

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 24, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 231 ~ 1 of 72

The Groton Area School District will be opening two hours late on Friday, February 24, 2023. With the significant snowfall and wind, clean-up and travel remain challenging. Buses will run on plowed roads only. Please be in contact with your driver if your roads are not open.

OST will be opening at 7:00 AM.

There was no delivery of the Aberdeen American News this morning. In talking with the district manager, he said there was confusion on the Interstate. Even though the interstate was listed as open, the lights were flashing that it was closed. In his words, "I saw it, I was there," He was en route to bringing the papers back, but not time for delivery. That means on Saturday, expect a nice bundle of papers to read!

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Groton Daily Independent
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Groton Community Calendar Friday, Feb. 24

Senior Menu: Chili, cornbread, coleslaw, pears.
School Breakfast: Cereal.
School Lunch: Fish nuggets, tritaters.
Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. (C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity.

Saturday, Feb. 25

Region 1A Girls Basketball Tournament at Milbank:
Groton Area vs. Waubay-Summit around 2:30 p.m.
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

County mountains—until tomorrow the first blizzard warning since 1989.

- MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell is suing House Speaker Kevin McCarthy for exclusively releasing footage from the January 6 Capitol riot to Fox News host Tucker Carlson and not to other networks like his.
- Alec Baldwin has pleaded not guilty to involuntary manslaughter charges brought against him following the fatal on-set shooting of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins in October 2021.
- Harvey Weinstein was sentenced to 16 years in prison in Los Angeles on rape and sexual assault charges, while R. Kelly got a 20-year sentence for enticement of a minor and child pornography charges, adding to the sentences they are already serving.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia is planning to launch “false flag” attacks to drag Belarus into the war and “undermine” the government of Moldova, the Institute for the Study of War has assessed.

- As some Republican donors leave Donald Trump for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, experts tell Newsweek that it's not the money lost but the signal it sends out that could hurt Trump the most in his 2024 election race.

- Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal urged the Transportation Department to do more against moving companies perpetrating scams but did not address whether he would introduce legislation to deal with the problem.

- The National Weather Service has issued a winter storm warning around Los Angeles—Ventura and Los Angeles

Governor Noem Now Accepting Applications for Summer Interns

PIERRE, S.D. – Governor Kristi Noem is now accepting applications for the Governor's Office Summer 2023 Internship Program.

Student interns will work with staff on various projects based on interests and strengths. Additional duties include aiding the governor's general counsel, constituent services team, and communications team. Interns will help conduct policy research, prepare policy briefings, and staff events. The internship program provides students first-hand experience with the State government and the functions of the governor's office.

College students who would like to be considered for an internship should submit a resume, cover letter, and letter of recommendation to brad.otten@state.sd.us. Application should be submitted by Friday April 7, 2023.

6" of Snow

Only six inches of snow fell in the Groton Area. Only - meaning the forecast amount was 12-19 inches. Thank goodness that was all we had with the windy conditions as well. Of course, I could be an inch or two off because of the wind, but even though, six inches may not seem like a lot, but compound that over every square inch and then to move it all requires a lot of time. The city crew got all of the streets plowed in under 9 hours.

CDC Adds COVID-19 Vaccine To Childhood Immunization Schedule

The CDC updates its recommended vaccine schedule every year. For this first time, it now includes the COVID vaccine.

By Sarah Cottrell - PARENTS

If you're keeping a close eye on what vaccines your child needs, this year, for the first time, you'll now see the COVID-19 vaccine on the recommended list of childhood immunizations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has officially added it to the schedule for people of all ages, particularly children. In the fall of 2022, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) voted to recommend the CDC add the COVID vaccine. Now it's official. This comes on the heels of President Joe Biden announcing the end of the national COVID emergency declaration on May 11, 2023.

So what else is new for 2023? Ultimately the guidance remains the same. The main difference is the fact that the COVID vaccine is now officially on the schedule to begin at age 6 months—or any time thereafter. As for boosters, the immunization schedule then points to the CDC's guidance on booster dose vaccination. In other words, when a new booster shot comes out, parents should follow the CDC's recommendation for that particular vaccination. That guidance may include factors like the type of vaccine your child had in their initial primary series (Pfizer or Moderna) or when they had their last shot. Here's what all of this means for kids and families.

How Vaccines Get On The Vaccine Schedule

The schedule of immunizations your child's pediatrician uses to help keep your child healthy is updated annually. The process includes collaboration between the Food and Drug Administration, which licenses all vaccines, and five different governing boards of trusted experts representing different areas of medicine and public health. That includes the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

In response to the COVID pandemic, researchers worked at breathtaking speeds to create an effective COVID vaccine. At the time of publishing, more than 81% of Americans have had at least one dose of the vaccine.¹ Now that the vaccine is added to the regular immunization schedule, doctors and parents will have more face-to-face opportunities to talk about the benefits of the vaccine.

"This effort reinforces my support of vaccinating all eligible people, including children, against COVID," says Matthew Harris, M.D., a pediatric emergency medicine physician and medical director of the COVID-19 vaccination program at Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park, NY. "The American Academy of Pediatrics has come out very strongly in favor of vaccinating all eligible children, regardless of prior history of COVID."

Will COVID Vaccines Be Mandated by Schools?

Following a vaccination schedule can feel confusing, considering that there are vaccines for 25 different diseases. That said, not all vaccines listed by the CDC are required for kids to enroll in public school.

Parents should note that adding the COVID vaccine to the childhood immunization schedule does not mean it will be mandated for students before enrolling in public schools. Those types of mandates happen solely at the state and local levels. As NBC News pointed out, the CDC added the HPV vaccine to the immunization schedule; however, only a handful of states have required it for students who matriculate in public schools.

Will the COVID-19 Vaccine Be Mandatory for Kids?

"Moving Covid-19 to the recommended immunization schedule does not impact what vaccines are required for school entrance if any," says Nirav Shah, M.D., director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said at the 2022 ACIP meeting where experts voted to add the vaccine to the schedule. "Local control matters. And we honor that the decision around school entrance for vaccines rests where it did before, which is with the state level, the county level, and at the municipal level if it exists at all."

Others agree that the CDC guidelines are unlikely to create COVID vaccine mandates in public education. "I think it is unlikely to ever be a mandate for public schools," says Dr. Harris. "There are a very select group of vaccine-preventable illnesses that pose such a tremendous risk to the population and that most

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states chose to make those vaccines mandatory.”

Dr. Harris says that unless there is a dramatic change in the COVID virus, he does not foresee the vaccine becoming mandated. However, it will be highly encouraged. “My hope is that this recommendation will generate more conversations between vaccine-hesitant parents and their pediatricians, and maybe those conversations will help parents feel at ease as they become more likely to open to vaccination,” said Dr. Harris. “COVID, while thought to be benign in most children, has killed over a thousand children in the last three years; it’s made hundreds of thousands of children sick. So I hope this reinvigorates really important family and provider conversations.”

Again, vaccine mandates happen at a state and local level, so check your state or local community to learn how they impact you and your family.

Why Is This COVID Vaccine Recommendation Significant?

The updated immunization schedule including the COVID vaccine and boosters will help insurance providers that usually cover the cost of vaccines listed on the CDC-recommended vaccine schedule. This distinction is significant as the federal government is winding down and ending its publicly funded program to offer free COVID vaccines to kids and adults.

During the 2022 ACIP committee vote, members voted to add the COVID vaccine to the Vaccines for Children Program (VFC), a nationalized public health program that offers free vaccines to kids who are eligible for or covered by Medicaid. Adding the COVID vaccine to the VFC will give greater access to uninsured or underinsured children, which will help inevitably boost COVID vaccination rates. While the CDC has added the COVID vaccine to the updated recommended immunization schedule, more work must be done to fully implement it into the VFC.

Should My Child Get the COVID Vaccine?

The COVID vaccine is safe and available for anyone over the age of 6 months. While the vaccine won’t 100% prevent anyone from getting the virus, it lowers the risk of spread and the risk of developing severe disease requiring hospitalization. Still, some parents wonder if their children should get it. For those still on the fence, Dr. Harris points out that the environment where kids spend their days automatically puts them at a higher risk of getting sick.

“Children spend most of the day in a mass setting,” Dr. Harris says. “They are in school, they are in camp, they are in social teams, and their ability to participate in other behaviors that minimize risks of infections is limited by the fact that we put them in a condition that they are in amongst lots of other kids who can potentially transmit a virus. I’m a parent of three kids, and they’ve gotten sick a dozen times because other kids come to school sick.”

Some parents worry that giving too many vaccines in a short window can overwhelm a child’s natural immune system. However, current data does not support that claim. The AAP notes kids are constantly exposed to germs, called antigens, and in a typical day, might be fighting off between 2,000 and 6,000 antigens. The AAP also says a child fights off under 150 antigens in the entire vaccine schedule combined. In short, kids’ immune systems are not overwhelmed by vaccines, and it is safe to add the COVID vaccine to the current recommended vaccine schedule.

Children as young as 6 months can receive either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines. They recommend that all children receive the vaccine even if they have already been infected with COVID. When it comes to boosters, there are different recommendations depending on whether your child has had the Pfizer or Moderna primary series. You can always check the CDC’s website or with your child’s pediatrician for the most up-to-date guidance on booster shots.

To learn more about up-to-date data on COVID-19, and the science and safety of vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine, visit the CDC website.

Parents, a Dotdash Meredith Brand, is an award-winning online resource for trustworthy, empathetic, and supportive information and inspiration for your families. We reach 9 million readers a month. Our content is written by experienced journalists, fact checked, and reviewed by our Expert Review Board for accuracy. Learn more about us and our editorial guidelines.

GDILIVE.COM

REGION 1A GIRLS' BASKETBALL AT MILBANK

Groton Area vs. Waubay-Summit

Saturday, Feb. 25, 2023 around 2:30 p.m.

Join Shane Clark with the play-by-play action on GDILIVE.COM

Game sponsored by

Bahr Spray Foam

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

Bierman Farm Service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Groton Ag Partners

Groton American Legion

Groton Chiropractic Clinic

Groton Dairy Queen

Groton Ford

Harry Implement

John Sieh Agency

Locke Electric

Lori's Pharmacy

Love to Travel

Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.

S & S Lumber & Hardware Hank

Weber Landscaping

Weismantel Insurance Agency



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.

GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Boys' Basketball Regular Season Finale

To feature the Senior Drum Line!

Friday, Feb. 24, 2023 at the Groton Area Arena

C game starts at 5 p.m. sponsored by Beverly Sombke

JV game to follow sponsored by Grandpa

Varsity to follow sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

Bierman Farm Service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Groton Chamber of Commerce

Groton Ford

John Sieh Agency

Locke Electric

Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.

Spanier Harvesting & Trucking

Bahr Spray Foam

Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.

GDI Subscribers can watch for free



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Attempts to block foreign ag-land ownership continue, despite existing laws that address it

1979 statutes include a 160-acre limit and an enforcement process

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR AND SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 23, 2023 6:28 PM

PIERRE — Efforts to prevent and root out existing foreign ownership of agricultural land in South Dakota are still in progress, despite the Legislature's rejection of a proposal from Gov. Kristi Noem, and despite a set of 44-year-old state laws that already facilitate some of what lawmakers are trying to accomplish.

The governor's bill would have created a committee to consider foreign purchases of ag land and make recommendations of approval or denial to the governor. The bill was intended to prevent ownership of ag land by countries viewed as hostile to the United States, such as China. But the governor's bill was defeated.

Meanwhile, a bill from House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Pierre, would require companies to disclose whether they own any agricultural land, and whether they have any foreign owners. The disclosures would be made in annual corporate reports that companies are already required to file. The bill has passed the House and awaits a vote in the Senate.

New bill's intent

Part of Mortenson's aim is closing a perceived loophole in existing state laws. Those laws, which date to 1979, prohibit foreign people and governments from owning more than 160 acres of agricultural land, with exceptions including land that's inherited, land covered by treaties, and land held by foreigners who have residency in the United States.

The laws do not specifically mention companies or corporations. Records from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show there are some foreigners and foreign-held corporations who own more than 160 acres of ag land in South Dakota, while the total amount of ag land in the state held by foreigners is more than 380,000 acres.

Closing the perceived loophole for companies, Mortenson said Thursday, "is my intention, and that is what I would like to continue working toward."

But the 1979 laws appear to account for much of what Mortenson is trying to achieve.

Existing laws

Those laws say the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources must monitor the reports of foreign ownership of ag land in South Dakota that are produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The reports are required by the federal Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act of 1978.

The state laws further require the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources to gather any indications of illegality revealed by the reports, and then to refer that information to the state attorney general for an investigation and potential legal action to force the forfeiture of any illegally owned land.

South Dakota Searchlight has asked whether DANR monitors the reports from the USDA, whether DANR refers any instances of non-compliance with the 160-acre rule to the attorney general, and whether the attorney general investigates and takes action against illegal land holdings. Representatives of DANR and the Attorney General's Office have acknowledged the questions and said they're seeking answers.

Attorney General Marty Jackley also said his office is watching Mortenson's bill.

"We're monitoring it, but we're not taking a position on it," Jackley said.

Mortenson said he remains committed to doing something more than existing state law requires.

"We need to ensure our laws are followed," Mortenson said in a written statement. "The state has a role

in monitoring foreign ownership of agricultural land.”

Sponsor of '79 laws obtains data

Former legislator Kent Frerichs, of Wilmot, sponsored the 1979 legislation in South Dakota. He recently obtained the 2021 report of foreign ag ownership in South Dakota from the USDA and shared it with South Dakota Searchlight.

The report lists 700 parcels of land in the state owned by foreign people or entities, including companies. Of those, about 50% are individuals and entities that own under 160 acres of land. The majority of the other 50% are European- and Canadian-owned wind farms and dairies. None of the land is held by Chinese owners, although a Chinese company owns the Smithfield packing plant in Sioux Falls, which is technically not classified as agricultural land.

What the USDA database does not disclose is whether those foreign owners who hold more than 160 acres are covered by the exceptions in South Dakota’s 1979 laws, or whether they’re holding land in South Dakota illegally. That’s something the state laws require DANR and the Attorney General’s Office to determine.

Frerichs has been frustrated by what he views as the failures of state government, the governor and the Legislature to utilize those existing laws before trying to enact new legislation. He believes the current laws could be effective if they’re enforced.

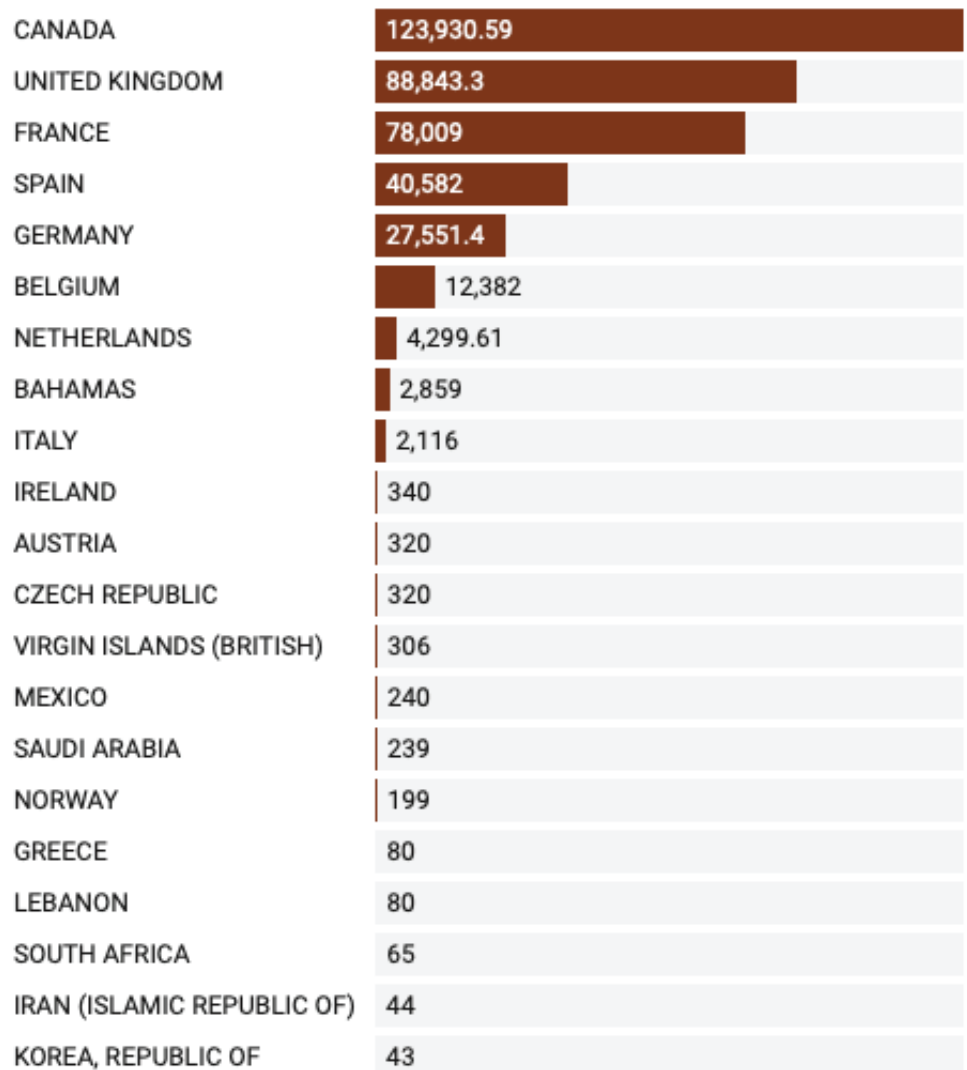
“I seriously wonder if the governor and Legislature have looked at the current statute,” Frerichs said.

