to free itself from colonialism.

After a couple more trips to Ghana, Chance decided to create a free concert series and visual arts show so others could experience the country's vibrant culture just like he did. During the summer, Chance and Mensa brought eight students from Chicago to Ghana to learn more about Africa.

"I felt so free in Ghana. .. and I want others to feel the same way," said Chance, who along with Mensa will host the inaugural Black Star Line festival in Accra, Ghana, in 2023. The weeklong festival will feature events, panel discussions and a free concert on Jan. 6 with performances by Chance, Mensa, Erykah Badu, T-Pain, Jeremih, Sarkodie, Tobe Nwigwe, Asakaa Boys and M.anifest.

The event will be held in Accra's Black Star Square, a monument to the political freedom that was won by Ghanaians in 1957. The festival's title was inspired by civil rights leader Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line, which was founded in 1919 and operated by Black people who helped link global shipping and tourism opportunities between America, the Caribbean and Africa.

Garvey inspired Chance's music video "YAH Know," featuring King Promise, and his upcoming album "Star Line Gallery," which is expected for release next year. He's already released a few other new music videos — such as "Child of God," "A Bar About a Bar" and "The Highs & Lows" with Joey Bada\$\$ — in which he calls "album art" to highlight popular artists in Africa.

Chance said Naila Opiangah's art piece for "Child of God" will be on display at the festival. He said his new "songs are candid realities of Black life."

"Artists have amazing graphics and album covers and single artworks that are made by great artists every day that's released," he said. "But the only time you get to see it is on this little inch-by-one inch depiction of it. These pieces are painted by world class artists. The ability to go see those pieces and interact with them in real life kind of adds people's understanding of the music."

Through his festival, Chance says he wants to bridge the gap between Black people abroad and Africa.

"I think that specifically the story of the founder's independence is something that all black people should know," he said "There are no free sub-Saharan African countries until 1957. I think they should know about the revolutionary leaders on the continent and abroad. I think that if we had this connectedness and this interaction, people will actually have a chance to see this."

Initially, it was tough gaining commitments from big-name music artists to travel and perform in West Africa. With few sponsors, much of the expenses to fund the free concert were out-of-pocket.

But Chance's team found a way to make the trip more affordable for travelers through a partnership with United Airlines, which is offering discount fares to Ghana for a year.

It's taken a lot of work to organize the event in such a short time, but Chance believes this festival could live on successfully for the next 50 years. In the future, he wants to host the festival in other countries, such as Jamaica and Haiti.

But for now, Chance's focus has been on attracting more people to Ghana, a place he can envision his family living after his daughters head to college.

"I wish I could live there right now," said the rapper, who has lived in Chicago his whole life. "I want people to see the convergence and similarities in all of these Black lives."

## Afghan women weep as Taliban fighters enforce university ban

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Taliban security forces in the Afghan capital on Wednesday enforced a higher education ban for women by blocking their access to universities, with video obtained by The Associated Press showing women weeping and consoling each other outside one campus in Kabul.

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The country's Taliban rulers a day earlier ordered women nationwide to stop attending private and public universities effective immediately and until further notice. The Taliban-led administration has not given a reason for the ban or reacted to the fierce and swift global condemnation of it.

Journalists saw Taliban forces outside four Kabul universities Wednesday. The forces stopped some women from entering, while allowing others to go in and finish their work. They also tried to prevent any photography, filming and protests from taking place.

Rahimullah Nadeem, a spokesman for Kabul University, confirmed that classes for female students had stopped. He said some women were allowed to enter the campus for paperwork and administrative reasons, and that four graduation ceremonies were held Wednesday.

Members of an activist group called the Unity and Solidarity of Afghanistan Women gathered outside the private Edrak University in Kabul on Wednesday morning, chanting slogans in Dari.

"Do not make education political!" they said. "Once again university is banned for women, we do not want to be eliminated!"

Despite initially promising a more moderate rule respecting rights for women and minorities, the Taliban have widely implemented their interpretation of Islamic law, or Sharia, since they seized power in August 2021.

They have banned girls from middle school and high school, barred women from most fields of employment and ordered them to wear head-to-toe clothing in public. Women are also banned from parks and gyms.

A letter shared by the spokesman for the Ministry of Higher Education, Ziaullah Hashmi, on Tuesday told private and public universities to implement the ban as soon as possible and to inform the ministry once the ban is in place.

The move is certain to hurt efforts by the Taliban to win international recognition for their government and aid from potential donors at a time when Afghanistan is mired in a worsening humanitarian crisis. The international community has urged Taliban leaders to reopen schools and give women their right to public space.

Turkey, Qatar and Pakistan, all Muslim countries, have expressed their disappointment at the university ban and urged authorities to withdraw or reconsider their decision.

Qatar played a key role in facilitating the negotiations that led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan last year. It called on the "Afghan caretaker government" to review the ban in line with the teachings of Islam on women's education.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said late Tuesday that no other country in the world bars women and girls from receiving an education.

"The Taliban cannot expect to be a legitimate member of the international community until they respect the rights of all in Afghanistan," he warned. "This decision will come with consequences for the Taliban."

On Wednesday, the U.S. State Department released a joint statement alongside the U.K., Canada, European Union and other Western allies that warned the ban further isolated Afghanistan's rulers from the international community.

The head of the U.N. agency promoting women's rights, Sima Bahous, said in a statement the move was part of a "comprehensive onslaught on women's rights in Afghanistan" and called for its immediate reversal.

Afghanistan's former president, Hamid Karzai, strongly condemned the university ban for women in a Tweet.

Abdallah Abdallah, a senior leader in Afghanistan's former U.S.-allied government, described universal education as a "fundamental" right. He urged the country's Taliban leadership to reconsider the decision.

Afghan political analyst Ahmad Saedi said that the latest decision by the Taliban authorities may have closed the door to winning international acceptance.

"The issue of recognition is over," he said. "The world is now trying to find an alternative. The world tried to interact more but they (the Taliban) don't let the world talk to them about recognition."

Saedi said he believes most Afghans favor female education because they consider learning to be a religious command contained in the Quran.

He said the decision to bar women from universities was likely made by a handful of senior Taliban figures, including the leader Hibatullah Akhunzada, who are based in the southwestern city of Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban movement.

He said the main center of power is Kandahar, rather than the Taliban-led government in Kabul, even if the ministers of justice, higher education and so-called "virtue and vice" would also have been involved in the decision to ban women from universities.

U.N. experts said last month that the Taliban's treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan may amount to a crime against humanity and should be investigated and prosecuted under international law.

They said the Taliban actions against females deepened existing rights violations — already the "most draconian globally" — and may constitute gender persecution, which is a crime against humanity.

The Taliban authorities have rejected the allegation.

Associated Press writer Riazat Butt contributed from Islamabad.

## Paul Bettany explores being art star Andy Warhol on Broadway

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Paul Bettany has long been an admirer of art superstar Andy Warhol, from a distance, like an art lover wandering a favorite gallery. But when he was initially offered a chance to get much closer and play his hero on stage, he declined.

"I don't know how you get underneath the wig and the glasses and the carefully curated public persona. I don't know how to do it," Bettany recalled thinking. "I think there might be a reason that Andy is always a cameo in films."

Persistence on the part of a producer and reading Warhol's diaries convinced Bettany that he might at least try. Now he finds himself on Broadway eight times a week underneath a wig, wearing glasses and making the very art onstage that he long admired.

Bettany stars in "The Collaboration," Anthony McCarten's fictional account about the real period in the mid-1980s when Warhol was compelled to work with new sensation and potential rival of the New York art world, Jean-Michel Basquiat, played by Jeremy Pope.

They were different men — one white, one Black; one older, the other younger. Warhol, 58, was a conceptual artist whose Pop Art explored household brand objects like Campbell's soup cans and celebrities like Marylyn Monroe, while Basquiat, in his late 20s, was a neo-Expressionist, concerned with colonialism and racism. "We speak different languages," Basquiat says in the play.