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.

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

Ag land owned by foreigners

The total amount of agricultural land owned in South Dakota by people or entities from foreign countries, in acres.



COMMENTARY

South Dakota woman explores societal conflicts in podcast with 'Harry Potter' author

BRAD JOHNSON ~ FEBRUARY 23, 2023 5:11 PM

It seemed as if everything "Harry Potter" author J.K. Rowling touched turned to gold. Her series about the boy wizard captivated the world and she became the most famous female author ever known.

Then "it all blew up in the summer of 2020," wrote Clark, South Dakota, author Megan Phelps-Roper in a Feb. 14 article on The Free Press website titled "The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling."

Rowling used Twitter to speak against an effort to eliminate the term "women" and replace it with "people who menstruate."

Phelps-Roper quoted Rowling as saying, "If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased." "It's hard to capture the breadth of the firestorm that followed," Roper wrote, as she foreshadowed a podcast she hosts with Rowling that began Feb. 21.

Phelps-Roper wrote, "Rowling's words led to a 'revolt' among the staff at one of her publishers, an outcry from some of her most ardent fans, and a torrent of negative headlines in news outlets around the globe. Actors who had grown up on the 'Harry Potter' film sets – people she had known since they were children – distanced themselves from her. Many of Rowling's former fans began calling for boycotts."

An effort began to cancel Rowling and essentially turn her into Voldemort, the villain of her Harry Potter series.

Phelps-Roper, who is married and raising two children in Clark, a town of 1,140 people, decided she might be the best person to help people understand Rowling's story.

Phelps-Roper has her own unusual story, which she shares in her book, "Unfollow: A Memoir of Loving and Leaving Extremism."

She explained in her recent article, "I was born into the Westboro Baptist Church, a tiny congregation founded by my grandfather that was a world unto itself. From the age of 5, I protested with my parents, siblings, and extended family on sidewalks across America – including outside the funerals of AIDS victims and American soldiers."

They believed their protests were "an expression of love, warning the world from sins that would do them harm." When she started sharing that message on Twitter, she discovered that it was hateful "and it was me who needed to change." She left her family and the church.

"I knew what it was like to be an object of intense hatred. But I also knew the value of good-faith conversation, and the role it can play in bridging even the deepest divides."

So, she reached out to Rowling, who responded with an invitation to Scotland. Rowling had read Phelps-Roper's book and was "familiar with my story."

The result of that trip is the podcast, "The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling."

Rowling's website says, "This wide-ranging audio documentary examines some of the most contentious conflicts of our time and includes J.K. Rowling talking in depth about the controversies surrounding her, from book bans to debates on gender and sex. The series also examines the forces propelling this moment in history, through interviews with Rowling's supporters and critics, journalists, historians, clinicians, and more."

Phelps-Roper said Rowling's story "is a microcosm of our time. It's about the polarization of public opinion and the fracturing of public conversation. It is about the chasm between what people say they believe and how they're understood by others.

"It's about what it means to be human – to be a social animal who feels compelled to be part of a tribe. And it's about the struggle to discern what is right when our individual view of the world is necessarily limited and imperfect."

Her observations are obvious in our own South Dakota Legislature.

Legislation aimed at transgender people has generated fear and misunderstanding. National political posturing is replacing thoughtful conversation. Pick any topic – COVID, climate change or immigration.

Screaming at one another through social media avenues has drowned out problem solving. Perhaps the discussions flowing from “deep questions” in a conversation hosted by a South Dakota author and producer with Rowling can open eyes and ears and soften hearts.

“I’m more persuaded more than ever that talking – and listening,” Phelps-Roper said, “will help us find the path forward.”

Brad Johnson is a Watertown real estate appraiser and journalist whose previous career was as a Colorado newspaper reporter and editor. He has been writing regularly appearing opinion columns for at least 20 years.

Market innovation a path to economic equity in farming, Vilsack tells ag conference

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - FEBRUARY 23, 2023 2:29 PM

WASHINGTON – U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack urged the private sector and government officials to address inequity and promote innovation in what he called a “pivotal moment” in the nation’s history at an industry conference Thursday.

In the opening session of the 99th USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum, Vilsack said new income streams and markets will be key for the next generation of American farmers of all sizes and backgrounds.

“I think we have to ask ourselves a serious question,” Vilsack said in the opening address.

“Whether we want a system that continues to see further consolidation, and the impact that that has on farmers and on rural communities, or whether we’re innovative enough to figure out a different way and expand opportunity.”

The Agricultural Outlook Forum is a conference put on by a collection of USDA divisions each year for government officials and those in the industry to discuss “current and emerging trends in the sector.”

In addition to talking about industry trends, Vilsack spoke to the cultural significance of rural America and its connection to the land, saying rural Americans understood that farmland must be cared for and not exploited.

“You can’t keep taking from it,” he said. “You can’t just keep putting the seed in the ground, and getting the crop out of it. You’ve got to put something back in the ground.”

A legacy of action

Vilsack used examples from American history to show that the federal government can address growing economic inequity among farms.

Amid failing farm operations during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, Henry Wallace, the Agriculture secretary under President Franklin Roosevelt, steered funding to conservation programs and developed a supply management plan to shore up farm income, Vilsack said. Vilsack is a former governor of Iowa and Wallace, who went on to serve as vice president under Roosevelt, was a native Iowan.

Then, as the global population exploded in the 1970s, Earl Butz, the Agriculture secretary in Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford’s administrations, removed the supply management system and led a government push for improving production practices to “feed the world,” Vilsack added.

Butz’s move produced remarkable gains in commodity productivity, but also led to significant specialization, farm size increases and high input costs, Vilsack said.

He added the boom in large-scale commodity farming has hurt rural communities, as on-farm employment, topsoil levels and rural populations have shrunk over the last 50 years.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing climate challenges, and Russia-Ukraine war, the United States brought in record farm income, Vilsack said. Yet, input costs rose significantly, and the department reported that roughly half of U.S. farms made negative income over the past several years.

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Those statistics showed that commercial-scale farms were prospering while small ones floundered, he said. "Those large commercial-sized operations did very, very well — and they should because they've invested a lot of time and energy in producing an extraordinary crop," he said. "But the other 90% or so are struggling."

As such, Vilsack said he believed former Secretary Sonny Perdue was "unfairly criticized" for his take on farm consolidation during the Trump administration.

Still, Vilsack proposed an alternate path from the one Perdue charted.

"He essentially said in America, the economies of scale are such that either you get big or get out," Vilsack said. "I think there's a different way. I think we can push back on what traditionally happens in the industry in this country. I think we can create a different innovative, creative way to approach the future."

Seeding new markets

An "innovative" strategy for farmers and ranchers could include generating new markets and on-farm income diversity, Vilsack said.

"It's not just growing crops and selling them, or raising livestock and selling them, or government payments," Vilsack said. "We can be innovative and creative enough to create additional profit opportunities."

Vilsack hailed what he viewed as an early success in the department's Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities program, which develops sustainable agricultural products. The program has invested in 141 projects since September 2022.

The program is also developing more "ecosystem service markets," which would pay farmers to hit water quality, biodiversity, and soil carbon benchmarks. The department operates 24 of those markets today, he said.

The additional markets would add to the potential income streams available to farmers, he said.

"So instead of two or three ways to generate profit and income on a farm, we have five or six or seven different ways," Vilsack said. "Each farm becomes a center of entrepreneurship."

Vilsack added that funding from the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, the COVID 19-relief law Democrats passed in early 2021, has enabled expansion of independent meat and agricultural product processors. The department allocated \$59 million from the law to meat packers Tuesday.

And he said a program in the \$1.2 trillion bipartisan infrastructure law would enable funding for agricultural building materials, like soybean-based road materials and sustainable aviation fuels.

"Now that small- or mid-sized operation can stay in business," Vilsack said. "Higher farm income, more rural jobs, better soil health, purer water quality and a stronger sense of community and connection. That's the future. That's what we're investing in now."

Vilsack said lawmakers had an "extraordinary" opportunity to act on this vision by reauthorizing the farm bill this year.

He noted that rural regions of the country embody a culture of giving back to the land.

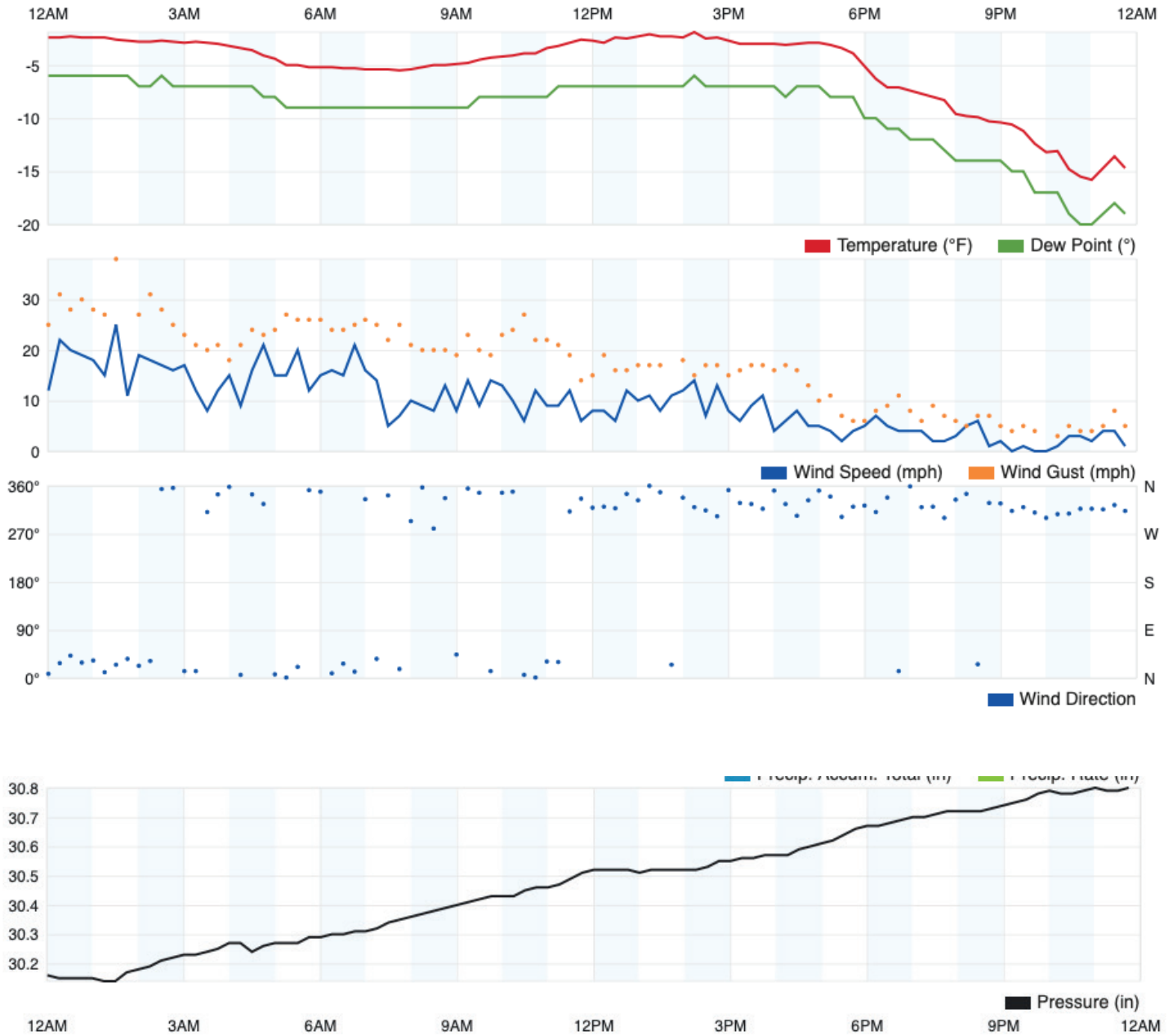
"We want that value system to be alive and well and flourishing in this country, especially now at a time of division," Vilsack said. "This isn't just about farmers and ranchers. It's not just about jobs. It's about the essence of this country."

Adam Goldstein is the D.C. Bureau intern for States Newsroom. Goldstein is a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, studying digital reporting. He is originally from San Francisco, and loves swimming, cooking, and the San Francisco 49ers.

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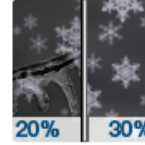

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs









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Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
						
20%					20% 30%	20%
Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Mostly Cloudy	Sunny	Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny	Slight Chance Wintry Mix then Chance Snow	Slight Chance Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow
High: -1 °F	Low: -18 °F	High: 19 °F	Low: 0 °F	High: 33 °F	Low: 25 °F	High: 35 °F

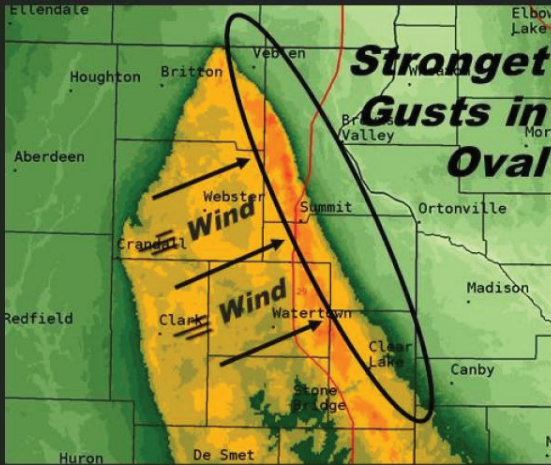
Arctic Cold ... Warmer This Weekend

Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday
				
Light Snow (Dusting-1/2")		Blowing Snow	Blowing Snow & Light Mix	
High: -1 to +10	High: 19 to 38 Low: -7 to -19	High: 30 to 42 Low: 0 to +15	High: 35 to 38 Low: 20 to 25	High: 28 to 42 Low: 9 to 17
<p>Updated: 2/24/2023 2:49 AM Central  NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE OCEANS AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION</p> <p>'Warmer' range for central SD & 'Colder' range for far northeast South Dakota and western Minnesota</p>				

We will see some light snow cross the area today ahead of some warmer air, followed by Prairie Coteau downslope winds. Despite mild temperatures, we will see additional chances for blowing snow across the area later in the weekend, along with some light mixed precipitation Monday.

Strong Downslope Winds Saturday AM

Created at 2:56 AM - Friday, February 24, 2023



What/Where? ❄️

Breezy to windy conditions, especially in the oval on the map at left, combined with cold temperatures and deep snowpack will lead to **blowing snow and reduced visibilities** across portions of Marshall, Roberts, and Grant Counties.

When? ❄️

Mainly from 6am to early Afternoon Saturday, Feb 25th

Impacts ❄️

Use caution while traveling, especially on I-29 north of Summit and other downslope wind-prone roads where snow exists.



Downslope winds are possible, and with fresh snow, blowing and drifting could be a problem during the morning and early afternoon Saturday.