The work explores what may have been their dynamic as both men try to figure the other out and visit each others' studios, and deals with race, commercialism, police brutality, addiction and the artist's soul. The audience watches them paint together, too.

Long before the role came along, Bettany had been a fan of both artists and visited a remounting of their collaboration at the Whitney in 2019. He hopes audiences go home after seeing the play and think about each man in a different way.

His Warhol is droll yet vulnerable, needy and yet sometimes haughty, curious and also competitive. He is threatened by the younger artist and feels old. "I am afraid. Not of death, of life," he says in the play.

Bettany is filled with praise for his subject. "If Warhol hadn't existed, it would be like the Beatles not existing. Music would just sound different now and things would look different — magazines would look different, the posters would look different, design would look different," he says.

The way Bettany shades his performance is clever, giving the audience at the beginning a glimpse of what they came IN expecting — a clipped, chilly Warhol in a turtleneck who then gradually unwinds as the play progresses into a fluid, fully fleshed-out person.

"Paul did this brilliantly as an actor, I think. We introduced the Andy that we know, and then he just opens more doors and more doors and more doors into the land of imagination," says Kwame Kwei-Armah, the play's director.

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While no one knows what was the exact dynamic of the two men — Warhol died in 1987 and Basquiat a year later — the play tries to stay as true to what we know of the art superstars.

“This is our version. Nobody really knows. But I do think that’s the wonderful thing about drama,” says Bettany, quoting McCarten as saying that “documentary can get you so far. It can get you to the front door, but it’s never going to invite you in for a cup of tea. Drama and imagination can get you there.”

Critics have had mixed reactions in New York, but Bettany’s performance has been praised, with the Daily News saying he “treads lightly and wisely through a tough assignment given all of the pre-existing Warholian preconceptions.”

The play, which crossed the Atlantic after having played London’s Young Vic Theatre this spring, was made into a film before it landed on Broadway, mostly shot in Boston. It opens the play up — adding more scenes, introducing audiences to Warhol’s mother and showing Warhol and Basquiat on the streets making graffiti art. Filming it added even more depth to the Broadway production.

One thing Bettany shared with Warhol was that the play shows the artist gingerly returning to painting after 25 years of making reproductions — roughly the same time Bettany has been away from stage work.

In the meantime, he’s been noticed for playing android superhero Vision in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Bettany, 50, earned an Emmy Award nomination last year for his role in “WandaVision.”

Doing theater at 50 is very different from doing it at 25, he says. When he was younger, he’d finish a play and be so buzzed he’d be unable to sleep, winding down in a club or a pub until the wee hours.

“Now I’ve got kids. Six o’clock in the morning, I’m up,” he says laughing. “By the time I’ve left the theater tonight, I’ll get home at 11, and I will have electricity running through my body. All I want to do is be with people and get it out of me. So I’m not sure it’s the healthiest thing in the world for me, frankly, but I love the doing of it.”

Mark Kennedy is at <http://twitter.com/KennedyTwits>

## Video gamers sue to stop Microsoft’s Activision Blizzard buy

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A group of gamers is suing to stop Microsoft from buying video game publisher Activision Blizzard, arguing that the \$68.7 billion acquisition would stifle competition and reduce consumer choice.

The lawsuit was filed late Tuesday in a U.S. federal court in San Francisco on behalf of 10 individual gamers who are fans of Activision Blizzard’s Call of Duty franchise and other popular titles such as World of Warcraft, Overwatch and Diablo.

Microsoft is facing a number of legal challenges as it tries to finalize what would be the priciest-ever merger of technology companies. The Federal Trade Commission earlier this month sued to block the takeover, saying it could suppress competitors to Microsoft’s Xbox game console and its growing games subscription business. Antitrust regulators in the United Kingdom and European Union are also investigating the deal.

Several of the plaintiffs in the private antitrust lawsuit said they play Activision Blizzard games on Sony’s PlayStation, the main rival to Microsoft’s Xbox. Others said they play them on personal computers, Xbox or Nintendo’s Switch.

In response to the lawsuit, Microsoft said Wednesday that the merger “will expand competition and create more opportunities for gamers and game developers as we seek to bring more games to more people.”

## New label law has unintended effect: Sesame in more foods

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

A new federal law requiring that sesame be listed as an allergen on food labels is having unintended consequences — increasing the number of products with the ingredient.

Food industry experts said the requirements are so stringent that many manufacturers, especially bakers, find it simpler and less expensive to add sesame to a product — and to label it — than to try to keep it away from other foods or equipment with sesame.



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As a result, several companies — including national restaurant chains like Olive Garden, Wendy's and Chick-fil-A and bread makers that stock grocery shelves and serve schools — are adding sesame to products that didn't have it before. While the practice is legal, consumers and advocates say it violates the spirit of the law aimed at making foods safer for people with allergies.

"It was really exciting as a policy advocate and a mom to get these labels," said Naomi Seiler, a consultant with the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America whose 9-year-old daughter, Zoe, is allergic to sesame. "Instead, companies are intentionally adding the allergen to food."

The new law, which goes into effect Jan. 1, requires that all foods made and sold in the U.S. must be labeled if they contain sesame, which is now the nation's ninth major allergen. Sesame can be found in obvious places, like sesame seeds on hamburger buns. But it is also an ingredient in many foods from protein bars to ice cream, added to sauces, dips and salad dressings and hidden in spices and flavorings.

Advocates for families coping with allergies lobbied for years to have sesame added to the list of major allergens. Congress in 2004 created labeling requirements for eight: milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soybeans.

More than 1.6 million people in the U.S. are allergic to sesame, some so severe that they need injections of epinephrine, a drug used to treat life-threatening reactions. Cases of sesame allergy have been rising in recent years along with a growing number of foods that contain the ingredient, said Dr. Ruchi Gupta, a pediatrician and director of the Center for Food Allergy & Asthma Research at Northwestern University.

"Sesame is in so many things that people don't really understand," said Gupta, who called the move to add sesame to products "so disappointing."

"In families that do have a sesame allergy, it is truly challenging," she said.

Under the new law, enforced by the Food and Drug Administration, companies must now explicitly label sesame as an ingredient or separately note that a product contains sesame. In the U.S., ingredients are listed on product packaging in order of amount. Sesame labeling has been required for years in other places, including Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

If the ingredients don't include sesame, companies must take steps to prevent the foods from coming in contact with any sesame, known as cross-contamination.

Food industry experts said the new requirements aren't simple or practical.

"It's as if we've suddenly asked bakers to go to the beach and remove all the sand," said Nathan Mir-damadi, a consultant with Commercial Food Sanitation, which advises the industry about food safety.

Some companies include statements on labels that say a food "may contain" a certain product or that the food is "produced in a facility" that also uses certain allergens. However, such statements are voluntary, not required, according to the FDA, and they do not absolve the company of requirements to prevent cross-contamination.

Instead, some companies have taken a different approach. Officials at Olive Garden said that starting this week, the chain is adding "a minimal amount of sesame flour" to the company's famous breadsticks "due to the potential for cross-contamination at the bakery."

Chick-fil-A has changed its white bun and multigrain brioche buns to include sesame, while Wendy's said the company has added sesame to its French toast sticks and buns.

United States Bakery, which operates Franz Family Bakeries in California and the Northwest, notified customers in March that they would add a small amount of sesame flour to all hamburger and hot dog buns and rolls "to mitigate the risk of any adverse reactions to sesame products."

Although such actions don't violate the law, the FDA "does not support" them, the agency said in a statement.

"It would make it more difficult for sesame allergic customers to find foods that are safe for them to consume," the statement said.

Some large companies previously have added other allergens to products and updated their labels. In 2016, Kellogg's added traces of peanut flour to some cookies and crackers, prompting protests.