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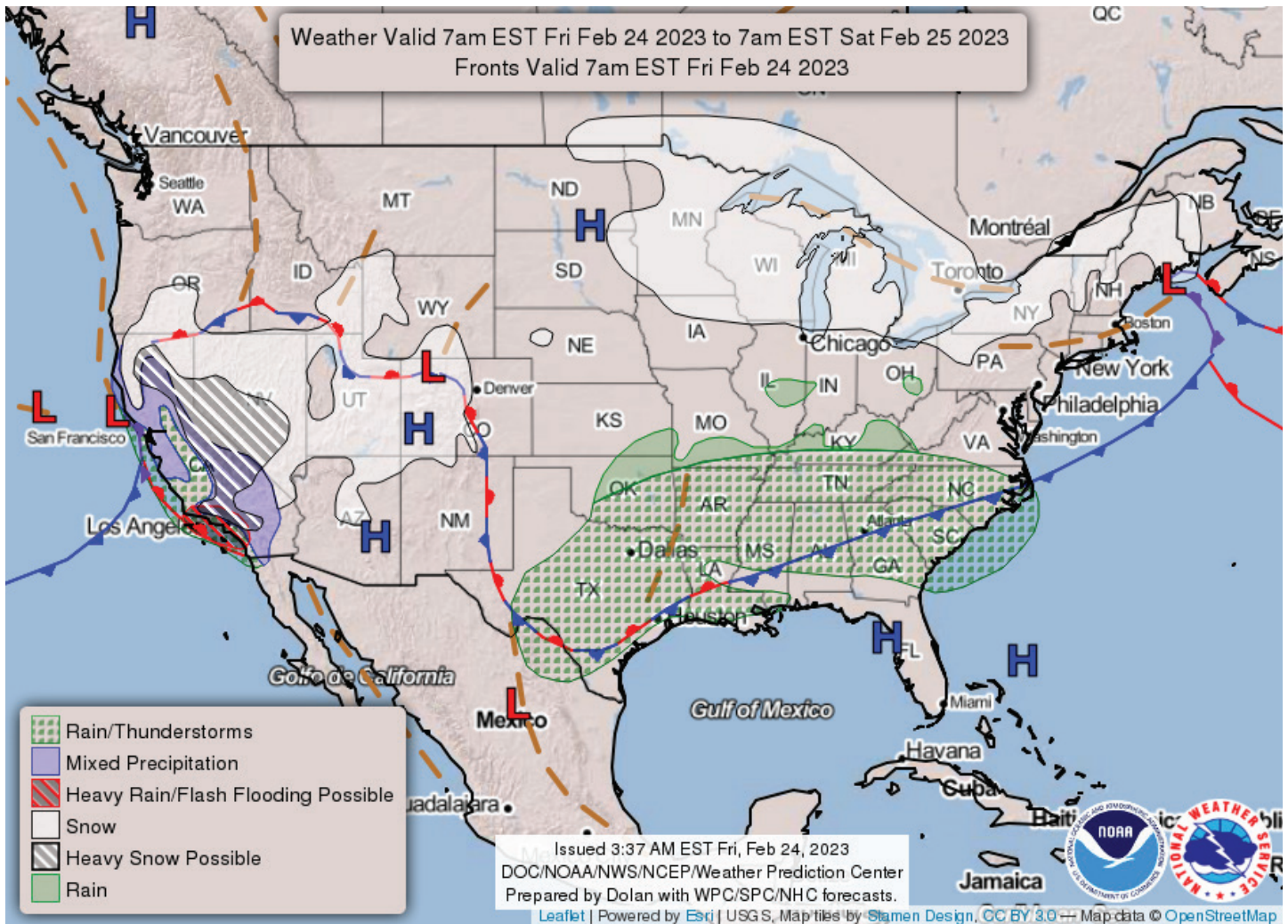
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: -1.9°F at 2:15 PM
Low Temp: -15.8 °F at 11:00 PM
Wind: 38 mph at 1:30 AM
Precip: : 6" of Snow

Day length: 10 hours, 55 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 1976
Record Low: -26 in 1940
Average High: 32
Average Low: 10
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.52
Precip to date in Feb.: 1.33
Average Precip to date: 1.07
Precip Year to Date: 0.25
Sunset Tonight: 6:13:30 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:15:55 AM



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Today in Weather History

February 24, 2001: Heavy snow of 6 to 14 inches fell across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Along with the heavy snow came blizzard conditions across northeastern South Dakota and west-central Minnesota during the morning hours of the 25th as northwest winds increased to 25 to 45 mph. As a result of the heavy snow and blizzard conditions, travel became difficult, if not impossible, resulting in some accidents and stranded motorists. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Waubay, Onida, Murdo, and Artas, 7 inches at Aberdeen, Faulkton, Ipswich, Kennebec, and Clark, and 8 inches at Miller, Castlewood, 23 N Highmore, and Pierre. In addition, nine inches of snow fell at Browns Valley, Wheaton, Clinton, Graceville, Dumont, Roy Lake, Mellette, Blunt, and Watertown. Other snowfall amounts included 10 inches near Summit, 11 inches at Webster, Ortonville, and Artichoke Lake, and 14 inches at Milbank.

1852 - The Susquehanna River ice bridge at Havre de Grace, MD, commenced to break up after forty days of use. A total of 1738 loaded freight cars were hauled along rails laid on the ice. (David Ludlum)

1936 - Vermont and New Hampshire received brown snow due to dust from storms in the Great Plains Region. A muddy rain fell across parts of northern New York State. (24th-25th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1969: The famous "100-Hour Storm" began in Boston, MA. Snow often fell between early on the 25th and noon on the 28th. The 26.3 inches at Logan Airport is the 2nd most significant snowstorm in Boston's history. In addition, 77 inches fell at Pinkham Notch Base Station in New Hampshire, bringing their February total to 130 inches. Their snow cover on the 27th was 164 inches. Mt. Washington, NH, received 172.8 inches of snow in the month.

1987 - A massive winter storm began to overspread the western U.S. In southern California, Big Bear was blanketed with 17 inches of snow, and Lake Hughes reported four inches of snow in just one hour. Snow pellets whitened coastal areas of Orange County and San Diego County, with three inches at Huntington Beach. The storm also produced thunderstorms with hail and waterspouts. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A total of thirty-three cities in the eastern U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date, and an Atlantic coast storm spread heavy snow from Georgia to southern New England. Snowfall totals in New Jersey ranged up to 24 inches in May County, with 19 inches reported at Atlantic City. Totals in North Carolina ranged up to 18 inches in Gates County, and winds along the coast of North Carolina gusted to 70 mph at Duck Pier. Strong winds gusting to 52 mph created blizzard conditions at Chatham MA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Strong northerly winds prevailed from Illinois to the Southern and Central Appalachians. Winds gusted to 68 mph at Sewickley Heights PA. High winds caused considerable blowing and drifting of snow across northern and central Indiana through the day. Wind gusts to 47 mph and 6 to 8 inches of snow created white-out conditions around South Bend IN. Traffic accidents resulted in two deaths and 130 injuries. Sixty-five persons were injured in one accident along Interstate 69 in Huntington County. Wind gusts to 60 mph and 4 to 8 inches of snow created blizzard conditions in eastern and northern Ohio. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2001: Over a dozen tornadoes spawned in central and eastern Arkansas. The strongest tornado (F3) was in Desha County, with parts of a farm shop found six miles away from where it was blown apart. An 18-month-old was killed in Fulton County by an F2 tornado.

2004 - Heavy snows blanket wide areas of northern New Mexico, closing schools and highways. Mountains east of Santa Fe receive 20 inches. Sandia Park, east of Albuquerque, measures 11 inches. 8 inches falls at Los Alamos.

2007: An EF3 tornado struck Dumas, Arkansas, injuring 28. Seven other tornadoes hit southeast Arkansas on this day, but no fatalities.

2016: A strong area of low pressure along with a cold front produced a severe weather outbreak from North Carolina to Pennsylvania. Not one but two rare February tornadoes occurred in central Virginia. The strongest tornado caused EF3 damage in Appomattox County.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

CONSCIOUS OF OUR CONSCIENCE

While managing the Washington Senators, Gil Hodges learned that four of his players had violated the team curfew. Calling the team together, he said, "I know that four of you have violated the team curfew, and I know who you are. No, I don't want to make this an issue, but you know the penalty for doing that. So I am going to leave a box on my desk, and you guilty ones put your hundred dollars in the box, and we'll drop the matter. I want to see \$400 in that box in the morning!" The next morning there were eight one-hundred dollar bills in the box.

Our conscience is one of God's greatest gifts. If we live according to His Word, it will enable us to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, the sacred from the secular.

Paul said that he took "pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." He lived his life in constant awareness of the fact that one day there would be a resurrection of the living and the dead followed by a judgment of both the just and the unjust. He refused to be found doing anything that would dishonor His Lord and Savior and be judged "unfit!"

There are many statements in the writings of Paul where he talked about his final accounting before God. He lived his life continually reminding himself - and others - of one important fact: We will all stand before Him to be judged. We would do well to remember this.

Prayer: Father, may we live life in light of eternity, always realizing that You will judge all of us on that day. May we prepare now for that day when we will face You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. Acts 24:16



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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2023 Community Events

- 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)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 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)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 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)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.21.23

2 15 30 36 63 24

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$126,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 59 Mins
DRAW: 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

6 24 25 31 38 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$38,010,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 59
DRAW: Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.23.23

1 7 20 21 38 15

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 29 Mins 47
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

1 3 12 21 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$64,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 59
DRAW: Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

2 38 53 62 63 2

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 58
DRAW: Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

11 19 39 44 65 7

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$119,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 58
DRAW: Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

THURSDAY'S SCORES

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=
CLASS B REGION 7=
WALL DEF. OELRICHS, FORFEIT
SDHSAA PLAYOFFS=
CLASS A REGION 8=
BELLE FOURCHE 51, HOT SPRINGS 26
HILL CITY 52, CUSTER 45
RAPID CITY CHRISTIAN 85, LEAD-DEADWOOD 6
CLASS B REGION 7=
JONES COUNTY 53, PHILIP 23
KADOKA AREA 50, NEW UNDERWOOD 36
WHITE RIVER 67, EDGEMONT 32

SOME HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL SCORES PROVIDED BY SCORESTREAM.COM, [HTTPS://SCORESTREAM.COM/](https://scorestream.com/)

Oral Roberts beats South Dakota 82-70, ups win streak to 13

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Connor Vanover scored 19 points to lead Oral Roberts to an 82-70 victory over South Dakota on Thursday night.

Vanover added nine rebounds for the Golden Eagles (26-4, 17-0 Summit League). Max Abmas finished with 18 points and three steals. Kareem Thompson totaled 16 points and seven rebounds.

Tasos Kamateros finished with 20 points and nine rebounds to pace the Coyotes (11-18, 6-11). A.J. Plitzuweit had 16 points and four assists. Kruz Perrott-Hunt scored 14.

NEXT UP

Both teams next play Saturday. Oral Roberts visits South Dakota State, while South Dakota hosts Kansas City.

Winter storms sow more chaos, shut down much of Portland

By CLAIRE RUSH, DREW CALLISTER and JIM SALTER Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Winter storms sowed more chaos across the U.S. on Thursday, shutting down much of Oregon's largest city with almost a foot of snow and paralyzing travel from parts of the Pacific Coast all the way to the northern Plains.

The nearly 11 inches (28 centimeters) that fell in Portland amounted to the second snowiest day in the city's history. It took drivers by surprise, stalling traffic during the Wednesday evening rush hour and trapping motorists on freeways for hours.

Some spent the night in their vehicles or abandoned them altogether as crews struggled to clear roads. Other commuters got off spun-out buses and walked in groups to safety. The National Weather Service, which had predicted only a slim chance of significant snow, planned to review its work.

The weather also knocked out power to almost a million homes and businesses in multiple states, closed schools and grounded or delayed thousands of flights. The system even brought snow to usually balmy Southern California.

Kim Upham endured a 13-hour ordeal as snow brought to a standstill the traffic on U.S. 26, a mountainous highway that connects Portland to the coast. Already treacherous because of its steep grade, the

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highway was covered in a sheet of ice, forcing some drivers to leave their cars in the middle of the road. "It was so scary to have semi-trucks behind you and semi-trucks in front of you, and you know you're on a slope," she said.

As the hours stretched on, some drivers began to worry about surviving until morning. Upham used a blanket to stay warm and spent the night in her car. To save gas, she turned the vehicle on only intermittently to run the windshield wipers and inch ahead when traffic moved slightly.

"I really don't want to die on 26," she added. "I was thinking that quite often, to be honest with you."

The Multnomah County medical examiner's office said it was investigating a suspected hypothermia death related to the storm. The agency offered no details.

Amid concern for the thousands of people who live on Portland's streets, city and county officials said they would open three additional overnight shelters Thursday evening, for a total of six. The sites would be able to sleep about 700 people.

Some reveled in the surprise day off in a place that rarely gets measurable snow.

Joan Jasper snapped on skis and was gliding through a residential neighborhood.

"They always have like 'snowmageddon' on the news, and so we kind of ignored it — and 11 inches later here we are!" she said. "This is gorgeous."

In Southern California, the weather service office in San Diego issued its first-ever blizzard warning, covering the mountains of San Bernardino County from early Friday until Saturday afternoon. San Bernardino County lies east of Los Angeles County, where the first mountain blizzard warning since 1989 was scheduled to take effect at the same time.

Karen Krenis was driving to a pottery studio in Santa Cruz, California, when she stopped in her tracks after seeing snow on the beach. She got out of her car and went to take photos. By the time she left, about 50 other people were there. Adults were snapping photos, and children were making snowballs.

"I have lived in California for 30 years, and I've never seen anything like it," Krenis said.

In Wyoming, roads across much of the southern part of the state were impassable, state officials said.

Rescuers tried to reach stranded motorists, but high winds and drifting snow created a "near-impossible situation," said Sgt. Jeremy Beck of the Wyoming Highway Patrol.

High winds and heavy snow in the Cascade Mountains prevented search teams from reaching the bodies of three climbers killed over the weekend in an avalanche on Washington state's Colchuck Peak.

Portland residents had expected no more than a dusting to a few inches. The city uses salt on its roads only in extreme situations for environmental reasons, and the chaos Thursday recalled a similar storm in 2017 that left motorists stranded on freeways and shut down the city for days.

The weather service originally predicted a 20% chance that Portland would get more than 2 inches (5 centimeters) of snow. The probability of getting 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 centimeters) was only around 5%.

The forecast changed rapidly as the storm approached, said Colby Neuman, a weather service meteorologist in Portland. He said forecasters would try to figure out why their models were wrong.

"There's a balance there between crying wolf and also informing people so they can make their own decisions," Neuman said.

In Arizona, several interstates and other highways were closed due to high winds, falling temperatures and blowing snow. Forecasters said snow could fall as rapidly as 2 to 3 inches (5 to 8 centimeters) per hour.

A blizzard warning was in effect through Saturday in California for higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada, where predictions called for several feet of snow, 60 mph (96 kph) gusts and wind chills as low as minus 40 degrees (minus 40 Celsius).

Electrical grids took a beating in the north as heavy ice and strong winds toppled power lines. In California, lines were fouled with tree branches and other debris.

A Michigan firefighter died Wednesday after coming in contact with a downed power line in the village of Paw Paw, authorities said. Van Buren County Sheriff Dan Abbott called it a tragic accident that was "no fault of the firefighter."

Widespread power outages were reported in California, Oregon, Illinois, Michigan and New York, according to the website PowerOutage.us.

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The largest outages by far were in Michigan, where more than 820,000 customers were without electricity, mostly in the state's southeast corner. Power lines and trees were shrouded in ice. DTE Energy said some outages could last through the weekend.

Afternoon temperatures in the 40s (above 4.4 Celsius) were expected to melt the ice, but DTE said it was bracing for more broken lines.

"A quarter-inch of ice on an electrical system is the equivalent of a baby grand piano hanging on those wires," said Trevor Lauer, the president of DTE's electric arm.

In the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, the city offered free dry ice, an acknowledgment that power could be out for a while. Ash Quam praised a public works crew for getting a large ice-coated tree limb out of the street.

"It was so loud when it came crashing down around midnight. By the time I woke up this morning, it was gone," Quam said on Facebook.

Weather also contributed to another day of problems at the nation's airports. By Thursday afternoon, more than 2,000 flights were canceled and nearly 14,000 were delayed across the country, according to the tracking service FlightAware.