That's frustrating and scary for parents like Kristy Fitzgerald of Crookston, Minnesota. She learned last

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spring that Pan-O-Gold Baking Co., which supplies breads to schools, health centers and grocery stores across the Midwest, was adding small amounts of sesame to its products, including those served at her daughter's school. Six-year-old Audrey, in the meantime, has outgrown her allergy to sesame.

Bob Huebner, food safety/quality assurance manager for Pan-O-Gold, told Fitzgerald in a string of emails that the company was forced to add sesame to the product and the label.

"The unfortunate reality is that our equipment and bakeries are not setup for allergen cleanings that would be required to prevent sesame cross-contamination and was not an option for us," Huebner wrote in an email to Fitzgerald. Huebner replied to an email from the AP but did not respond to questions about the company's practices.

Fitzgerald started an online petition protesting the move to add sesame.

"At some point, someone is going to feed an allergic child sesame," Fitzgerald said. "It makes me think the laws need to change to show that this is not an acceptable practice."

—  
The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Science and Educational Media Group. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## Musk says Twitter in precarious position, defends cost cuts

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Elon Musk is defending his massive cost-cutting at Twitter as necessary for the social media platform to survive next year, due in part to debt payments tied to his \$44 billion takeover of the company.

"This company is like, basically, you're in a plane that is headed towards the ground at high speed with the engines on fire and the controls don't work," Musk told a late-night audience on a Twitter Spaces call Tuesday.

That's after Elon Musk said earlier on Tuesday that he plans on remaining as Twitter's CEO until he can find someone willing to replace him in the job.

Musk's announcement came after millions of Twitter users asked him to step down in an online poll the billionaire himself created and promised to abide by.

"I will resign as CEO as soon as I find someone foolish enough to take the job!" Musk tweeted. "After that, I will just run the software & servers teams."

Since taking over the San Francisco social media platform in late October, Musk's run as CEO has been marked by quickly issued rules and policies that have often been withdrawn or changed soon after being made public.

Musk said Tuesday night that he "spent the last five weeks cutting costs like crazy" and trying to build a stronger paid subscription service because otherwise Twitter might be operating with \$3 billion in negative cash flow next year. He in part blamed the \$12.5 billion in debt tied to his April agreement to buy the company, as well as the Federal Reserve's recent interest rate hikes.

Some of Musk's actions have unnerved Twitter advertisers and turned off users. He has laid off more than half of Twitter's workforce, released contract content moderators and disbanded a council of trust and safety advisors that the company formed in 2016 to address hate speech and other problems on the platform.

The Tesla CEO has also alienated investors at his electric vehicle company over concerns that Twitter is taking too much of his attention, and possibly offending loyal customers.

Even more unnerving for investors, Tesla shares are plummeting.

Shares of Tesla are down 35% since Musk took over Twitter on Oct. 27, costing investors billions. Tesla's market value was over \$1.1 trillion on April 1, the last trading day before Musk disclosed he was buying up Twitter shares. The company has since lost 58% of its value, at a time when rival auto makers are cutting in on Tesla's dominant share of electric vehicle sales.

Shares fell Wednesday, as they have every day this week.

A single share of Tesla that cost about \$400 to start the year, can now be had for less than \$140.

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Musk sought to defend some of his recent Twitter decisions on the Twitter Spaces call.

"They may seem sometimes spurious or odd or whatever," Musk said. "It's because we have an emergency fire drill on our hands. That's the reason. Not because I'm naturally capricious. Or at least, aspirationally, I'm not naturally capricious."

Musk, who also helms the SpaceX rocket company, has previously acknowledged how difficult it will be to find someone to take over as Twitter CEO.

Bantering with Twitter followers earlier this week, he said that the person replacing him "must like pain a lot" to run a company that he said has been "in the fast lane to bankruptcy."

"No one wants the job who can actually keep Twitter alive. There is no successor," Musk tweeted.

As things stand, Musk would still retain overwhelming influence over platform as its owner. He fired the company's board of directors soon after taking control.

## **Pain, few gains for investors as markets slumped in 2022**

The Associated Press undefined

Investors found few, if any, places to safely put their money in 2022, as central banks in the U.S. and around the globe raised interest rates for the first time in years to fight surging inflation, stoking fear of a global recession.

Uncertainty about how far the Federal Reserve and other central banks would go in the fight against inflation sparked a return of volatility. Large swings in stocks were common on Wall Street as the Fed raised its key interest rate seven times and signaled more hikes to come in 2023.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's strict COVID-19 policies also contributed to inflation and roiled the global economy as well as markets in Asia, Europe and the U.S.

On Wall Street, the benchmark S&P 500 index had its worst start to a year since 1970. By June, the index fell into a bear market, a drop of more than 20% from the record high set in early January. The energy sector was the lone winner, benefitting from a spike in oil and gas prices. Technology stocks tumbled after leading the market during the pandemic.

Borrowing money got more expensive. The 10-year Treasury yield, which influences rates on mortgages and other loans, soared, reaching 4.22% in October after starting the year at 1.51%.

Still, climbing yields in the U.S. and abroad sent prices for older bonds already in investors' portfolios sharply lower. The rout in bonds was particularly painful for fixed-income investors.

Cryptocurrency investors weren't spared either. Bitcoin shed more than half its value and a number of high-flying companies wound up in bankruptcy court.

— Alex Veiga

Here's a look back on the key events in markets for 2022:

### **INFLATION AND THE FED**

Inflation was the dominant global economic theme this year. Gasoline prices in the U.S. reached \$5 a gallon. Companies either raised prices, or kept prices steady but put less in each package. Europe feared running short of natural gas and prices there rose more than in the U.S.

Central banks' response to inflation overshadowed financial markets in 2022 and could very well do so again next year. As the year began, officials at the Federal Reserve had accepted that inflation was not a temporary phenomenon. Russia's invasion of Ukraine only made things worse by sending energy and food prices soaring.

Still, it wasn't until March, when the U.S. government said inflation had approached 8%, that the Fed acted — too little, too late for some pundits and economists. As the year went on the Fed got more aggressive, eventually raising rates seven times by a total of 4.25 percentage points.

Inflation in the U.S. appears to have peaked at 9.1% in June. By year-end, there were hopeful signs as prices for goods fell and rents started declining. But tough inflation talk from the Fed at its last meeting of the year took the steam out of what had been a fourth-quarter rally for stocks.

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— Chris Rugaber

For full coverage of the global economy, go to <https://apnews.com/hub/economy>

## THE BEAR ROARS

Wall Street's brutal year left few stocks unscathed, and the vast majority fell into a bear market under the weight of fast-rising interest rates.

After peaking on the very first trading day of 2022, it took about six months for the S&P 500 to drop more than 20%. The biggest losers were the stocks that had performed the best in the rally that followed the coronavirus crash.

Back then, high-growth tech stocks roared the highest thanks to the juice provided by super-low interest rates. But in the cold light of 2022, those stocks suddenly looked the most expensive and the most vulnerable as the Fed hiked interest rates to their highest level in 15 years.

The pain did not discriminate much, though. Seven out of 10 stocks in the S&P 500 fell in 2022, as of Dec. 21. Many analysts expect more pain in early 2023 before things get better.

— Stan Choe

To see AP's full coverage of the markets, go to: <https://apnews.com/hub/financial-markets> and <https://apnews.com/hub/off-the-charts>

## BOND MARKET BLUES

It was one of the worst years in history for bond investors.

Decades-high inflation meant the fixed payments coming from bonds in the future won't buy as many groceries, gallons of gasoline or whatever else is rising in price.

The Federal Reserve's decision to raise interest rates also hammered bond prices. Because newly issued bonds were paying more in interest, the older bonds sitting in many investors' portfolios were suddenly much less attractive because of their lower yields.

The largest bond fund by assets, one from Vanguard that tracks the broad market, had lost 12.5% in 2022, as of Dec. 20. That's by far its worst year since its inception in 1987.

Historically bonds have held up better than stocks during downturns, offering some cushion for investors, but both tumbled in 2022.

— Stan Choe

## HOUSING MARKET SLUMPS

As 2022 began, the nation's housing market was still running red hot.

House hunters competed for the fewest homes for sale in more than two decades, fueling bidding wars that pushed prices sharply higher. The average rate on a 30-year mortgage was slightly above 3%, near historic lows.

Then mortgage rates started to climb, spurred by expectations of higher interest rates as the Federal Reserve began raising its short-term lending rate in a bid to tame inflation. By October, the average rate on a 30-year home loan soared above 7%, a 20-year high.

Higher mortgage rates combined with still-rising home prices make it difficult for many would-be buyers to afford a home. Sales of previously occupied U.S. homes saw their biggest sales slump in more than a decade.

— Alex Veiga

## IS TESLA ON AUTOPILOT?

You can't blame Tesla shareholders for feeling jilted.

CEO Elon Musk took over Twitter and appears consumed with turning around the social media company. With Musk's focus diverted, Tesla shares have lost more than half their value. And Tesla's dominance of the market for electric vehicles is waning.

Most of Musk's wealth is tied up in Tesla stock, which started falling in April when he disclosed a stake in



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Twitter. The collapse in the stock price has bumped Musk into second place on Forbes' list of the world's wealthiest people, behind cosmetic magnate Bernard Arnault.

After buying Twitter in October, Musk has cut half its staff and picked fights with public officials and others.

— Tom Krisher

For full coverage of Elon Musk, Twitter and Tesla, go to <https://apnews.com/hub/twitter-inc>

## CONSUMERS FEEL THE PINCH

The highest inflation in four decades is hitting consumers right in their wallets.

Households — especially at the lower end of the income spectrum — are likely depleting savings built up during the pandemic, with more pain to come should the economy tip into a recession. Credit card debt ballooned and rents rose in 2022, although there are signs housing costs will be coming down. While President Biden promised student borrowers relief of up to \$20,000 this year, that debt cancellation policy is tied up in the courts.

Wages went up, although not at the same pace as inflation. Aggressive rate hikes by the Federal Reserve have pushed up the cost of borrowing money. But while the average rate on a credit card rose to 16.3% in August from 14.5% at the start of the year, according to the government, the average rate for a savings account is still just 0.2%; it's 0.9% for a one-year CD.

— Cora Lewis

For full coverage personal finance got to <https://apnews.com/hub/financial-wellness> and <https://apnews.com/hub/personal-finance>

## UKRAINE WAR IMPACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February sent prices soaring for the commodities the world runs on: oil, natural gas, and wheat.

European prices for natural gas rose to 17 times their prewar levels after Russia choked off most supplies over the war. The result was an energy crisis that pushed inflation to record levels and left governments and utilities scrambling to find alternative supplies of gas ahead of winter heating season.

Global oil prices spiked as Western buyers shunned Moscow's crude, sending Brent to over \$120 per barrel in May. Europe banned most Russian oil imports in December and the Group of Seven democracies imposed a \$60 per barrel price cap on Russian exports.

Meanwhile record wheat prices spurred disastrous food inflation in poor countries.

By year end, lower prices for oil, natural gas and electricity had provided a bit of relief for drivers and homeowners.

To see full coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war, go to <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

## CHINA DITCHES ZERO COVID

China's economic growth and stock market slid in 2022 under pressure from pandemic controls and corporate debt, prompting the ruling Communist Party to ease off anti-disease restrictions and try to revive a struggling real estate industry.

The world's second-largest economy shrank by 2.6% in the three months ending in June compared with the previous quarter after Shanghai and other industrial centers shut down for up to two months to fight outbreaks.

Forecasters say annual growth might fall below 3%, among the lowest in decades. To cut the economic drag, the ruling party ended testing for millions of people and stopped requiring supermarkets and other businesses to track the health of employees and customers. Beijing also tried to revive real estate, China's biggest economic driver, by lending more to apartment buyers while trying to prevent a renewed rise in borrowing by developers.

— Joe McDonald

To see full coverage of developments in China, go to <https://apnews.com/hub/china>

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## CRYPTO'S WILD RIDE

The year began with bitcoin above \$45,000 and the crypto industry making further inroads among politicians and mainstream financial institutions. As 2022 ends, bitcoin is below \$17,000, the industry's "savior" is in jail and Washington is fighting over how to regulate crypto.

With the steady, steep decline of crypto prices in the background, the dominoes began to fall with the collapse in May of Terra, a so-called stablecoin. Investors lost tens of billions of dollars and a number of crypto companies faced financial ruin. In stepped Sam Bankman-Fried, the young founder of crypto exchange FTX, who bailed out crypto lender BlockFi and crypto firm Voyager, earning him comparisons to the original J.P. Morgan.

Those plaudits evaporated when FTX unraveled in November. Questions about its financial strength prompted customers to request large withdrawals. Overwhelmed and, it turns out, underfunded, FTX filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on Nov. 11. Bankman-Fried was arrested in the Bahamas and U.S. prosecutors hit him with an eight-count indictment.

— Ken Sweet

To see AP's full coverage of the cryptocurrency industry, go to: <https://apnews.com/hub/cryptocurrency>

## THE STREAMING WARS

Netflix, Warner Bros. Discovery and other big entertainment companies tumbled in 2022 as streaming services struggled amid increased competition and rising inflation stifled advertising spending.

Streaming services had to contend with a return to normal for many people who had been stuck at home because of lockdowns or other restrictions during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The sheer number of streaming options also left companies in a fierce fight for viewers' attention.

Streaming giant Netflix lost about half of its value after a steep drop in viewers in the year's first half. Disney felt the pinch from lower advertising revenue, but the diversified entertainment giant's stock held up better than most competitors.

Warner Bros. Discovery also struggled with advertising revenue, and it axed several films including "Batgirl" as it shifted strategy and looked to trim costs.

— Damian Troise

## WHO "very concerned" about reports of severe COVID in China

GENEVA (AP) — The head of the World Health Organization said the agency is "very concerned" about rising reports of severe coronavirus disease across China after the country largely abandoned its "zero COVID" policy, warning that its lagging vaccination rate could result in large numbers of vulnerable people getting infected.

At a press briefing on Wednesday, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the U.N. agency needs more information on COVID-19 severity in China, particularly regarding hospital and intensive care unit admissions, "in order to make a comprehensive risk assessment of the situation on the ground."

"WHO is very concerned over the evolving situation in China with increasing reports of severe disease," Tedros said. He added that while COVID deaths have dropped more than 90% since their global peak, there were still too many uncertainties about the virus to conclude that the pandemic is over.

Some scientists have warned that the unchecked spread of COVID-19 in China could spur the emergence of new variants, which might unravel progress made globally to contain the pandemic.

"Vaccination is the exit strategy from omicron," WHO emergencies chief Dr. Michael Ryan said.

Ryan said the explosive surge of cases in China was not exclusively due to the lifting of many of the country's restrictive policies and that it was impossible to stop transmission of omicron, the most highly infectious variant yet seen of COVID-19.

He said vaccination rates among people over age 60 in China lagged behind many other countries and that the efficacy of the Chinese-made vaccines was about 50%.

"That's just not adequate protection in a population as large as China, with so many vulnerable people,"

Ryan said. He added that while China has dramatically increased its capacity to vaccinate people in recent weeks, it's unclear whether that will be enough.

To date, China has declined to authorize Western-made messenger RNA vaccines, which have proven to be more effective than its locally made shots. Beijing did agree to allow a shipment of the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine to be imported, for Germans living in China.

"The question remains whether or not enough vaccination can be done in the coming week or two weeks that will actually blunt the impact of the second wave and the burden on the health system," Ryan said.

Like Tedros, he said WHO had insufficient information about the extent of severe disease and hospitalization, but he noted that nearly all countries overwhelmed by COVID-19 had struggled to share such real-time data.