Ukraine leader pledges push for victory on war anniversary

By JOHN LEICESTER and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's president pledged to push for victory in 2023 as he and other Ukrainians on Friday marked the somber anniversary of the Russian invasion that he called "the longest day of our lives."

As morning broke on a day of commemorations and reflection, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy struck a tone of grim defiance and used the Feb. 24 anniversary to congratulate Ukrainians on their resilience in the face of Europe's biggest and deadliest war since World War II. He said they had proven themselves to be invincible in what he called "a year of pain, sorrow, faith and unity."

"We survived the first day of the full-scale war. We didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but we clearly understood that for each tomorrow, you need to fight. And we fought," he said in an early morning video address.

It was "the longest day of our lives. The hardest day of our modern history. We woke up early and haven't fallen asleep since," he said.

Ukrainians attended memorials, held vigils and other remembrances for their tens of thousands of dead — a toll growing all the time as fighting rages in eastern Ukraine in particular. Although Friday marked the anniversary of the full-scale invasion, combat between Russian-backed forces and Ukrainian troops has raged in the country's east since 2014. New video from there shot with a drone for The Associated Press showed how the town of Marinka has been razed, along with others.

Lining up in the capital, Kyiv, to buy anniversary commemorative postage stamps, Tetiana Klimkova said that a year into the invasion, she's been unable to shake "the feeling that your heart is constantly falling, it is falling and hurting."

Still, "this day has become a symbol for me that we have survived for a whole year and will continue to live," she said. "On this day, our children and grandchildren will remember how strong Ukrainians are mentally, physically, and spiritually."

But peace is nowhere in sight. China called for a cease-fire — an idea previously rejected by Ukraine for fear it would allow Russia to regroup militarily after bruising battlefield setbacks.

A 12-point paper issued Friday by China's Foreign Ministry also urged the end of Western sanctions that are squeezing Russia's economy.

That suggestion also looks like a non-starter, given that Western nations are working to further tighten the sanctions noose, not loosen it. The U.K. government imposed more sanctions Friday on firms supplying military equipment to Moscow and said it would bar exports to Russia of aircraft parts and other components.

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Ukraine also is readying another military push to roll back Russian forces — with weaponry that has been pouring in from the West.

“Ukraine is entering a new period, with a new task — to win,” Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said on Facebook.

“It will not be easy. But we will manage,” he said. “There is rage and a desire to avenge the fallen.”

Mercifully, air raid alarms didn’t sound overnight in Kyiv and the morning started quietly, allaying concerns that Russia might unleash another barrage of missiles to pile yet more sadness on Ukraine on the date of the anniversary.

Still, the government recommended that schools move classes online, and office employees were asked to work from home. And even as they rode Kyiv’s subway to work, bought coffee and got busy, Ukrainians were unavoidably haunted by thoughts of loss and memories of a year ago when missiles struck, Russian invaded Ukraine’s borders and a refugee exodus began. Back then, there were fears the country might fall within days or weeks.

Mykhailo Horbunov, a 68-year-old man trying to rebuild in Kyiv after having been forced to flee his Russian-occupied village in the south, said the invasion had been a watershed in his life. He lost his agricultural business, and Russian troops have been living in his house for six months. He described the war’s impact on him as “a collapse.”

The day was also particularly poignant for the parents of children born exactly a year ago as bombs began killing and maiming.

“It’s a tragedy for the whole country, for every Ukrainian,” said Alina Mustafaieva, who gave birth to daughter Yeva as the first explosions echoed across Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city.

“My family was lucky. We didn’t lose anyone or anything. But many did, and we have to share this loss together,” she said.

Tributes to Ukraine’s resilience flowed from overseas. The Eiffel Tower in Paris was among monuments illuminated in Ukraine’s colors — yellow and blue.

Zelenskyy got an early start to the day, firing off a tweet that promised: “We know that 2023 will be the year of our victory!”

He followed that up with his video address in which he pledged not to abandon Ukrainians living under Russian occupation.

Ukraine “has not forgotten about you, has not given up on you. One way or another, we will liberate all our lands,” he said.

A year on, casualty figures are horrific on both sides, although Moscow and Kyiv are keeping precise numbers under wraps. Western estimates suggest hundreds of thousands of killed and wounded. The failure of the Russian military to fill its initial objective of capturing Kyiv severely dented its reputation as a fighting force. Still, it has unleashed an unrelenting barrage of firepower on Ukraine over the past year. Ukrainian armed forces put the tally at roughly 5,000 missile strikes, 3,500 airstrikes and 1,000 drone strikes.

Economic repercussions have rippled across the globe. Diplomatic repercussions, too. Western nations are supporting Ukraine militarily, financially and politically. But China, India and countries in the global south have proven ambivalent about Western arguments that Ukraine is the front line of a fight for freedom and democracy.

Workers dig by layers in search for 47 missing at China mine

By NG HAN GUAN Associated Press

ALXA LEAGUE, China (AP) — Work crews trying to find 47 people missing after a collapse at an open-pit mine in northern China have had to change their excavation methods to avoid causing more landslides, state media reported Friday.

Six people have been confirmed dead and six injured people have been rescued at the mine in Inner Mongolia’s Alxa League as of Thursday night, broadcaster CCTV said.

With a large collapsed area at the mine, the digging done by backhoes and bulldozers can risk more

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collapses. The crews are excavating by layers and making trapezoid-shaped descents to carry on their search from both sides of the mountain in an adjustment of their rescue plans, the report said.

On Friday, heavy machines were seen working on the top level of the collapsed site, searching for trapped vehicles and missing persons.

"It is very challenging to conduct rescue work," Li Zhongzeng, head of Alxa League in Inner Mongolia, told CCTV. "Rescue workers from everywhere, including those in neighboring regions, are rushing to the site."

The initial cave-in of one of the pit's walls occurred at about 1 p.m. Wednesday, burying people and mining trucks below in tons of rocks and sand. A brief video of the collapse posted on the website of the Beijing Times showed a massive wall of reddish dirt or sand rushing down a slope onto mining vehicles moving below.

A subsequent landslide about five hours later halted rescue efforts before they resumed Thursday.

CCTV said 1,160 rescuers were currently at the scene. They were seen using heavy machines, shovels and rescue dogs in their search for miners.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has called for an "all-out" search-and-rescue effort.

Wang Xiangxi, minister of emergency management, said authorities should investigate the disaster and hold accountable anyone who was responsible for it.

Authorities in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region also issued an urgent notice asking all districts to perform safety checks and eliminate any hidden risks, according to a local state newspaper. Those who do not comply with the request and cause accidents will be held accountable, it added.

On Friday, security remained tight at a checkpoint between Inner Mongolia and the neighboring region of Ningxia, with two police officers in yellow vests checking vehicles that were trying to get past what one of them called a "restricted" area.

Some trucks were turned away from proceeding further, but others including one emergency services vehicle driving very fast with a siren blaring and a truck carrying rescue supplies were let in. The checkpoint appeared quieter compared to a day ago.

The company running the mine, Inner Mongolia Xinjing Coal Industry Co. Ltd., was fined last year for multiple safety violations including insecure routes, unsafe storage of volatile materials and a lack of safety training, according to the news website The Paper.

Inner Mongolia is a key region for mining of coal, minerals and rare earths that critics say has ravaged the region's landscape of mountains, grassy steppes and deserts.

China overwhelmingly relies on coal for power generation but has tried to cut the number of deadly mine accidents through a greater emphasis on safety and the closure of smaller operations that lacked necessary equipment.

What is China's peace proposal for Ukraine War?

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — One year into Russia's war against Ukraine, China is offering a 12-point proposal to end the fighting.

The proposal follows China's recent announcement that it is trying to act as mediator in the war that has re-energized Western alliances viewed by Beijing and Moscow as rivals. China's top diplomat indicated that the plan was coming at a security conference this week in Munich, Germany.

With its release, President Xi Jinping's government is reiterating China's claim to being neutral, despite blocking efforts at the United Nations to condemn the invasion. The document echoes Russian claims that Western governments are to blame for the Feb. 24, 2022 invasion and criticizes sanctions on Russia.

At the Munich meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed skepticism about Beijing's position before the plan's release. He said China has provided non-lethal assistance that supports Russian President Vladimir Putin's war effort and said the U.S. has intelligence that Beijing is "considering providing lethal support." China has called the allegation a "smear" and said it lacks evidence.

WHAT HAS CHINA PROPOSED?

China's proposal calls for a cease-fire and peace talks, and an end to sanctions against Russia.

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China placed responsibility for sanctions on other "relevant countries" without naming them. These countries, it says, "should stop abusing unilateral sanctions" and "do their share in de-escalating the Ukraine crisis."

Many of the 12 points were very general and did not contain specific proposals.

Without mentioning either Russia or Ukraine, it says sovereignty of all countries should be upheld. It didn't specify what that would look like for Ukraine, and the land taken from it since Russia seized Crimea in 2014.

The proposal also condemns a "Cold War mentality," a term that often refers to the United States and the U.S.-European military alliance NATO. "The security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs," the proposal says. Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded a promise that Ukraine will not join the bloc before the invasion.

Other points call for a cease-fire, peace talks, protection for prisoners of war and stopping attacks on civilians, without elaborating, as well as keeping nuclear power plants safe and facilitating grain exports.

"The basic tone and the fundamental message in the policy is quite pro-Russia," said Li Mingjiang, a professor of Chinese foreign policy and international security at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

DOES CHINA BACK RUSSIA IN ITS WAR ON UKRAINE?

China has offered contradictory statements regarding its stance. It says Russia was provoked into taking action by NATO's eastward expansion, but has also claimed neutrality on the war.

Ahead of Russia's attack, Xi and Putin attended the opening of last year's Winter Olympics in Beijing and issued a statement that their governments had a "no limits" friendship. China has since ignored Western criticism and reaffirmed that pledge.

Putin has said he expects Xi to visit Russia in the next few months. China has yet to confirm that.

China is "trying to have it both ways," Blinken said Sunday on NBC.

"Publicly, they present themselves as a country striving for peace in Ukraine, but privately, as I said, we've seen already over these past months the provision of non-lethal assistance that does go directly to aiding and abetting Russia's war effort."

HAS CHINA PROVIDED SUPPORT TO RUSSIA?

China's support for Russia has been largely rhetorical and political. Beijing has helped to prevent efforts to condemn Moscow at the United Nations. There is no public evidence it is currently supplying arms to Russia, but the U.S. has said China is providing non-lethal support already and may do more.

Blinken, at the Munich conference, said the United States has long been concerned that China would provide weapons to Russia. "We have information that gives us concern that they are considering providing lethal support to Russia," he said.

Blinken said he expressed to the Chinese envoy to the meeting, Wang Yi, that "this would be a serious problem."

NATO's chief said Wednesday he had seen some signs that China may be ready to provide arms and warned that would be it would be supporting a violation of international law.

Russian and Chinese forces have held joint drills since the invasion, most recently with the South African navy in a shipping lane off the South African coast.

Ukraine's defense minister Oleksii Reznikov expressed doubt about China's willingness to send lethal aid to Russia.

"I think that if China will help them ... it will not (be) weaponry. It will (be) some kinds of like clothes," Reznikov said in Kyiv Monday.

Israel's outpost approvals boost settlers, deepen conflict

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

GIVAT HAREL, West Bank (AP) — One day in the fall of 1998, Shivi Drori, a young farmer fresh out of the Israeli army, brought three trailers to a rugged hilltop deep in the occupied West Bank and began to plant raspberries.

It was an unauthorized settlement in the heart of territory claimed by the Palestinians, but Drori, now

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49, said he considered himself to be “in a way, working with the government.”

Today, more than 90 Jewish families live in what has become the thriving village of Givat Harel — full of concrete homes with breathtaking views, a crowded nursery and an award-winning vineyard.

Just down the road is Turmus Aya, a Palestinian village that lost part of its land to the nearby Shilo settlement two decades ago. One of the villagers, Amal Abu Awad, 58, has watched her world shrink since the settlers arrived.

She said settlers prevented her late husband from reaching his grazing land and periodically uprooted her olive trees. Last week, masked vandals attacked her house, armed with clubs and knives, shouting insults as they smashed windows and broke her solar panels.

Her seven sons now take turns perching on the roof overnight, watching out for vigilantes.

“This was our land long before they thought to claim it,” she said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s new far-right government announced last week it would legalize Givat Harel, along with nine other unauthorized West Bank outposts, boosting settlers’ morale and strengthening their hold on the land.

Drori’s village, on a ridge between the Palestinian cities of Ramallah and Nablus, is part of an extensive network of 150 outposts now home to some 20,000 settlers, according to anti-settlement watchdog Peace Now. The outposts appeared over the past three decades, many built at least partially on private Palestinian land, Peace Now says.

While the outposts were established without formal government authorization, they often received tacit government support or even public funding. Over 20% of the outposts, like Givat Harel, have been retroactively legalized, and more are in the pipeline.

Anti-settlement groups and experts describe a steady government effort to entrench Israeli rule over the West Bank and grab more occupied land that Palestinians seek for a future state. Strings of strategically located outposts have changed the landscape of the territory — threatening to make a future Palestinian state little more than a shriveled constellation of disconnected enclaves.

“We see this as a very big move toward annexation,” said Ziv Stahl, director of Israeli rights group Yesh Din. “Cementing the existence of these places blocks any hope for Palestinians to ever get their land back.”

On Monday, days after the government’s outpost approvals triggered widespread condemnation, Netanyahu declared a six-month freeze in recognizing new outposts — part of a U.S.-brokered agreement to avert a diplomatic crisis at the United Nations.

As a result, the U.N. Security Council approved a watered-down statement opposing Israel’s expansion of settlements, derailing a legally binding resolution that would have demanded a halt to Israeli settlement activity.

But Netanyahu made no public commitment to halt settlement construction. On Thursday, his government granted approval for over 7,000 new homes in Jewish settlements across the West Bank. Some of those homes, settlement opponents said, are located in four outposts that remain unauthorized.

Netanyahu’s freeze “is meaningless,” said Lior Amihai from Peace Now.

Settlement critics describe a wink-and-nod policy toward outposts traced back to efforts by successive governments to deflect international pressure. Most of the world considers all Israeli settlements — home to some 700,000 people in the West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem — as a violation of international law.

In 1996, Israel pledged it would not establish new settlements as part of peace-making efforts with the Palestinians, but said it would need to keep building in existing ones to accommodate natural growth.

Since then, successive governments have made a distinction between authorized settlements and “illegal” outposts, such as Dori’s Givat Harel.

Like many others, Givat Harel straddles both public and private land — including agricultural land belonging to the Palestinian villages of Sinjil and Qaryout, according to Dror Etkes, an anti-settlement activist who follows Israeli land policy in the West Bank.

From the outpost, both villages, along with other Palestinian towns, can be seen nestled in the undulating hills.

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Drori dismissed claims of Palestinian ownership, saying the hilltop had long been vacant.

"We were fulfilling government desires, just in a weird way," he said, speaking at the settlement's vineyard, which exports some 100,000 bottles a year of locally produced Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and marquee blends named "Dancing Hills."

"It's always hush-hush," he said.

Givat Harel popped up during the first outpost building boom in the 1990s. Encouraged by Ariel Sharon, Israel's foreign minister in 1998 who famously exhorted settlers to "run and grab" Palestinian hilltops, Drori arrived at the scenic ridge.

Sharon even gifted Givat Harel its first water tankers, Drori said. The Ministry of Construction poured money into new houses. The local settler council installed electric towers, paved roads and piped water to the homes. In a sign of legitimacy, Israeli soldiers guarded the front gate.

Neighboring Palestinians, who could only obtain power from solar panels and routinely faced home demolitions because they lacked building permits in the Israeli-controlled part of the West Bank, warily eyed the outpost's fresh paint and irrigated gardens.

Drori says he's a pioneer willing to live in a hostile land promised by God. As for the Palestinians, he said, "If you want to stay here, you have to get used to the Israeli government."

A 2005 government report revealed widespread collusion among officials to illicitly divert state funds to unauthorized outposts. Its author, Talia Sasson, called for the immediate removal of outposts on private Palestinian land. Yet no action was taken against more than 100 outposts she identified.

Over the years, the United States and other Israeli allies decried settlements as an obstacle to peace. To avoid international censure, Israel repeatedly promised to dismantle the rogue outposts — but only two major ones were evacuated. Others were strategically registered as new neighborhoods of established settlements.