Ryan also suggested China's definition of COVID deaths was too narrow, saying the country was limiting it to people who have suffered respiratory failure.

"People who die of COVID die from many different (organ) systems' failures, given the severity of infection," Ryan said. "So limiting a diagnosis of death from COVID to someone with a COVID positive test and respiratory failure will very much underestimate the true death toll associated with COVID."

Countries such as Britain, for example, define any COVID death as someone who has died within 28 days of testing positive for the virus.

Globally, nearly every country has grappled with how to count COVID deaths, and official numbers are believed to be a major underestimate. In May, WHO estimated there were nearly 15 million coronavirus deaths worldwide, more than double the official toll of 6 million.

Follow AP's coverage of the pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

## 1 woman's story of rape convinced all Weinstein trial jurors

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Most of the jurors at Harvey Weinstein's Los Angeles trial were ready to convict him of crimes related to three of the four women he was charged with raping or sexually assaulting.

Yet after weeks of deliberation the eight men and four women voted unanimously to convict him of crimes against only one: a Russian-born model and actor known as Jane Doe 1. She lived in Rome and was visiting California for a film festival at age 34 in 2013, when she said the now-disgraced film mogul appeared uninvited at her Los Angeles hotel room door in the middle of the night.

The jurors were released from service and allowed to talk publicly after more than two months Tuesday, when they could not reach a unanimous decision on two aggravating factors that might have made for a higher sentence. Their deliberations took nine days spanning more than two weeks, but those who spoke to reporters said the talks were never contentious.

Weinstein was found guilty of one count of rape and two counts of sexual assault against Jane Doe 1. He now faces up to 18 years in prison in California to go with a 23-year sentence for a rape and sexual assault conviction in New York.

Jurors said that Jane Doe 1's composure, and the fact that she did not contact Weinstein after he raped her, allowed the divided group to reach consensus on her accusations.

"I thought Jane Doe 1 was very convincing in her story," said one juror, a 62-year-old man who works in banking and only provided his first name, Michael, because he sought to maintain privacy amid the publicity surrounding the case.

The physical and technical evidence surrounding Jane Doe 1 was some of the thinnest at the trial, but jurors were told that under the law, if they found an accuser's story credible, that alone could be enough to convict.

They acquitted Weinstein on a count of sexual battery against a massage therapist. They were deadlocked, with 10 of 12 voting for guilt, on a count of sexual battery against model Lauren Young; and voting 8-4 in favor of conviction on rape and sexual assault counts involving Jennifer Siebel Newsom, a documentary filmmaker and wife of California Gov. Gavin Newsom.

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The Associated Press does not name people who have said they were sexually abused, unless they come forward publicly or have given consent through their attorneys, as Young and Siebel Newsom have.

Jane Doe 1 only one among them who had no further direct dealings with Weinstein or his representatives after the incident. She testified she had barely known who he was, having been introduced only briefly at the film festival, and wanted nothing from him. Others, including Siebel Newsom, had friendly email exchanges with Weinstein or sought out future meetings after their incidents, a point the defense pounded in their cross-examinations and closing arguments.

That resonated with some jurors.

Michael said he voted to convict on the Jane Doe 1 counts, but reluctantly voted to acquit on the counts involving Siebel Newsom. The difference, he said, was the women's "subsequent action."

"In a 2 1/2 year period she had sent Mr. Weinstein over 35 emails," he said of Siebel Newsom. "She wanted access to Harvey Weinstein. It sounded like she wanted access to a lot of his resources. It raised a reasonable doubt in my mind."

Weinstein has repeatedly denied engaging in any non-consensual sex. His lawyers called some of the encounters in the charges consensual and others flat-out fabricated, including the story told by Jane Doe 1. They pointed out that prosecutors had not even produced independent evidence to place Weinstein at her hotel.

"Jane Doe 1 is lying. Period," Weinstein lawyer Alan Jackson said in his closing argument.

One juror suggested that the broad statement was undermined by defense arguments that engaged with the details of Jane Doe 1's account.

"I think Jackson's last comment where Harvey just wasn't there, hurt him," said the juror, Arnold Esqueda, who works as director of security for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. "They were defending all these things, and then they just say he's not there. Well they should have just said he's not there."

He said he and other jurors made that point to a "very old school" man on the jury who who "decided that he was going vote guilty on that one. He stayed pretty much not guilty on the rest."

While tearful at times, Jane Doe 1's testimony was restrained and straightforward in comparison to some that followed. She spoke slowly with a Russian accent, and made nearly no use of a translator on hand.

Esqueda said the intensely emotional testimony of Siebel Newsom, who was screaming through tears at times during her testimony, might have been too much for some fellow jurors. The panel was divided 6-6 on the counts involving her when he suggested getting a read-back of her testimony from the court reporter.

"She had a little drama," Esqueda said. "So I suggested let's re-read it, and I think after we read it it switched a couple of people in her favor, without the drama."

Changes over time in the massage therapist's story helped lead jurors to acquit on that count, Michael said.

Judge Lisa Lench tentatively scheduled Weinstein's sentencing for Jan. 9 after his attorneys asked that it be done promptly.

But Lench said it might not happen so quickly given the issues surrounding the case, including prosecutors' pending decision on whether or not to retry the deadlocked counts.

"We'll need to consult the victims first and foremost," Deputy District Attorney Paul Thompson said.

He asked the judge if other Weinstein accusers, including some who testified against him at trial but were not part of the charges, and the women whose counts were deadlocked, might give victim impact statements at the sentencing.

Lench promptly rejected the idea.

"I'm not going to make this an open forum on all of the allegations that were presented in this trial," she said.

"So it'll just be Jane Doe 1 then," Thompson replied.



For more on the Harvey Weinstein trial, visit: <https://apnews.com/hub/harvey-weinstein>

## Trump tax audits required by IRS were delayed, panel says

By JOSH BOAK, BRIAN SLODYSKO, LISA MASCARO and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The IRS failed to pursue mandatory audits of Donald Trump on a timely basis during his presidency, a congressional panel found on Tuesday, raising questions about statements by the former president and leading members of his administration who claimed he could not release his tax filings because of the ongoing reviews.

A report released by the Democratic majority on the House Ways and Means Committee indicated the Trump administration may have disregarded an IRS requirement dating back to 1977 that mandates audits of a president's tax filings. The IRS only began to audit Trump's 2016 tax filings on April 3, 2019, more than two years into Trump's presidency and just months after Democrats took control of the House. That date coincides with Rep. Richard Neal, the panel chairman, asking the IRS for information related to Trump's tax returns.

There was no suggestion that Trump, who has announced a third presidential run, sought to directly influence the IRS or discourage the agency from reviewing his tax information. But the report found that the audit process was "dormant, at best."

The 29-page report was published just hours after the committee voted along party lines to release Trump's tax returns in the coming days, raising the potential of additional revelations related to the finances of the onetime businessman who broke political norms by refusing to voluntarily release his returns as he sought the presidency. The vote was the culmination of a yearslong fight between Trump and Democrats that has played out everywhere from the campaign trail to the halls of Congress and the Supreme Court.

Democrats on the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee argued that transparency and the rule of law were at stake, while Republicans countered that the release would set a dangerous precedent with regard to the loss of privacy protections.

"This is about the presidency, not the president," Neal, D-Mass., told reporters.

Texas Rep. Kevin Brady, the panel's top GOP member, said, "Regrettably, the deed is done."

"Over our objections in opposition, Democrats in the Ways and Means Committee have unleashed a dangerous new political weapon that overturns decades of privacy protections," he told reporters. "The era of political targeting, and of Congress's enemies list, is back and every American, every American taxpayer, who may get on the wrong side of the majority in Congress is now at risk."

Trump spent much of Tuesday evening releasing statements on his social media platform that were unrelated to his tax returns. The IRS didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

But an accompanying report released by Congress' nonpartisan Joint Committee on Taxation also found repeated faults with the IRS's approach toward auditing Trump and his companies.

IRS agents in charge of the audits repeatedly did not bring in specialists with expertise assessing the complicated structure of Trump's holdings. They frequently determined that a limited examination was warranted because Trump hired a professional accounting firm that they assumed would make sure Trump "properly reports all income and deduction items correctly."

"We must express disagreement with the decision not to engage any specialists when facing returns with a high degree of complexity," the tax committee report states. "We also fail to understand why the fact that counsel and an accounting firm participated in tax preparation ensures the accuracy of the returns."

The reports released Tuesday renewed scrutiny on one of the biggest questions that has surrounded Trump since he shifted from a reality television star to an unlikely presidential candidate: Why did he abandon the post-Watergate tradition of White House hopefuls releasing their tax returns? Trump and those around him have consistently said that IRS audits prevented him from doing so.

"I would love to give them, but I'm not going to do it while I'm under audit," Trump said on April 10, 2019, before boarding the presidential helicopter.

There are no laws that would have barred Trump from voluntarily releasing his returns even if they were

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being audited. But when Trump spoke of being audited, it's unclear whether he was referring to the mandatory process specifically aimed at presidents or prior reviews that are more typical for wealthy individuals.

The New York Times found that before he entered the White House, Trump was facing an IRS audit potentially tied to a \$72.9 million tax refund arising from \$700 million in losses he claimed in 2009. The documents released Tuesday indicate that Trump continued to collect tax benefits from those losses through 2018.

"What happened?" said Steven Rosenthal, senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center. "If it was not resolved, the IRS stalled. If it was resolved in Trump's favor, then maybe the IRS rolled over and played dead. That's what we have to find out."

The report raised multiple red flags about aspects of Trump's tax filings, including his carryover losses, deductions tied to conservation and charitable donations, and loans to his children that could be taxable gifts.

In response to the findings, the Ways and Means Committee is proposing legislation to beef up the IRS's approach, requiring an initial report no later than 90 days from the filing of a president's tax returns. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the chamber would "move swiftly" to advance the legislation.

Democrats argue that the IRS is ill-equipped to audit high-income, complex tax returns, and instead targets filers in lower-income brackets — something they have tried to remedy with their work on the panel.

"Because of the dismantling of funding to the IRS, they have not been able to do their job," said Rep. Steven Horsford, D-Nev. "They did not have the specialized staff to do it for that high-income category — not just this person, but people who fall into that category."

But Republicans have vowed to cut a recent influx of funding for more IRS agents. That's the first bill they will consider upon taking the House majority in less than two weeks.

The committee's move represents yet another challenge for Trump. Just a day earlier, the House Jan. 6 committee voted to make a criminal referral to the Justice Department for Trump's role in sparking the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. He's also facing an intensifying investigation in Atlanta for efforts to overturn the 2020 election results in Georgia. And he's the subject of growing criticism from fellow Republicans for contributing to the party's underwhelming performance in last month's midterms.

Trump's family business, The Trump Organization, was convicted earlier this month on tax fraud charges for helping some executives dodge taxes on company-paid perks such as apartments and luxury cars.

Manhattan district attorney Alvin Bragg told The Associated Press in an interview last week that his office's investigation into Trump and his businesses continues.

"We're going to follow the facts and continue to do our job," Bragg said.

Trump has argued there is little to learn from his tax returns even as he has fought to keep them private.

"You can't learn much from tax returns, but it is illegal to release them if they are not yours!" he complained on his social media network last weekend.

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Kinnard reported from Columbia, South Carolina. Associated Press writers Paul Wiseman contributed from Washington and Michael R. Sisak and Jill Colvin in New York contributed this report.

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This story was first published on Dec. 20, 2022. It was updated on Dec. 21, 2022 to correct that Horsford said IRS agents haven't been "able," not "unable," to do their job.

## Esports seen as pathway to boost diversity in STEM careers

By CLAIRE SAVAGE Associated Press/Report for America

CHICAGO (AP) — As a kid, Kevin Fair would take apart his Nintendo console, troubleshoot issues and put it back together again — experiences the Black entrepreneur says represented "a life trajectory changing moment" when he realized the entertainment system was more than a toy.

"I think I was just genuinely inspired by digital technology," he said.

Motivated by his love for video games, Fair learned to code and fix computers. In 2009, he started I

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Play Games!, a Chicago-based business that exposes young people of color to a side of video gaming they might not have otherwise known existed.

By channeling students' enthusiasm for esports — multiplayer competitive video games — schools and businesses like Fair's aim to prepare them for careers in science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM, at a time when the fields lack racial diversity.

"These kids were born with digital devices within their hands, and if you give them access, the world is theirs," said entrepreneur and scholar Jihan Johnston, who founded digital education company Beatbotics with her teenage son, Davon — an avid gamer.

Despite industry inequality and representation issues, young video game users are diverse. A 2015 Pew Research Center study found Black teens are slightly more likely than their peers to play video games, while roughly the same amount of white and Hispanic teens play.

Meanwhile, Black and Hispanic workers make up just 9% and 8% of STEM employees in the U.S. respectively, Pew said last year.

Johnston is reframing the conversation about video games by coaching communities of color on how esports can lead to careers for their children.

"I think our community does not know that this can lead to college," she said.

This school year, DePaul University in Chicago offered a new academic esports scholarship designed to hone practical skills for the video game industry. Nine of the 10 freshmen recipients are students of color, according to Stephen Wilke, the school's esports coordinator.

Aramis Reyes, an 18-year-old computer science major with a focus in game design and development, is one of the \$1,500 scholarship awardees.

The bespectacled teen described himself as a casual, noncompetitive gamer. For Reyes, the magic of video games is the potential for storytelling. "I have so many design ideas that I want to get into," he said.

Skills that gamers develop naturally help prime them for their pick of careers in IT, coding, statistics, software engineering and more, Fair said. Typing proficiency sets up gamers to be efficient in the modern workplace, and competitive players approach the data they see on their screen analytically, thinking in frames per second.

"All of that is high-end math happening in the person's head at the moment," he said.

Like Fair, video games also sparked Reyes' interest in coding.

"Everything is so accessible if you know the right place to look. You know, I literally went through a secondhand store and found a book this thick on how to learn Python," Reyes said, gesturing to show a 10-inch (25-centimeter) spine.

Fair said businesses like his will help close the diversity gap. Increasing diversity in STEM would improve pay equity, invigorate innovation and help keep America competitive on a global scale, as testing reveals the U.S. is lagging in STEM education.

University of California Irvine research supports Fair's strategy: a collaborative program with the North America Scholastic Esports Federation found that school-affiliated clubs aimed at using student interest in esports in an academic context facilitated math and science learning, increased STEM interest, and benefited kids at low-income schools the most.

Grace Collins, a Cleveland area teacher who launched the first all-girls varsity esports high school team in 2018, said creating a welcome space and improving representation is crucial to building out diversity in both esports and STEM.

"I think the challenges for diversity in esports and the challenges for diversity in STEM are often very similar ... so solving this problem in one place can help alleviate them on the other side," Collins said.

Reyes, who is Hispanic and Latino, said esports feels like a welcoming community for students of color, and is "absolutely" an avenue into improving diversity in STEM. Although civil rights advocates say racist hate speech persists online, overwhelmingly the gaming community is accepting, in Reyes' experience.

Sophomore Lethrese Rosete agreed, calling DePaul's esports club "a very safe and friendly environment." Rosete, 20, is majoring in user design experience to combine her creativity and coding skills.

She's aware of inequality issues in STEM and video game design, mentioning Activision's Blizzard Entertainment president, ousted after a discrimination and sexual harassment lawsuit cited a "frat boy" culture that became "a breeding ground for harassment and discrimination against women."

But Rosete said DePaul doesn't feel that way. "We're all just here to learn," she said.

When first-person shooter game Valorant released a new Filipina character, Rosete said she started screaming and running around in excitement.