Now, settlers find their closest allies at the highest government levels. On Thursday, Netanyahu's new coalition officially granted Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, a settler leader, authority over settlement construction.

Drori said Smotrich, a long-time friend, prayed and celebrated at Givat Harel the night of the recognition decision.

"Things will really change here for the good," Drori said, describing his dreams to build an elementary school and expand the synagogue.

Smotrich and other far-right ministers plan to spend billions expanding and investing in settlements. Rights groups warn this will deepen the conflict with the Palestinians and lead to more bloodshed.

Down an unpaved dirt road in Turmus Aya, Abu Awad fixed her eyes on the hilltop overlooking her home. Last month settlers tried to set fire to a nearby house, burning the car in the driveway. Then last week came the attack on her home.

Police said they arrested two suspects over the arson attack. Palestinians, who are prosecuted in military courts with an extremely high conviction rate, have long complained about impunity enjoyed by settlers, who are charged, if at all, in civil ones.

"They cut the electricity so it was pitch black," Abu Awad said. "In the dark, they could do whatever they wanted."

Japanese Americans won redress, fight for Black reparations

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — When Miya Iwataki and other Japanese Americans fought in the 1980s for the U.S. government to apologize to the families it imprisoned during World War II, Black politicians and civil rights leaders were integral to the movement.

Thirty-five years after they won that apology — and survivors of prison camps received \$20,000 each — those advocates are now demanding atonement for Black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved. From California to Washington, D.C., activists are joining revived reparations movements and pushing for

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formal government compensation for the lasting harm of slavery's legacy on subsequent generations, from access to housing and education to voting rights and employment.

Advocating for reparations is "the right thing to do," said Iwataki, a resident of South Pasadena, California who is in her 70s. She cited cross-cultural solidarity that has built up over decades.

Black lawmakers such as the late California congressmen Mervyn Dymally and Ron Dellums played critical roles in winning the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which formalized the government's apology and redress payments.

Last Sunday marked the 81st anniversary of President Franklin D. Roosevelt signing an executive order that allowed the government to force an estimated 125,000 people — two-thirds of them U.S. citizens — from their homes and businesses, and incarcerate them in desolate, barbed-wire camps throughout the west.

"We want to help other communities win reparations, because it was so important to us," Iwataki said.

After stalling for decades at the federal level, reparations for slavery has received new interest amid a national reckoning over the 2020 police killing of George Floyd. Amid nationwide protests that year, California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed legislation that established a first-in-the-nation task force to address the topic of slave reparations.

Other cities and counties have since followed, including Boston, St. Louis, and San Francisco, where an advisory committee issued a draft recommendation last year proposing a lump-sum payment of \$5 million apiece for eligible individuals.

In December, the National Nikkei Reparations Coalition, alongside more than 70 other Japanese American and Asian American organizations, submitted a letter calling on the Biden administration to establish a presidential commission.

Japanese American activists in California are studying the landmark report issued by California's task force — and plan to reach out to college students, churches and other community groups to raise awareness about why Black reparations is needed — and how it intersects with their own struggle.

Reparations critics say that monetary compensation and other forms of atonement are not necessary when no one alive today was enslaved or a slave owner, overlooking the inequities today impacting later generations of Black Americans.

Retired teacher Kathy Masaoka of Los Angeles, who testified in 1981 for Japanese American redress and in 2021 in favor of federal reparations legislation, says they are just beginning to educate their own community about Black history and anti-Black prejudice.

She said that starting conversations in her community is "undoing a lot of ideas that people have" about American history and the case for reparations, said Masaoka, 74.

San Francisco attorney Don Tamaki, who is Japanese, is the only person appointed to California's nine-member task force who is not Black.

At meetings, he shared how critical it was for organizers to arrange for former detainees to tell their stories to national media outlets. Redress advocates had to make hard decisions though, such as agreeing to legislation that denied reparations to an estimated 2,000 Latin Americans of Japanese descent who were also incarcerated.

There is no equivalence to the experiences of the Japanese American and Black American communities, Tamaki said, but there are similar lessons, such as the need for a massive public education campaign.

Only 30% of U.S. adults surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2021 supported reparations for slavery, 77% of whom were Black Americans. Support among Latinos and Asians was 39% and 33%, respectively, and white Americans had the lowest rate of support, at 18%.

Some advocates said that the idea of reparations for the World War II incarceration camps was once considered outlandish. But many young, third-generation Japanese Americans were inspired to mobilize from civil rights and ethnic pride movements, including the Black Panther Party and the Brown Berets, who promoted Chicano rights.

Some advocates were outraged by — and threatened to boycott — hearings set up by a 1980 federal commission on Japanese internment, called it a delaying tactic. But the testimonies that came out of public

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hearings the following year served as a turning point.

For the first time, many survivors shared stories that even their families didn't know, educating not only the younger generation but the broader American public.

"There was not a dry eye in the house at those hearings," said Iwataki, who worked with the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations to arrange transportation to the hearings, as well as meals and translators, for former detainees.

Many young Japanese Americans went from frustration with their grandparents and parents for not fighting back to understanding how vulnerable they were, said Ron Wakabayashi, who was then national director of the Japanese American Citizens League. The average age of second-generation Japanese Americans who were incarcerated in the camps was only 18, he said.

"Probably the more important thing that we got out of that was the generational healing, and the restoration of our identity," said Wakabayashi, 78.

The commission found no military necessity for the camps, saying the detentions stemmed broadly from "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership," according to a report issued in 1983.

President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, providing living survivors with a formal apology and \$20,000 each for the "grave injustice" done to them. It would cost the U.S. government about \$1.6 billion.

Throughout the process, activists said, the Congressional Black Caucus remained a steadfast supporter of reparations. Then-Rep. Dymally authored a reparations bill in 1982 and later, provided his staff and office support so that advocates could lobby other members of Congress.

Another California congressman, Rep. Dellums, delivered a searing speech on the House floor of being a 6-year-old boy watching as his best friend, a Japanese American boy of the same age, was taken away to the camps.

A year after Reagan signed Japanese reparations into law, the late Congressman John Conyers introduced a bill to consider slavery reparations, named after the promise of 40 acres and a mule that the U.S. initially made to freed slaves. The bill has gone nowhere.

Dreisen Heath, an advocate for Black reparations, plans to travel from her home in the Washington, D.C. area to California in coming months to join artist and writer traci kato-kiriyama, whose parents were incarcerated as children, in leading workshops and educational forums.

They hope to engage young Japanese American and Black American students in the current movement.

"Nothing ever worthwhile in this country has ever happened without intergenerational, multiracial (coalition) building," said Heath. "I see the Japanese American community, and by extension the Asian American community, indispensable to realizing reparations for Black people."

Flotsam found off New York may be from famous SS Savannah

By KAREN MATTHEWS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A chunk of weather-beaten flotsam that washed up on a New York shoreline after Tropical Storm Ian last fall has piqued the interest of experts who say it is likely part of the SS Savannah, which ran aground and broke apart in 1821, two years after it became the first vessel to cross the Atlantic Ocean partly under steam power.

The roughly 13-foot (4-meter) square piece of wreckage was spotted in October off Fire Island, a barrier island that hugs Long Island's southern shore, and is now in the custody of the Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society. It will work with National Park Service officials to identify the wreckage and put it on public display.

"It was pretty thrilling to find it," said Betsy DeMaria, a museum technician at the park service's Fire Island National Seashore. "We definitely are going to have some subject matter experts take a look at it and help us get a better view of what we have here."

It may be difficult to identify the wreckage with 100% certainty, but park service officials said the Savannah is a top contender among Fire Island's known shipwrecks.

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Explorers have searched for the Savannah for over two centuries but have not found anything they could definitively link to the famous ship. The newly discovered wreckage, though, "very well could be" a piece of the historic shipwreck, said Ira Breskin, a senior lecturer at the State University of New York Maritime College in the Bronx. "It makes perfect sense."

Evidence includes the 1-to-1.3-inch (2.5-to-3.3-centimeter) wooden pegs holding the wreckage's planks together, consistent with a 100-foot (30.5-meter) vessel, park service officials said in a news release. The Savannah was 98 feet, 6 inches (30 meters) long. Additionally, the officials said, the wreckage's iron spikes suggest a ship built around 1820. The Savannah was built in 1818.

Breskin, author of "The Business of Shipping," noted that the Savannah's use of steam power was so advanced for its time that the May 24, 1819, start of its transatlantic voyage is commemorated as National Maritime Day. "It's important because they were trying to basically show the viability of a steam engine to make it across the pond," he said.

Breskin said a nautical archaeologist should be able to help identify the Fire Island wreckage, which appears likely to be from the Savannah. "It's plausible, and it's important, and it's living history if the scientists confirm that it is what we think it is," he said.

The Savannah, a sailing ship outfitted with a 90-horsepower steam engine, traveled mainly under sail across the Atlantic, using steam power for 80 hours of the nearly month-long passage to Liverpool, England.

Crowds cheered as the Savannah sailed from Liverpool to Sweden and Russia and then back to its home port of Savannah, Georgia, but the ship was not a financial success, in part because people were afraid to travel on the hybrid vessel. The Savannah's steam engine was removed and sold after the ship's owners suffered losses in the Great Savannah Fire of 1820.

The Savannah was transporting cargo between Savannah and New York when it ran aground off Fire Island. It later broke apart. The crew made it safely to shore and the cargo of cotton was salvaged, but the Augusta Chronicle & Georgia Gazette reported that "Captain Holdridge was considerably hurt by being upset in the boat."

Explorers have searched for the Savannah over the two centuries since it but have not found anything they could definitively link to the famous ship. The newly discovered wreckage, though, "very well could be" a piece of the historic shipwreck, Breskin said. "It makes perfect sense."

California could face floods, blizzards from huge US storm

By ROBERT JABLON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A coast-to-coast storm that paralyzed roads and blacked out nearly 1 million homes and businesses was set to pound California on Friday, sparking warnings about floods and blizzards.

The National Weather Service warned of a "cold and dangerous winter storm" through Saturday. As much as 5 feet (1.5 meters) of snow could fall in some mountains near Los Angeles, which could create whiteout conditions as winds gust to 75 mph (120 kph) and an increased risk of avalanches, forecasters said.

The weather service issued rare blizzard warnings for Southern California mountain areas and urged drivers to avoid dangerous roads.

Storms already have battered the Plains states and northern regions of the country for days and the National Weather Service predicted continuing problems from ice, snow and freezing rain into the weekend.

In the Pacific Northwest, much of Oregon's largest city was shut down after almost a foot (30 centimeters) of snow fell unexpectedly. It took drivers in Portland by surprise, stalling traffic during the Wednesday evening rush hour and trapping motorists on freeways, some of whom spent the night in their cars.

Maia Foley-Weintraub's 5-year-old son had to spend the night at daycare because she was stuck in snow-stalled traffic for nine hours. In a moment of panic during that time, her van slid down an icy hill, forcing her to use the emergency brake. It took her until 2 a.m. Thursday to make it home safely.

"People were just spinning out and getting stuck left and right," she said. "It was just one thing after another. I did not have any idea that that was going to turn out the way it did."

The snow began to melt later in the day but as temperatures dropped and night fell, roads became slick

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with black ice.

Portions of Interstate 80 in California and Wyoming were closed because of impassable conditions. That included about a 70-mile (112-kilometer) stretch over the top of the Sierra Nevada linking California and Nevada.

The weather also knocked out power to nearly 1 million homes and businesses in multiple states and closed dozens of schools. Weather also contributed to airport snarls. At one point on Thursday, more 2,000 flights were grounded and nearly 14,000 were delayed across the country, according to the tracking service FlightAware.com.

Widespread power outages were reported in Michigan, Illinois, California, New York and Wisconsin, according to the website PowerOutage.us.

The largest outages by far were in Michigan, where at one point more than 820,000 customers were without electricity, mostly in the state's southeast corner. Some 3,000 power lines were knocked down after being coated with ice as much as three-quarters of an inch thick and crews were struggling to get the juice back by the end of Sunday, utilities said.

"Utilities across the country fear ice storms like we fear nothing else," said Trevor Lauer, president of DTE Electric. "We've not had an ice storm in the last 50 years that has impacted our infrastructure like this."

A Michigan firefighter died Wednesday after coming in contact with a downed power line in the village of Paw Paw, authorities said.

Winter storm warnings remained in effect in northern Michigan and parts of New England could see sleet, snow and freezing rain as a cold front stretched from the eastern Great Lakes to East Texas, the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center said.

But the weather front was creating vastly different conditions in different parts of the country.

"Southerly flow ahead of the front is creating mild and warm conditions for much of the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic while northwesterly winds behind the front are pushing cold arctic air into the Plains and Upper Midwest," the weather service said.

Usually balmy California saw unusual winter weather.

Karen Krenis was driving to a pottery studio in Santa Cruz in the San Francisco Bay area on Thursday when she stopped in her tracks after seeing snow on the beach. She got out of her car and went to take photos. By the time she left, about 50 other people were there. Adults were snapping photos, and children were making snowballs.

"I have lived in California for 30 years, and I've never seen anything like it," Krenis said.

In Southern California, the storm began moving Thursday with widespread rain and some snow flurries. There was even a dusting of snow or graupel — a sort of soft hail — Thursday morning in the hills near the Hollywood sign, although it quickly vanished.

Flood watches and warnings were in effect through Saturday afternoon for some coastal regions and valleys, and the potential for heavy rainfall causing flooding and debris flow in some areas burned by wildfires in recent years.

Evacuation warnings also were issued in Ventura County for four areas that were considered unstable after being hit hard by storms last month.

The weather service said temperatures could drop far below normal in the region. That posed a special risk to thousands of homeless people, with shelter space limited and freezing temperatures expected in some areas.

Terry Stephens, who lives in a trailer with her son and his girlfriend in Palmdale, was temporarily placed in a hotel room in the Antelope Valley city northeast of Los Angeles after shivering through the night on Wednesday.

"It was frigid; your bones ache and you can't get warm," she told the Los Angeles Times. "I had three blankets on me last night and I was still freezing. Nothing helped."

Tired of Texans running for president? 2024 may be relieve

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By WILL WEISSERT and PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — It's early yet, but next year's presidential race may feature something the political world hasn't seen in the last 50 years: no Texans.

The Texas-size hole in the field will be on stark display Friday at a closed Republican donor event outside the state capital, Austin, featuring the likes of former Vice President Mike Pence, who is expected to mount a campaign, and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who announced her bid last week.

Some Texans could still run. Republican Gov. Greg Abbott won't decide until after Memorial Day. Republican Sen. Ted Cruz, who ran in 2016, says he's focused for now on reelection next year. Will Hurd, a onetime CIA agent and former Republican congressman from San Antonio, is seriously considering a bid and may bring on staff, aides say.

If none of them seeks the White House, it'd be the first time since 1972 without at least one major candidate who rose to public prominence in Texas or lived in the state while running for or holding office.

Finding the next most recent Texan-less presidential cycle requires going all the way back to 1952, four years before Lyndon B. Johnson made his first attempt at the White House.

"Clearly, there's some constitutional amendment that voters supported back in the day that says, 'If you're a governor of Texas, you must consider running for president,'" joked Dave Carney, Abbott's chief strategist and a top strategist to Texas Gov. Rick Perry's 2012 presidential bid. "And many of them have. For good or bad."

Some Texans' White House runs were indeed forgettable.

That includes Democratic Sen. Lloyd Bentsen's 1976 run and bids by Republican Rep. Ron Paul in 2008 and Republican Sen. Phil Gramm in 1996. John Connally was Texas' Democratic governor from 1963 until 1969 but sought the White House as a Republican in 1980. Dallas businessman Ross Perot never held elected office but mounted major presidential campaigns in 1992 and 1996.

Indeed, if this cycle proceeds without a Texas official, it won't be a sign of the state's waning political influence. Texas' booming population has added nearly 4 million residents since 2010 while getting younger and more diverse. Its strong economy has attracted tech companies and corporate stalwarts who have flocked in from around the country.

Texas has also become a bastion of conservative priorities, enacting one of the nation's strictest anti-abortion laws even before the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* and dramatically loosening gun restrictions while calling for federal crackdowns along the U.S.-Mexico border.

"I think every year a Texan's not in the presidential race is disappointing to me," said George Seay, a major GOP donor based in Dallas who was Perry's finance chair in 2012 and supported Marco Rubio in 2016.

"With all due respect to Florida, which is an incredibly compelling, right-leaning state from a political standpoint," Seay added, "Texas is the sun, the moon and the stars."

A possible presidential race without a Texan would be a departure from recent cycles, which featured more than one. The 2012 GOP presidential primary pitted Paul against Perry and 2016's featured Perry and Cruz. Former Rep. Beto O'Rourke and former San Antonio Mayor Julián Castro both ran in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary.

Although only three presidents have actually called Texas home, the state has left a mark on Washington.

Long after he left office, a Braniff Airlines flight dubbed the "LBJ Special" continued to fly from Washington Dulles to Austin every afternoon, an unusual nonstop flight for the time. President George W. Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, was the "Western White House" but only because Johnson's ranch in Stonewall, where he spent nearly a quarter of his presidency, had already claimed the "Texas White House" moniker.

Bush even flew his favorite caterer, Eddie Deen, from suburban Dallas to Washington to serve smoked ribs and stuffed jalapenos at his inaugural balls. His father, President George H.W. Bush, was a congressman from Houston and incorporated the state's rugged ethos into his political brand, trying to season his Northeast upbringing with a dash of down-home.

"Everything is bigger in Texas, including the egos of our already outsize politicians," said Mark Updegrove, CEO of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation, who noted that playing up their Texas swagger has paid

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off through the decades for presidential candidates from both parties.

Since the modern era of presidential campaigning began in 1972, Texans have been involved in more cycles than any other state. Candidates from California have launched more overall bids at 19, according to Eric Ostermeier, a research fellow at University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs. But Texans and New Yorkers are second, producing 15 total candidacies each.

Ostermeier says he counts a home state as where a candidate rose to public prominence or lived when they ran for office. That means Houston-born Marianne Williamson, who lives in Beverly Hills and is readying a 2024 Democratic presidential bid, would qualify as a Californian.

More clarity on possible Texans in the 2024 primary campaign will come after the state Legislature adjourns in late May. Carney said Abbott will then "look at what the state of the race is, and does he have something that would be differentiating to the race that would be attractive to voters."

"The governor will not be a spoiler," Carney said. "But, if he thinks he has something to offer, he might run. If he thinks there's enough folks running with the same, similar ideas that he has," then probably not.

Hurd, who retired from Congress in 2021 after three terms representing Texas' most competitive House district, traveled to New Hampshire recently and is planning trips to other early primary states.

Cruz says he's concentrating on his Senate race next year but hasn't ruled out another presidential run. He could do both. Texas' so-called LBJ law allows running for Senate and president simultaneously, and Bentsen was reelected to his seat while losing the vice presidency in 1988.

A Cruz aide called the prospect of no Texans in the presidential race since 1972 a "clever bit of trivia."

North Korea says it fired cruise missiles as rivals trained

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea said Friday it test-fired long-range cruise missiles off its eastern coast a day earlier, adding to a provocative streak in weapons demonstrations as its rivals step up military training.

The launches, which were later confirmed by South Korea's military, were intended to verify the reliability of the missiles and the rapid-response capabilities of the unit that operates those weapons, North Korean state media said.

The launches took place as the U.S. and South Korea held a simulation in Washington aimed at sharpening their response to North Korean nuclear threats.

Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency said the four missiles flew for nearly three hours after being launched from the northeastern coast, drew oval and figure-eight patterns above the sea, and showed they can hit targets 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) away.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the flight details announced by North Korea had discrepancies with the readings by U.S. and South Korean intelligence assets, but it didn't elaborate. It said the allies were continuing to analyze the launches.

Lee Hyojung, spokesperson of Seoul's Unification Ministry, which handles inter-Korean affairs, denounced North Korea for escalating its testing activity despite signs of deepening economic isolation and food insecurity.

North Korea first tested a long-range cruise missile system in September 2021 and has implied the missiles are being developed to be armed with nuclear warheads.

It also test-fired an intercontinental ballistic missile Saturday and a pair of short-range missiles Monday to demonstrate a dual ability to conduct nuclear strikes on South Korea and the U.S. mainland.

North Korea said Monday's short-range launches were a response to the United States flying B-1B bombers to the region for joint training with South Korean and Japanese warplanes on Sunday in a show of force following the North's ICBM test.

Prior to the ICBM launch, North Korea vowed an "unprecedentedly" strong response over a series of military drills planned by Seoul and Washington. North Korea has described the annual U.S.-South Korea drills as rehearsals for a potential invasion, although the allies say their exercises are defensive in nature.

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Cruise missiles are among a growing number of North Korean weapons and are designed to be maneuverable in flight to evade defenses.

Since the collapse of negotiations with the United States in 2019, North Korea has been accelerating its development of short-range solid-fuel ballistic missiles targeting South Korea, including those that travel on low trajectories that theoretically would be harder to intercept.

North Korea is also trying to develop solid-fuel ICBMs, which could be easier to move on vehicles and can be fired faster than the North's existing liquid-fuel ICBMs, reducing opportunities for opponents to detect the launches and counter them.

North Korea is coming off a record year in weapons demonstrations with more than 70 ballistic missiles fired, including ICBMs with potential to reach the U.S. mainland. It also conducted what it described as simulated nuclear attacks against South Korean and U.S. targets.

Leader Kim Jong Un doubled down on his nuclear push entering 2023, calling for an "exponential increase" in nuclear warheads, mass production of battlefield tactical nuclear weapons targeting "enemy" South Korea and the development of more advanced ICBMs.

The U.S. Department of Defense and South Korea's Defense Ministry said their militaries conducted a simulation at the Pentagon on Wednesday that was focused on the possibility of North Korea using nuclear weapons. The allies discussed ways to demonstrate their "strong response capabilities and resolve to respond appropriately" to any North Korean nuclear use.

The Americans during the meeting highlighted the Biden administration's 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, which states that any nuclear attack by North Korea against the United States or its allies and partners "will result in the end of that regime," the U.S. Department of Defense said. It was referring to a legislatively mandated document that spells out U.S. nuclear policy and strategy for the next five to 10 years.

The U.S. and South Korean delegations also visited Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in Georgia, where they were briefed on the mission of Ohio-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. U.S. officials at the base described such forces as key means of providing U.S. extended deterrence to allies, referring to a commitment to defend them with the full range of its military capabilities, including nuclear ones.

Senior North Korean Foreign Ministry official Kwon Jong Gun denounced the allies' simulated exercise and visit to the Georgia submarine base, calling the actions an extension of anti-Pyongyang hostility. Kwon in his statement also complained that the U.N. Security Council held an emergency meeting this week to discuss recent North Korean launches.

During the meeting on Monday, the United States and its allies urged the Security Council to condemn the North's unlawful ballistic activities, while China and Russia blamed Washington for raising animosity by stepping up its military exercises targeting Pyongyang.

"The U.S. should bear in mind that if it persists in its hostile and provocative practices against the DPRK despite the latter's repeated protest and warning, it can be regarded as a declaration of war against the DPRK," Kwon said, using the initials of North Korea's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

In face of the North's growing threats, South Korea has been seeking stronger reassurances from the United States that it would swiftly and decisively use its nuclear capabilities to defend its ally from a North Korean nuclear attack.

"The United States will continue to work with (South Korea) to ensure an effective mix of capabilities, concepts, deployments, exercises, and tailored options to deter and, if necessary, respond to coercion and aggression by (North Korea)," the Department of Defense said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Seoul's Unification Ministry said it will resume radiation exposure tests for North Korean escapees who had lived near the North's northern nuclear testing ground since its first detonation in 2006. Previous tests conducted on 40 escapees found nine people with abnormalities that could indicate high exposure, though no direct link to radiation was established.

The Seoul-based Transitional Justice Working Group had urged South Korea to resume such tests, saying radiation may have spread by rainfall and groundwater. The U.S. and South Korean officials have said

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the North Korea is likely preparing to conduct its seventh test at the site in Punggye-ri, which would be the first since 2017.

Lee, the ministry's spokesperson, said the government plans to provide tests to any of the 881 people who had lived in that North Korean region after 2006 who wish to be tested.

Russia launches rescue ship to space station after leaks

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

Russia launched a rescue ship on Friday for two cosmonauts and a NASA astronaut whose original ride home sprang a dangerous leak while parked at the International Space Station.

The new, empty Soyuz capsule should arrive at the orbiting lab on Sunday.

The capsule leak in December was blamed on a micrometeorite that punctured an external radiator, draining it of coolant. The same thing appeared to happen again earlier this month, this time on a docked Russian cargo ship. Camera views showed a small hole in each spacecraft.

The Russian Space Agency delayed the launch of the replacement Soyuz, looking for any manufacturing defects. No issues were found, and the agency proceeded with Friday's predawn launch from Kazakhstan of the capsule with bundles of supplies strapped into the three seats.

Given the urgent need for this capsule, two top NASA officials traveled from the U.S. to observe the launch in person. To everyone's relief, the capsule safely reached orbit nine minutes after liftoff — "a perfect ride to orbit," NASA Mission Control's Rob Navias reported from Houston.

Officials had determined it was too risky to bring NASA's Frank Rubio and Russia's Sergey Prokopyev and Dmitri Petelin back in their damaged Soyuz next month as originally planned. With no coolant, the cabin temperature would spike during the trip back to Earth, potentially damaging computers and other equipment, and exposing the suited-up crew to excessive heat.

Until the new Soyuz pulls up, emergency plans call for Rubio to switch to a SpaceX crew capsule that's docked at the space station. Prokopyev and Petelin remain assigned to their damaged Soyuz in the unlikely need for a fast getaway. Having one less person on board would keep the temperature down to a hopefully manageable level, Russian engineers concluded.

The damaged Soyuz will return to Earth with no one aboard by the end of March, so engineers can examine it.

The three men launched in this Soyuz last September on what should have been a six-month mission. They'll now stay in space for a full year, until a new capsule is ready for their crew replacements for liftoff in September. It was their Soyuz that just launched with no one on board.

The damaged supply ship was filled with trash and cut loose over the weekend, burning up in the atmosphere as originally planned.

"The Russians are continuing to take a really close look" at both spacecraft leaks, NASA's deputy space station program manager Dana Weigel told reporters earlier this week. "They're looking at everything ... to try to understand that."

NASA has a fresh crew of four launching atop a SpaceX rocket early Monday morning from Florida's Kennedy Space Center. SpaceX's William Gerstenmaier said the four astronauts returning to Earth in a few weeks already have inspected the Dragon capsule that will carry them home and "it all checked out fine."

Police: 'Random' shootings leave woman, child, reporter dead

By DAVID FISCHER and FREIDA FRISARO Associated Press

A man riding in a car with his cousin shot and killed another passenger then returned to the same neighborhood near Orlando hours later and shot four more people, killing a journalist covering the original shooting and a 9-year-old girl, Florida police and witnesses said.

Orange County Sheriff John Mina characterized the shootings Wednesday as random acts of violence. Mina said during a news conference that 19-year-old Keith Melvin Moses has been arrested and charged

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with first-degree murder in the initial shooting that killed Nathacha Augustin, 38, and that "numerous more charges" would follow.

Spectrum News 13 identified the slain reporter as Dylan Lyons. Photographer Jesse Walden was also wounded. Mina said Walden has been talking to investigators while being treated at a hospital.

The two were in an unmarked news vehicle on Wednesday afternoon covering the first homicide when a man approached and shot them, Mina said. The man then went to a nearby home where he fatally shot T'yonna Major and critically wounded the girl's mother. Officials have not released the mother's name.

Mina said Thursday that investigators do not know the motive for any of the shootings. He said Moses is a known gang member but that the shootings didn't appear to be gang-related. It was not clear if Moses knew that two of the victims were journalists and Mina noted that their vehicle didn't look like a typical news van or feature the station's logo.

The sheriff said when deputies arrested Moses they seized a Glock semiautomatic weapon that "was still hot to the touch, meaning it had just been fired, and there were no more rounds."

Body camera footage released by the sheriff's office shows Moses apparently resisting arrest. After deputies take him to the ground, Moses repeatedly yells that he can't breathe and that deputies are killing him, according to the video. Moses complained he was hurt and was taken to a hospital where he attacked medical staff, Mina said. He has since refused to speak with detectives.

The Office of the Public Defender for Orange and Osceola counties, which is representing Moses, declined to comment.

A man who called 911 after Augustin was shot told investigators that he was driving around smoking cannabis with her when he spotted Moses, his cousin, walking along a road. He said Moses "seemed down" so he offered him a ride, according to an arrest affidavit. Moses climbed into the backseat, behind Augustin, and about 30 seconds later the driver said he "heard a loud bang" and saw blood on Augustin's face.

He said he stopped and Moses fled. The driver called 911.

He told investigators that Moses and Augustin didn't know each other and that he didn't hear the two exchange any words before the shot was fired.

Deputies first went to the Pine Hills area, just northwest of Orlando, at around 11 a.m. Wednesday following the shooting of Augustin. About five hours later, 911 calls began coming in from the same area. Police found the journalists who had been shot being helped by a news crew from another station, WFTV.

"I want to acknowledge the brave WFTV news crew who was there and witnessed the shooting and rendered aid to the victims until our deputies arrived," Mina said.

Lyons was born and raised in Philadelphia, and graduated from the University of Central Florida, the station said. Before joining Spectrum News, he worked for a station in Gainesville.

"(Lyons) took his job very seriously. He loved his career. He loved what he did," said Spectrum Sports 360 reporter and friend Josh Miller. "He loved the community, telling the stories of people, reporting on the news, and he was just passionate about what he did."

Rachel Lyons, the reporter's older sister, is raising money for his funeral via GoFundMe. She wrote that Lyons would have turned 25 in March. He is also survived by his parents and fiancée.

In a recorded message sent to parents Thursday, Pine Hill Elementary School Principal Latonya Smothers said the 9-year-old T'yonna was a "kind and beautiful young girl with an infectious smile."

During Thursday's news conference, State Attorney Monique H. Worrell said her office had received multiple calls asking why Moses was not in custody from previous offenses.

"This individual's only adult offense was a possession of marijuana, 4.6 grams of marijuana, that my office did not charge because when you have a quantity that low, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement does not test the substance, and that means the state's attorneys office cannot prove the case," she said.

Worrell said she was prohibited by Florida law from discussing any juvenile charges Moses might have faced. Earlier, Mina said Moses had faced at least two gun-related charges as a juvenile, including possession of a firearm by a minor and armed robbery.

Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, said "our hearts go out" to the families of those killed in Wednesday's shooting

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"Too many lives are being ripped apart by gun violence," she said. "The president continues to call on Congress to act on gun safety, and for state officials to take action at the state level."

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis hasn't publicly commented on the shooting. Earlier this week, the Republican governor and likely 2024 presidential candidate made stops in three major Democratic metro areas — New York, Philadelphia and Chicago — to extol tough-on-crime laws that he has signed in Florida and to criticize "woke" culture and anti-police sentiment.

In recent months, DeSantis has expressed support for constitutional carry legislation, which would eliminate the requirement for concealed weapons permits in Florida. The phrase "constitutional carry" refers to the view that the right to bear arms guaranteed by the Second Amendment negates any need for a permit or license to carry a gun in public, either openly or concealed.

Worldwide, 40 journalists were reported killed last year, plus another two this year before Wednesday, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. One of those was in the U.S.

Jeff German, who covered politics and corruption for the Las Vegas Review-Journal, was found dead outside his home in September after being stabbed multiple times. Former Clark County Public Administrator Robert Telles, who had been a frequent subject of German's reporting, has pleaded not guilty to a murder charge.

In 2015, Virginia reporter Alison Parker and cameraman Adam Ward were shot and killed during their live TV broadcast for CBS affiliate WDBJ7. The gunman, a former reporter for the TV station, killed himself hours later.

R. Kelly avoids lengthy add-on to 30-year prison sentence

By MICHAEL TARM and CLAIRE SAVAGE Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday rejected a call from prosecutors to keep R. Kelly behind bars until he is 100, instead telling the Grammy Award-winning R&B singer he would serve all but one of his 20 years on child sex convictions simultaneously with a previous sentence.

Handed down in a courtroom in Kelly's hometown of Chicago, the sentence means Kelly could make it out of prison alive, when he is about 80. Prosecutors had asked Judge Harry Leinenweber to sentence him to 25 years — and to not let him begin serving those until after he completed the first 30-year sentence, imposed on him last year in New York for federal racketeering and sex trafficking convictions.