"I felt at peace," said Rosete, who is Filipina American. "I felt like my representation had come."

But video games are not a cure-all for the STEM diversity gap. "It's a systemic problem that's way bigger than esports," Wilke said.

Lack of representation, online extremism and expensive equipment buy-in could have the opposite effect by reinforcing stereotypes and exacerbating inequality.

Online safety is also a concern — video game company Epic Games, maker of Fortnite, will pay a total of \$520 million to settle complaints involving children's privacy and methods that tricked players into making purchases, U.S. federal regulators said Monday.

Fair recommended parents keep a "good watchful eye" on their kids' online activity. "There's a lot of trash out there," he said.

Access to gaming consoles and computers varies by teens' household income, and the average Black and Hispanic households earn about half as much as the average white household, the Federal Reserve reported in 2021.

Although surveys show increases in developers of color, white men remain overrepresented in the gaming industry.

Fair said there is a long way to go to improving racial diversity in both STEM and esports.

"I can have a lot of kids that love playing FIFA. But that doesn't mean that they're going to desire to become engineers," he said. "You have to kind of try and show directly how what they're doing, the activity that they want to do connects to something that they can make money in."

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Savage is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

## Red Cross conducts rare visit with 3,400 Yemen war prisoners

By NAJIB JOBAIN Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Red Cross said Wednesday that it had conducted rare visits to thousands of prisoners on both sides of Yemen's eight-year civil war, a step that could pave the way for an exchange of detainees between the rival parties.

Fabrizio Carboni, the International Committee of the Red Cross's director for the Middle East, told The Associated Press that members of the organization had seen more than 3,400 individuals in a 10-day visit to a facility in Saudi Arabia in December and a separate trip to Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in October. Carboni was speaking in a Zoom call from Geneva, where he is based.

He said members of the organization had been allowed access to some of the most "secret and sensitive places" in each country, and will be able to inform many detainees' loved ones of their whereabouts.

"It means the authorities accept our presence and what comes with our presence, which is the capacity to repeat the visits, the fact that we will inform the families," Carboni said.

Yemen's conflict began in 2014 after Houthi rebels came down from the mountains and took control of the capital, Sanaa, and much of the country's north, forcing Yemen's government into exile. The Saudi-led coalition then entered the war in March 2015, backed by the U.S. and the United Arab Emirates.

The conflict has since become one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, killing more than 150,000 people, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Neither side has released the number of conflict-related prisoners it holds, but tens of thousands are estimated to have been held over



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the course of the war, many in harsh conditions.

The last mass swap took place in 2020, and overseen by the Red Cross, saw more than 1,000 detainees returned home, in what was hailed as a significant step towards peace. According to a 2018 agreement in Stockholm, the warring sides agreed to swap over 15,000 prisoners, though it's unclear how many have so far walked free.

Carboni said the prison visits would bolster "confidence-building measures" between the two sides of the conflict, but that it was also a sign of hope to those who remain jailed on either side of the war's frontlines.

"We await the close of political negotiations toward the release, transfer and repatriation of all conflict-related detainees so they can be reunited with their families after years of separation," the group said in a statement announcing the visits.

In October, the coalition and the Houthis failed to renew a truce that had been the longest lull in fighting during the war. The ceasefire had initially taken effect in April and had raised hopes of a more durable peace. Since then, the United Nations and other bodies have endeavored to get the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition to sit down again to discuss a political settlement.

The ICRC, as the Red Cross is known internationally, plays an often-confidential role to check on prisoners of war and regularly oversees exchanges in conflicts around the world. The group thanked both sides in Yemen for cooperating in allowing access to detainees, but urged them to return to peace talks.

"I really hope that our visit helps, you know very humbly, helps create this environment for more conducive negotiations," Carboni said.

## 'Aftersun,' 'Banshees' lead AP's best films of 2022

By JAKE COYLE and LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writers

The Associated Press' Film Writers Jake Coyle and Lindsey Bahr's picks for the best movies of 2022:

JAKE COYLE:

1. "Aftersun": Rarely does such a delicately crafted tale pack such a wallop. Charlotte Wells' breathtaking feature debut, starring newcomer Frankie Corio and Paul Mescal as an 11-year-old girl and her father on vacation in Turkey, is such a keenly observed accumulation of detail and feeling that you hardly notice the undertow of heartache that will, in the end, absolutely floor you.

2. "Belle": Though it was a hit in Japan, it was easy to miss Mamoru Hosoda's glorious anime back in January, when it arrived in North American theaters. It's a dazzling blend of "Beauty and the Beast," a girl's wrenching battle with grief and self-doubt, and possibly the best movie ever made about the Internet. It's a lot, maybe too much, but "Belle" reaches the most beautiful of climaxes.

3. "The Banshees of Inisherin": Martin McDonagh's latest is a lean fable that throbs with existential conundrum. It plays out between a quizzical Colin Farrell, a doom-laden Brendan Gleeson, an exasperated Kerry Condon and a much-cherished donkey. What else could you possibly need?

4. "Decision to Leave": The Korean master Park Chan-wook marries a police procedural and romance, and the twisty noirish results are at turns delightful and devastating.

5. "Descendant": Margaret Brown's expansive, ruminative documentary reverberates with history and stories passed down through time. The central incident is the discovery in Mobile, Alabama, of the Clotilda, the last known slave ship to arrive on U.S. shores. But Brown's roaming, wide-lens film is most powerful for the way it captures the community of Clotilda descendants — a contemplative and compelling cast of characters — as they weigh slavery's present-day legacy.

6. "No Bears": Jafar Panahi may be the most vital and courageous filmmaker in the world right now. The Iranian writer-director has been banned from making movies or traveling since he was arrested in 2010 for supporting protesters. Yet Panahi has, ingeniously, continued to find ways to make thoughtful, playful, defiant films that reflect his predicament while slyly capturing the Iranian society around him. "No Bears," which dramatizes Panahi making a film along the Turkish border, is one of his best. It's grown only more piercing since Panahi was jailed on a six-year prison sentence earlier this year. In one bleakly stirring moment, Panahi stands on a darkened borderland, contemplating fleeing.

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7. "Everything Everywhere All at Once" and "Nope": In a movie world where spectacles often come with little within, both of these films were absolutely brimming with ideas and images. You could call the Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's film and Jordan Peele's latest opus overstuffed. But their sheer cinematic abundance made them nourishing, vibrant exceptions. Much the same could be said of James Cameron's equally visionary "Avatar: The Way of Water."

8. "Lingui, the Sacred Bonds": Chadian filmmaker Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's film is one of the year's most tender mother-daughter portraits. Rihane Khali Alio and Achouackh Abakar Souleymane star in this extraordinarily vivid tale, set in the outskirts of present-day N'Djamena, of abortion, motherhood and female solidarity.

9. "The Fabelmans": Steven Spielberg's natural mode as a filmmaker might not be introspective. He's not historically been one to phone home. And while that awkwardness can sometimes be felt in his movie memoir, there are many scenes here unlike anything he's ever shot before, and among his very best.

10. "Kimi": A great benefit of the so-called "pandemic movies" is that they were made fast, loose and of-their-moment. This year, many filmmakers, maybe as a result of all that time shut-in, released inward-looking films. Often better were the ones that more directly dealt with the pandemic reality around us. Steven Soderbergh's fleet-footed thriller starring Zoë Kravitz as an agoraphobic tech contractor deftly channeled the times into a riveting little pop gem.

Also: "Compartment No. 6," "Till," "One Fine Morning," "The Cathedral," "The Woman King," "Saint Omer," "Apollo 10 1/2," "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery," "Emily the Criminal," "Bones and All"

LINDSEY BAHR:

1. "The Banshees of Inisherin": Martin McDonagh's film is a sharp, funny and utterly devastating work about the end of a friendship on a small Irish island. Colin Farrell uses his wonderful brows (and acting chops) to ensure ultimate heartbreak as his world and sense of self crumbles and rots. But it's the ensemble, including Brendan Gleeson, Kerry Condon, Barry Keoghan and on down, who imbue this deceptively simple set-up with gravity and depth.