"The nature of this offense is ... horrific," Leinenweber said in explaining the 20-year sentence. He noted that Kelly's sexual abuse victims would suffer from his crimes for the rest of their lives.

At the same time, he accepted defense arguments that Kelly might not even make it to 80, so handing him a consecutive lengthy sentence, rather than allowing him to serve all but one year of it simultaneously, didn't make much sense.

"He has a life expectancy of not a hell of a lot more," the judge said. "He is 56 years of age."

Kelly's defense lawyer celebrated the ruling as a victory, and some of the singer's fans could be heard cheering outside the courtroom.

Kelly remained still, his eyes downcast, as Leinenweber explained what was at times a hard-to-follow sentence. He did seem to show some emotion when a representative read a statement written by "Jane," one of his accusers and a key prosecution witness.

"I was brainwashed by Robert and a sex slave," Jane's statement said. "It almost killed me."

Kelly did not make a statement in court prior to the sentencing decision, heeding the advice of his lawyer, Jennifer Bonjean, to stay quiet while they appeal both his Chicago and New York convictions.

"It's the right outcome," Bonjean said of the sentence after the hearing ended. "The judge was reasonable. He, I think, took into account both sides and ultimately was fair."

The U.S. Attorney in Chicago, John Lausch, conceded that prosecutors were disappointed Kelly didn't receive more consecutive prison time. But he added, "Twenty years is a significant sentence, and we are happy that that was imposed in this case."

The judge said at the outset of Thursday's hearing that he did not accept the government's contention

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that Kelly used fear to woo underage girls for sex, a determination that was important in deciding whether to extend Kelly's current term significantly.

"The (government's) whole theory of grooming, was sort of the opposite of fear of bodily harm," the judge told the court. "It was the fear of lost love, lost affections (from Kelly). ... It just doesn't seem to me that it rises to the fear of bodily harm."

Two of Kelly's accusers asked the judge Thursday to punish him harshly.

"When your virginity is taken by a pedophile at 14 ... your life is never your own," Jane's statement read.

Another accuser, who used the pseudonym "Nia," addressed Kelly directly in court. Speaking forcefully as her voice quivered, Nia said Kelly would repeatedly point out her alleged faults while he abused her.

"Now you are here ... because there is something wrong with you," she said. "No longer will you be able to harm children."

Jurors in Chicago convicted Kelly last year on six of 13 counts: three of producing child porn and three of enticement of minors for sex. Prosecutors did not get a conviction on the marquee charge: that Kelly and his then-business manager successfully rigged his state child pornography trial in 2008.

Kelly rose from poverty in Chicago to become one of the world's biggest R&B stars. Known for his smash hit "I Believe I Can Fly" and for sex-infused songs such as "Bump n' Grind," he sold millions of albums even after allegations about his abuse of girls began circulating publicly in the 1990s.

Prosecutors had previously described Kelly as "a serial sexual predator" who used his fame and wealth to reel in, sexually abuse and then discard star-struck fans.

At Thursday's hearing, U.S. Assistant Attorney Jeannice Appenteng urged the judge to keep Kelly in prison "for the rest of his life."

Kelly's abuse of children was especially appalling, she said, because he "memorialized" his abuse by filming victims, including Jane. Appenteng told the court Kelly "used Jane as a sex prop, a thing" for producing pornographic videos.

Bonjean has said repeatedly that the government singled out her client because he is a superstar and she previously accused prosecutors of offering an "embellished narrative" to get the judge to join what she called the government's "bloodthirsty campaign to make Kelly a symbol of the #MeToo movement."

She echoed that theme Thursday in calling the request for a 25-year consecutive sentence "overkill."

The singer has suffered enough, including financially, Bonjean said. She said his worth once approached \$1 billion, but that he "is now destitute."

Just before Kelly was taken back to detention Thursday, Bonjean requested that he not be placed on suicide watch because constant checks by guards "is in and of itself cruel" and "creates mental health issues."

"He was expecting this," she told the judge. "Mr. Kelly ... is not suicidal."

On stand, Alex Murdaugh denies killings but admits lying

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

Disgraced South Carolina attorney Alex Murdaugh denied killing his wife and son but admitted lying to investigators about when he last saw them alive as he took the stand in his own defense Thursday.

Murdaugh, 54, is charged with murder in the fatal shootings of his wife, Maggie, 52, and their 22-year-old son, Paul, who were killed near kennels on their property on June 7, 2021. In his testimony, Murdaugh continued to staunchly deny any role in the killings.

"I would never intentionally do anything to hurt either one of them," Murdaugh said, tears running down his cheeks.

Prosecutors spent four weeks of the trial painting Murdaugh as a liar who stole money from clients and decided to kill his wife and son because he wanted sympathy to buy time to cover up his financial crimes that were about to be discovered. They have detailed what they called lie after lie, saying Murdaugh reacts violently when the truth is about to emerge, like trying to arrange his own death after his law firm fired him three months after the killings.

Murdaugh lied about being at the kennels with his wife and son shortly before their killings for 20 months

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before taking the stand Thursday, day 23 of his trial. Murdaugh blamed the lie — first told to a state law enforcement agent hours after the killings — on his addiction to opioids, which he said clouded his thinking and created a distrust of police.

"As my addiction evolved over time, I would get in these situations, these circumstances where I would get paranoid thinking," Murdaugh said.

The once-prominent attorney had told police that he was napping and did not go to the kennels before leaving the house to visit his ailing mother in another town. But several witnesses testified that they believed they heard Murdaugh's voice along with his son and wife on cellphone video taken at the kennels about five minutes before the shootings. It took investigators more than a year to hack into Paul Murdaugh's iPhone and find the video.

Once Alex Murdaugh started lying about being at the kennels, he said he felt he had to continue: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave. Once I told a lie — I told my family — I had to keep lying."

For prosecutors, that lie underpins a case where investigators haven't presented the weapons used to kill the victims, a confession, surveillance video or clothes covered in blood. Murdaugh faces 30 years to life in prison if convicted.

Murdaugh testified that his wife asked him to go to the kennels the evening of the killings, so he rode down in a golf cart and wrestled a chicken away from a dog before returning to the house and deciding to go visit his ailing mother.

He said that, after returning home from visiting his mother, neither his wife nor his son was in the house. After several minutes, Murdaugh said, he drove his SUV to the kennels where he said he last saw them.

Murdaugh described arriving to find the grisly scene of the killings, pausing his testimony for several seconds as he cried. "It was so bad," he said.

After his dramatic opening questions about whether Murdaugh killed his son and wife, defense attorney Jim Griffin led his client through several key points of the case.

Murdaugh said he never saw a blue rain jacket that prosecutors found at his mother's home with gunshot residue on the lining. He said his mother's caretaker was mistaken when she said he came by unexpectedly at 6:30 a.m. acting oddly.

He told Griffin several times that he urged investigators to get GPS data from his SUV or his wife's phone that would exonerate him. Earlier defense testimony suggested state agents waited too long to get that information from Maggie Murdaugh's device and it was overwritten for the night of the killings.

Throughout his testimony, Murdaugh called his son "Paul Paul" and his wife "Mags," though he didn't use those nicknames in three interviews with police.

Defense attorneys told the judge that Murdaugh might not have testified at all if prosecutors hadn't been allowed to introduce evidence of financial crimes.

Murdaugh admitted in court that he stole money from clients and blamed an addiction to painkillers from the lingering effects of a college football injury that got worse nearly two decades ago.

"I'm not quite sure how I let myself get where I got. I battled that addiction for so many years. I was spending so much money on pills," Murdaugh said.

Murdaugh is charged with about 100 other crimes, ranging from stealing from clients to tax evasion. He is being held without bail on those charges, so even if he is found not guilty of the killings, he will not walk out of court a free man. If convicted of most or all of those financial crimes, Murdaugh would likely spend decades in prison.

Prosecutor Creighton Waters didn't question Murdaugh about the murders at the start of his cross-examination, focusing instead on clients Murdaugh stole money from.

"We heard about it in a very academic, paperwork manner. But in every one of these, you had to sit down and look somebody in the eye and convince them you were on their side when you were not," Waters said.

Murdaugh said he couldn't remember all the details of the thefts that took place over at least 13 years and offered a blanket statement that he was wrong, which Waters rejected before hammering on the personal nature of the thefts.

"There were plenty of conversations where I looked people in the eye and lied to them," Murdaugh eventually conceded.

Train crew had little warning before Ohio wreck, probe finds

By JOHN SEEWER, MICHAEL RUBINKAM and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

EAST PALESTINE, Ohio (AP) — The crew operating a freight train that derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, didn't get much warning before dozens of cars went off the tracks, and there is no indication that crew members did anything wrong, federal investigators said Thursday as they released a preliminary report into the fiery wreck that prompted a toxic chemical release and an evacuation.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg made his first visit to the crash site and took shots at former President Donald Trump, who had visited the day before and criticized the federal response to the train derailment. Their back-and-forth was the latest sign that the East Palestine wreck has become a hot-button political issue, prompting a rebuke from the head of the National Transportation Safety Board.

"Enough with the politics. I don't understand why this has gotten so political," safety board Chair Jennifer Homendy, clearly exasperated, said at a briefing in Washington, D.C., on Thursday. "This is a community that is suffering. This is not about politics. This is about addressing their needs, their concerns."

The NTSB report, which laid out the facts that investigators have gathered to date, said crew members had no indication the train was in trouble until an alarm sounded just before it went off the tracks.

An engineer slowed and stopped the train after getting a "critical audible alarm message" that signaled an overheated axle, according to the report. The three-person crew then saw fire and smoke and alerted dispatch, the report said.

"We have no evidence that the crew did anything wrong," said Homendy, who announced a rare investigatory field hearing to be conducted in East Palestine this spring as officials seek to get to the bottom of the derailment's cause and build consensus on how to prevent similar wrecks.

Investigators said the temperature of the failed wheel bearing increased by 215 degrees in a span of 30 miles (48 kilometers), but did not reach the temperature threshold that railroad company Norfolk Southern had set for an alarm to go off until just before the wreck.

The train was going about 47 mph (75 kph), under the speed limit of 50 mph (80 kph), according to investigators.

Outside experts who looked at the report said the system appeared to work as designed, from the spacing of the hot bearing detectors along the tracks to the operation of the sensors.

"There's nothing in the NTSB report that surprises me at all," said Dave Clarke, the former director of the Center for Transportation Research at the University of Tennessee. "I can't see anything to really criticize about what happened or how the response was made."

Christopher Barkan, director of the Rail Transportation and Engineering Center at the University of Illinois, said the spacing of the sensors that recorded the temperatures of the Norfolk Southern train — 10 and 20 miles (16 to 32 kilometers) apart — is common in the industry.

He said the detectors would not have notified the train crew of elevated bearing temperatures unless they met the threshold for action.

"I don't see anything wrong here, but we just don't know," Barkan said.

Homendy said investigators would look at whether industry safety standards — including high-temperature alarm thresholds and sensor spacing — will need to change to prevent similar derailments.

Norfolk Southern said the NTSB report showed the heat detectors worked as intended and the train crew operated "within the company's rules." Nevertheless, the company said it would "need to learn as much as we can from this event" and "develop practices and invest in technologies that could help prevent an incident like this in the future."

The freight cars that derailed on the East Palestine outskirts, near the Pennsylvania state line, included 11 carrying hazardous materials. Villagers evacuated as fears grew about a potential explosion of smoldering wreckage.

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Officials seeking to avoid an uncontrolled blast intentionally released and burned toxic vinyl chloride from five rail cars, sending flames and black smoke into the sky. That left people questioning the potential health effects even as authorities maintained they were doing their best to protect people.

In another sign of the environmental impact, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources said Thursday it now estimates spilled contaminants affecting several miles of streams killed nearly 44,000 fish, mostly small ones such as minnows. Its initial estimate was 3,500.

As NTSB released its preliminary findings, Buttigieg — who had been criticized for not coming to East Palestine earlier — went on a tour of the crash site and defended the Biden administration's response to the Feb. 3 derailment, which Trump had portrayed as indifferent and a "betrayal."

Buttigieg told reporters that if the former president — and current Republican presidential candidate — felt strongly about increased rail safety efforts, "one thing he could do is express support for reversing the deregulation that happened on his watch."

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre excoriated "political stunts that we're seeing from the other side" but did not say whether a trip by Democratic President Joe Biden was in the works.

Another Biden administration official, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan, has been to East Palestine multiple times, most recently Tuesday as the EPA ordered Norfolk Southern to pay for the cleanup.

With heavy equipment rumbling behind him, Buttigieg slammed Norfolk Southern and other freight rail companies for fighting regulations he said would "hold them accountable and the other railroad companies accountable for their safety record." He pressed Congress to act.

Heather Bable, who lives two blocks from the derailment site, said she's relieved the government's top brass is finally showing up.

"We need that attention because we weren't getting it. They should have been here all along," said Bable.

After throngs of residents lined the streets in pouring rain to welcome Trump on Wednesday, the reception for Buttigieg was decidedly more muted, with little fanfare around the village of just under 5,000 residents. Trump won nearly 72% of the vote in this heavily Republican region in 2020.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Chris Deluzio, whose Pennsylvania district borders the derailment site, asked Norfolk Southern to expand the boundaries of the geographic zone in which it is providing financial assistance and testing. He asserted the current zone excludes many affected Pennsylvania residents and businesses, and said the company should commit to cleaning up soil and water up to 30 miles (48 kilometers) beyond it.

"Norfolk Southern is failing to show any commitment to rebuilding lost trust in our community," Deluzio wrote in a letter to Norfolk Southern's CEO. Providing additional resources "would help your company restore the sense of security that the Norfolk Southern train derailment and its aftermath destroyed."

Jimmy Carter: White House rise depended on twists before '76

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

PLAINS, Ga. (AP) — Jimmy Carter's path to the presidency is an oft-told story, especially by aspiring presidents trying to be the next politician to defy Washington expectations.

As a little-known Georgia governor, Carter announced in late 1974 that he'd seek the presidency. Atlanta's largest newspaper answered with a mocking headline: "Jimmy Who?" National media mostly yawned.

Undeterred, the peanut farmer took his family and friends to Iowa and New Hampshire, where "the Peanut Brigade" set the modern standard for a retail campaign and helped elect Carter as the 39th president.

But the long odds weren't just about 1976 for Carter, who is 98 and now receiving end-of-life care at his home in Plains, Georgia. Carter's early life and career were replete with dominoes that could have blocked his White House road before he knew he was on it.

Here are some "What Ifs?" that, had they played out differently, may have made it impossible for Americans ever to answer that mocking question from Atlanta newspaper editors.

THE ARCHERY FARM

Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, now 95, were born in Plains. But Carter's parents, Lillian and Earl Carter,

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moved their family in 1927 to a farm in the mostly Black community of Archery, just outside Plains. Thus began Carter's exposure to divisions of race and class in the segregated, Depression-era South.

Young Jimmy had Black playmates with whom he hunted, fished and fashioned homemade toys. Like their neighbors, the Carters had "no running water, electricity or insulation" and depended on open fireplaces for heat. "We relieved ourselves in slop jars during the night," Carter wrote in a memoir.

Yet despite the lack of luxury, the future president was still secure in relative privilege, because he was the child of the white, land-owning family at the center of a community where many impoverished Black residents worked for his parents.

One of his earliest influencers was "Miss Rachel" Clark, a Black neighbor and caregiver who was married to the unofficial foreman of the Carter farm. Carter, who spent considerable time at the Clarks' home, would later say he "knew Rachel Clark in many ways better than my mother."

Those experiences — seeing the humanity of his Black friends but still living under the white supremacist order of the era — undergirded his public life as a Southern Democrat. He learned early how to navigate an evolving country and party that was stacked with segregationists in Carter's formative political years before coming to embrace civil rights. Carter did not fight for civil rights legislation in the 1950s and 1960s. He campaigned carefully for Georgia governor in 1970, avoiding explicit mentions of race. He won with a small-town, rural coalition of Black voters and white conservatives — then used it to govern more progressively on race than he had campaigned. It was a political tightrope he may never have managed if he'd grown up in the heart of Plains rather than Archery.

'MR. EARL'

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter married in 1946 and left Plains to launch his promising career with the U.S. Navy — with no notions of returning except as visitors. But Carter's father, who had become a prominent merchant and state lawmaker, died in 1953. Carter made the decision, without consulting Rosalynn, to move the young family back home, where the pair built the family farm operations into an impressive peanut agribusiness. Carter joined the local school board and within a decade would run for the Georgia Assembly, further replicating his father's path. If "Mr. Earl" had lived longer, his namesake might have become an admiral in some far-flung naval post, but never commander in chief.