2. "Tár": Todd Field's brilliant, restless "Tár" reminded me how much I love movies (and tricked me into believing that I was some kind of scholar of classical music for a few hours). Cate Blanchett is transcendent in bringing this flawed genius to life, challenging the audience to consider big questions about power, status and art. It is demanding but immensely rewarding cinema that is not easily defined, which is perhaps why audiences aren't taking a chance on it in theaters (which is a mistake).

3. "Women Talking": Sarah Polley's film hasn't even been released to the general public and it's already considered "divisive," which is one of the best reasons to seek it out. Aren't you curious which side you'll be on? I'm one who was spellbound by her heady, spiritual vision of a group of abused women in an isolated religious colony questioning their reality and wondering if life could somehow be different than what they know.

4. "Aftersun": In a year full of autobiographical films from very famous names, it was the one from the unknown that made the biggest impression. You don't have to know anything about Charlotte Wells to get wrapped up in "Aftersun," an inspired and fully realized memory piece about an ordinary vacation some 20 years prior that will leave you in pieces (which is somehow possible even when the "Macarena" is also stuck in your head).

5. "Saint Omer": A young woman is on trial for the death of her 15-month-old daughter in this haunting French courtroom drama, a tremendous debut feature from documentarian Alice Diop, that upends your notions of what the genre can be in its examination of trauma, the immigrant experience and expectations of motherhood.

6. "Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris": This is the kind of romantic confection that's a bit of an outlier on a list like this, but that's why it's here. Anthony Fabian's film about an English housecleaner and war widow (Lesley Manville) in the 1950s who saves up to travel to Paris to buy a couture Christian Dior gown is a balm -- heartwarming without being schlocky, reverential of high fashion artistry but critical of its exclusionary ways and just a supreme delight.

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7. "Kimi": Sorry "Top Gun: Maverick," you were very entertaining too, but Steven Soderbergh's "Kimi" was my favorite popcorn experience of the year — a taut, paranoid thriller with a modern, Alexa/Siri-inspired spin on the overheard crime scenario of "Blow Up," with a sharp performance from Zoe Kravitz, who can even make an agoraphobic shut in extremely cool.

8. "Murina": There is rot beneath the punishingly beautiful, sun-soaked Adriatic setting of Croatian filmmaker Antoneta Alamat Kusijanovic's sublimely menacing debut feature about a 17-year-old girl who is starting to question the ingrained misogyny around her. The family dynamics are as rocky and dangerous as the picturesque backdrop.

9. "Corsage": Beauty, waistlines, aging, celebrity, duty and desire haunt Empress Elisabeth of Austria in Marie Kreutzer's intricate and interpretive portrait of dynamic mind and soul that's been stifled by her position and myriad traumas. Vicky Krieps is perfect as the deliriously subversive "Sissi."

10. "White Noise": The supermarket dance to LCD Soundsystem's "New Body Rhumba" might not come until the very end of Noah Baumbach's Don DeLillo adaptation but there is a dazzling rhythm to the entire epic, from the controlled chaos of the overlapping dialogue to the hectic choreography of a family making breakfast. But maybe the most surprising thing is that behind all the wit, the style, the commentary on American society and the banal and the profound in the everyday, there is a real emotional weight too.

Also: "Happening," "The Eternal Daughter," "Avatar: The Way of Water," "Fire of Love," "Catherine Called Birdy," "EO," "Bodies Bodies Bodies," "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed," "Cyrano."

## Today in History: December 22, the shoe bomber fails

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 22, the 356th day of 2022. There are nine days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 22, 1990, Lech Walesa (lek vah-WEN'-sah) took the oath of office as Poland's first popularly elected president.

On this date:

In 1858, opera composer Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy.

In 1894, French army officer Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of treason in a court-martial that triggered worldwide charges of anti-Semitism. (Dreyfus was eventually vindicated.)

In 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill arrived in Washington for a wartime conference with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In 1944, during the World War II Battle of the Bulge, U.S. Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe rejected a German demand for surrender, writing "Nuts!" in his official reply.

In 1984, New York City resident Bernhard Goetz (bur-NAHRD' gehts) shot and wounded four youths on a Manhattan subway, claiming they were about to rob him.

In 1989, Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo), the last of Eastern Europe's hard-line Communist rulers, was toppled from power in a popular uprising.

In 1992, a Libyan Boeing 727 jetliner crashed after a midair collision with a MiG fighter, killing all 157 aboard the jetliner, and both crew members of the fighter jet.

In 1995, actor Butterfly McQueen, who'd played the scatterbrained slave Prissy in "Gone with the Wind," died in Augusta, Georgia, at age 84.

In 2001, Richard C. Reid, a passenger on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami, tried to ignite explosives in his shoes, but was subdued by flight attendants and fellow passengers. (Reid is serving a life sentence in federal prison.)

In 2003, a federal judge ruled the Pentagon couldn't enforce mandatory anthrax vaccinations for military personnel.

In 2010, President Barack Obama signed a law allowing gays for the first time in history to serve openly in America's military, repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

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In 2020, President Donald Trump unexpectedly released two videos, one falsely declaring that he had won the election in a "landslide," and the other urging lawmakers to increase direct payments for most individuals to \$2,000 in a COVID relief package, a move opposed by most Republicans.

Ten years ago: The late U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye was praised as a humble leader who embodied honor, dignity and duty during a public visitation at Hawaii's state Capitol, five days after his death at age 88. Egypt's Islamist-backed constitution received a "yes" majority in a final round of voting on a referendum that saw a low voter turnout.

Five years ago: The wildfire that had burned its way through communities and wilderness northwest of Los Angeles became the largest blaze ever officially recorded in California; it had scorched 273,400 acres and destroyed more than 700 homes. iPhone owners from several states sued Apple for not disclosing sooner that it issued software updates deliberately slowing older-model phones so aging batteries would last longer. President Donald Trump signed the \$1.5 trillion tax overhaul into law. The U.N. Security Council unanimously approved tough new sanctions against North Korea in response to its latest launch of a ballistic missile that Pyongyang said was capable of reaching anywhere on the U.S. mainland.

One year ago: U.S. health regulators authorized the first pill against COVID-19, a Pfizer drug that Americans would be able to take at home to head off the worst effects of the virus. A New York man, Matthew Greene, pleaded guilty to storming the U.S. Capitol with fellow members of the far-right Proud Boys; he was the first Proud Boys member to publicly plead guilty to conspiring with other members to stop Congress from certifying the Electoral College vote. The Department of Homeland Security announced that 100 children, mostly from Central America, had been reunited with their families after being separated under President Donald Trump's zero-tolerance border policy. The NHL announced that players would not be able to participate in the Beijing Olympics; the league would spend the previously scheduled Olympic break making up games postponed because of COVID-19 protocols.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Hector Elizondo is 86. Country singer Red Steagall is 84. Former World Bank Group President Paul Wolfowitz is 79. Baseball Hall of Famer Steve Carlton is 78. Former ABC News anchor Diane Sawyer is 77. Rock singer-musician Rick Nielsen (Cheap Trick) is 74. Rock singer-musician Michael Bacon is 74. Baseball All-Star Steve Garvey is 74. Golfer Jan Stephenson is 71. Actor BernNadette Stanis is 69. Rapper Luther "Luke" Campbell is 62. Actor Ralph Fiennes (rayf fynz) is 60. Actor Lauralee Bell is 54. Country singer Lori McKenna is 54. Actor Dina Meyer is 54. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, is 52. Actor Heather Donahue is 49. Actor Chris Carmack is 42. Actor Harry Ford is 40. Actor Greg Finley is 38. Actor Logan Huffman is 33. R&B singer Jordin Sparks is 33. Pop singer Meghan Trainor is 29. Norwegian tennis player Casper Ruud is 24.