ELECTION FRAUD

Carter sought elected office for the first time in 1962, "somewhat quixotically," he recalled. His Democratic opponent in the state Senate primary was a peanut buyer named Homer Moore. But, the real barrier was Joe Hurst, a neighboring county's political boss. On Election Day, Carter and his allies caught Hurst pressuring voters and discarding ballots cast for Carter. Quitman County results showed Moore with more votes than registration rolls recorded altogether. Carter challenged the results with the party. After court tussles, Carter ended up on the general election ballot and prevailed. It took a subsequent Senate floor dispute before he was finally sworn in.

THE 1966 CHOICE

Carter wasn't much for the legislature's back-slapping ways. By 1966, he decided to run for Congress against a heavyweight incumbent, Bo Callaway. Then Ernest Vandiver, a former Georgia governor, dropped out of the governor's race, allowing Callaway to step into his place against arch-segregationist Lester Maddox. With Callaway's switch, Carter was on his way to Washington. But the young state senator was bothered by Georgians having to choose between Callaway and Maddox. (In this era, the Democratic nominee was virtually assured a November victory.) Carter tried to recruit a moderate Democrat to run against them but was unsuccessful. So, he recalled, "I decided to relinquish my assured seat in the U.S. Congress and run for governor."

He lost to Maddox. But the decision was the start of a four-year campaign that resulted in his 1970 gubernatorial win.

NO GRAND PLANS

History often reveals happenstance in the lives of every president. Carter even chose "Turning Point" as the title of his book about the 1962 state Senate election that changed his career trajectory. Lyndon

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Baines Johnson won a disputed early congressional race. Bill Clinton lost his first reelection bid as a young Arkansas governor and required a rehabilitation follow-up victory before he reached the national stage a decade later in 1992. George W. Bush narrowly won the Texas governor's race in 1994, the same night his brother Jeb lost the Florida governor's race as a favorite. The Texan would be president six years later. Floridian Jeb, once thought of as the political darling in that generation of the Bush dynasty, likely will never be.

Yet the Bushes were a blue-blooded political family already anchored in the national establishment. Johnson and Clinton had no political birthrights but set out from young ages to reach the nation's highest office. As a young congressman, Johnson even dubbed himself "LBJ," patterned after Franklin Delano Roosevelt's moniker, "FDR."

For Carter, ambition was a driving force generally. But it was not singularly focused.

Carter would serve just one term. His struggles to corral inflation, ease energy shortages and quickly free American hostages in Iran overshadowed achievements at home and abroad. He signed notable legislation on the environment, education and mental health care, and started deregulation of key industries, including airlines. Abroad, he struck a peace deal between Egypt and Israel, normalized relations with China and negotiated treaties turning over control of the Panama Canal.

Carter would say later that he never focused on winning a second term — to his political peril — just as he had no grand design to win his first.

Those four years in the White House "were the pinnacle of my political life," he recalled around his 90th birthday, but "there was never an orderly or planned path to get there during my early life."

Israel approves over 7,000 settlement homes, groups say

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's far-right government has granted approval for over 7,000 new homes in Jewish settlements in the West Bank, settlement backers and opponents said Thursday. The move defies growing international opposition to construction in the occupied territory.

The announcement came just days after the U.N. Security Council passed a statement strongly criticizing Israeli settlement construction on occupied lands claimed by the Palestinians. The United States, Israel's closest ally, blocked what would have been an even tougher legally binding resolution, with diplomats saying they had received Israeli assurances of refraining from unilateral acts for six months.

The new approvals took place during a two-day meeting that ended Thursday and appeared to contradict those claims. The U.S. has repeatedly criticized Israeli settlement construction, saying it undermines hopes for a two-state solution with the Palestinians, but taken no action to stop it.

Peace Now, an anti-settlement watchdog group that attended the meeting, said a planning committee granted approvals for some 7,100 new housing units across the West Bank.

The group said the committee scheduled a meeting next month to discuss plans to develop a strategic area east of Jerusalem known as E1. The U.S. in the past has blocked the project, which would largely bisect the West Bank and which critics say would make it impossible to establish a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Lior Amihai, the group's incoming director, said some 5,200 housing units were in the early stages of planning, while the remainder were approved for near-term construction. He also said construction was approved in four unauthorized outposts.

Earlier this week, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said he had pledged not to legalize any more wildcat outposts. He made the promise after retroactively legalizing 10 existing outposts earlier this month.

The Israeli government is "spitting on the face of the U.S., only a few days after announcing that they committed to them that there would be no advancement of settlements in the near future," said Peace Now.

The United States criticized the decision. "We view the expansion of settlements as an obstacle to peace that undermines the geographic viability of a two-state solution," said a National Security Council Statement. But it gave no indication that the U.S. was prepared to act.

Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, appealed to the United States

to intervene. "The American side is required to stop this violation, which will not lead to any peace or stability in the region," he said.

The planned construction is likely to add to the already heightened tensions following an Israeli military raid that killed 10 Palestinians in the West Bank city of Nablus on Wednesday.

The international community, along with the Palestinians, considers settlement construction illegal or illegitimate. Over 700,000 Israelis now live in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem — territories captured by Israel in 1967 and sought by the Palestinians for a future independent state.

Netanyahu's new coalition, which took office in late December, is dominated by religious and ultranationalist politicians with close ties to the settlement movement. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, a firebrand settler leader, on Thursday was officially granted Cabinet-level authority over settlement policies.

Smotrich had promised earlier this month a major settlement push. His office declined to comment Thursday, but settler representatives, who also attended the planning meeting, celebrated what they said were new approvals.

Yossi Dagan, a settler leader in the northern West Bank, welcomed the retroactive approval of 118 homes in "Nofei Nehemia," an outpost in the northern West Bank, after a 20-year struggle. "Great news for Samaria, for settlement and for the entire nation of Israel," he said, using the biblical name for the region.

Shlomo Neeman, chairman of the Yesha settler's council, declared the approvals "a tremendous boost." Neeman is also mayor of the "Gush Etzion" settlement bloc near Jerusalem, where settlers said hundreds of new homes were approved.

The decision marks one of the largest approvals of settlement construction in years. In comparison, some 8,000 units were approved in the previous two years, according to Peace Now.

"It's very big," said Amihai.

Harvey Weinstein gets 16 more years for rape, sexual assault

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A Los Angeles judge on Thursday sentenced Harvey Weinstein to 16 more years in prison after a jury convicted him of the rape and sexual assault of an Italian actor and model, furthering the fall of the onetime movie magnate who became a #MeToo magnet.

The prison term, along with the 23 years he received in 2020 for a similar conviction in New York, amounts to a likely life sentence for the 70-year-old.

Weinstein, sitting in a wheelchair and wearing jail attire, directly appealed to Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Lisa B. Lench, saying: "I maintain that I'm innocent. I never raped or sexually assaulted Jane Doe 1." The woman who Weinstein was convicted of raping sobbed in the courtroom as he spoke.

Moments earlier she had told the judge about the pain she felt after being attacked by Weinstein. "Before that night I was a very happy and confident woman. I valued myself and the relationship I had with God," the woman, who was identified in court only as Jane Doe 1, said through tears as she stood at a lectern behind prosecutors. "I was excited about my future. Everything changed after the defendant brutally assaulted me. There is no prison sentence long enough to undo the damage."

Jurors in December convicted Weinstein of one count of rape and two counts of sexual assault against the woman who at the trial's opening in October gave a dramatic and emotional account of him arriving uninvited at her hotel room during a 2013 film festival in the run-up to the Oscars, talking his way in and assaulting her during a film festival.

Lench sentenced Weinstein to eight years for a forcible rape count, six years for forcible oral copulation and two years for forcible penetration with a foreign object, for a combined 16 years.

His attorneys requested that she sentence him to three years for each count, and have the sentences run simultaneously.

"Mr. Weinstein did a lot of good for a lot of people in a 50 year career," Weinstein lawyer Mark Werksman told the judge. "He was a man that many famous movie stars would thank in their Oscar speeches."

Werksman cited Weinstein's age and very poor health, suggesting a long sentence would make it unlikely he would ever see his five children outside of prison.

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Jane Doe 1 could be heard crying in court throughout Werksman and Weinstein's remarks to the judge. "This is a made up story. Jane Doe 1 is an actress. She can turn the tears on," said Weinstein, who insisted he had never met the woman. "Please don't sentence me to life in prison. I don't deserve it. There are so many things wrong with this case."

The jury acquitted Weinstein of the sexual battery of a massage therapist and failed to reach verdicts on counts involving two other women.

"Today, justice prevailed for survivors," the massage therapist, known during trial as Jane Doe 3, said in a statement issued through her attorney after the sentencing. "No woman has to fear Harvey Weinstein again as he will never leave prison."

The defense contends that Weinstein had consensual sex with two of the women he was charged with assaulting and that two others were making up the incidents entirely.

Lench handed down the sentence Thursday after rejecting a motion by Weinstein's lawyers for a new trial. In arguments they said the judge was wrong to exclude from evidence messages showing that the Italian model had a sexual relationship with the director of the film festival she was visiting during the attack.

Defense attorney Alan Jackson said that rape shield laws excluding the sexual history of a victim were not relevant here, because the defense would have used the messages to show that the woman perjured herself and damaged her credibility when she testified that she and the festival director, Pascal Videcomini, were merely friends and colleagues.

"If the jury had known that Jane Doe 1 and Pascal were intimately involved, they never would have bought the story that was told," Jackson said. "We know they wouldn't have bought it. Because some of them have said so."

Jackson argued that the messages would also have bolstered defense arguments that the woman was not even in her hotel room, where she testified the attack occurred, but was with Vicedomini.

The defense had given the judge affidavits from jurors, two of whom were in the audience for the sentencing, that the evidence might have made them decide differently.

Lench called the juror statements "speculation" about how the evidence would have played out that were not relevant under the law.

The two jurors, who only gave their first names Michael and Jay, told reporters outside the courtroom that they were not there to advocate for either side, but said hearing about the messages might have changed deliberations.

The issue is likely to be at the forefront of Weinstein's upcoming appeal.

Prosecutors and Weinstein's attorneys declined comment on the sentence.

The Associated Press does not typically name people who say they have been sexually assaulted.

Legal uncertainties remain on both coasts for Weinstein.

New York's highest court has agreed to hear his appeal in his rape and sexual assault convictions there. And prosecutors in Los Angeles have yet to say whether they will retry Weinstein on counts they were unable to reach a verdict on. A hearing on the possible retrial is scheduled for next month.

Weinstein is eligible for parole in New York in 2039.

'Never saw such hell': Russian soldiers in Ukraine call home

By ERIKA KINETZ Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — One Russian soldier tells his mother that the young Ukrainians dead from his first firefight looked just like him. Another explains to his wife that he's drunk because alcohol makes it easier to kill civilians. A third wants his girlfriend to know that in all the horror, he dreams about just being with her.

About 2,000 secret recordings of intercepted conversations between Russian soldiers in Ukraine and their loved ones back home offer a harrowing new perspective on Vladimir Putin's year-old war. There is a human mystery at the heart of this conversations heard in intercepted phone calls: How do people raised with a sense of right and wrong end up accepting and perpetrating terrible acts of violence?

The AP identified calls made in March 2022 by soldiers in a military division that Ukrainian prosecutors

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say committed war crimes in Bucha, a town outside Kyiv that became an early symbol of Russian atrocities.

They show how deeply unprepared young soldiers — and their country — were for the war to come. Many joined the military because they needed money and were informed of their deployment at the last minute. They were told they'd be welcomed as heroes for liberating Ukraine from its Nazi oppressors and their Western backers, and that Kyiv would fall without bloodshed within a week.

The intercepts also show that as soldiers realized how much they'd been misled, they grew more and more afraid. Violence that once would have been unthinkable became normal. Looting and drinking offered moments of rare reprieve. Some said they were following orders to kill civilians or prisoners of war.

They tell their mothers what this war actually looks like: About the teenage Ukrainian boy who got his ears cut off. How the scariest sound is not the whistle of a rocket flying past, but the silence that means it's coming directly for you. How modern weapons can obliterate the human body so there's nothing left to bring home.

We listen as their mothers struggle to reconcile their pride and their horror, and as their wives and fathers beg them not to drink too much and to please, please call home.

These are the stories of three of those men — Ivan, Leonid and Maxim. The AP isn't using their full names to protect their families in Russia. The AP established that they were in areas when atrocities were committed, but has no evidence of their individual actions beyond what they confess.

The AP spoke with the mothers of Ivan and Leonid, but couldn't reach Maxim or his family. The AP verified these calls with the help of the Dossier Center, an investigative group in London funded by Russian dissident Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The conversations have been edited for length and clarity.

In a joint production on Saturday, Feb. 25, The Associated Press and Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting will broadcast never-before-heard audio of Russian soldiers as they confront — and perpetrate — the brutality of Russia's war in Ukraine.

LEONID

Leonid became a soldier because he needed money. He was in debt and didn't want to depend on his parents.

"I just wasn't prepared emotionally for my child to go to war at the age of 19," his mother told the AP in January. "None of us had experienced anything like this, that your child would live in a time when he has to go and fight."

Leonid's mother said Russia needs to protect itself from its enemies. But, like many others, she expected Russia to take parts of eastern Ukraine quickly. Instead, Leonid's unit got stuck around Bucha.

"No one thought it would be so terrible," his mother said. "My son just said one thing: 'My conscience is clear. They opened fire first.' That's all."

In the calls, there is an obvious moral dissonance between the way Leonid's mother raised him and what he is seeing and doing in Ukraine. Still, she defended her son, insisting he never even came into contact with civilians in Ukraine.

She said everything was calm, civil. There was no trouble at the checkpoints. Nothing bad happened. The war didn't change her son.

She declined to listen to any of the intercepts: "This is absurd," she said. "Just don't try to make it look like my child killed innocent people."

ONE: Kill if you don't want to be killed.

Leonid's introduction to war came on Feb. 24, as his unit crossed into Ukraine from Belarus and decimated a detachment of Ukrainians at the border. After his first fight, Leonid seems to have compassion for the young Ukrainian soldiers they'd just killed.

Mother: "When did you get scared?"

Leonid: "When our commander warned us we would be shot, 100%. He warned us that although we'd

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be bombed and shot at, our aim was to get through.”

Mother: “Did they shoot you?”

Leonid: “Of course. We defeated them.”

Mother: “Mhm. Did you shoot from your tanks?”

Leonid: “Yeah, we did. We shot from the tanks, machine guns and rifles. We had no losses. We destroyed their four tanks. There were dead bodies lying around and burning. So, we won.”

Mother: “Oh what a nightmare! Lyonka, you wanted to live at that moment, right honey?”

Leonid: “More than ever!”

Mother: “More than ever, right honey?”

Leonid: “Of course.”

Mother: “It’s totally horrible.”

Leonid: “They were lying there, just 18 or 19 years old. Am I different from them? No, I’m not.”

TWO: The rules of normal life no longer apply.

Leonid tells his mother their plan was to seize Kyiv within a week, without firing a single bullet. Instead, his unit started taking fire near Chernobyl. They had no maps and the Ukrainians had taken down all the road signs.

“It was so confusing,” he says. “They were well prepared.”

Not expecting a prolonged attack, Russian soldiers ran short on basic supplies. One way for them to get what they needed — or wanted — was to steal.

Many soldiers, including Leonid, talk about money with the wary precision that comes from not having enough. Some take orders from friends and family for certain-sized shoes and parts for specific cars, proud to go home with something to give.

When Leonid tells his mother casually about looting, at first she can’t believe he’s stealing. But it’s become normal for him.

As he speaks, he watches a town burn on the horizon.

“Such a beauty,” he says.

Leonid: “Look, mom, I’m looking at tons of houses — I don’t know, dozens, hundreds — and they’re all empty. Everyone ran away.”

Mother: “So all the people left, right? You guys aren’t looting them, are you? You’re not going into other people’s houses?”

Leonid: “Of course we are, mom. Are you crazy?”

Mother: “Oh, you are. What do you take from there?”

Leonid: “We take food, bed linen, pillows. Blankets, forks, spoons, pans.”

Mother: (laughing) “You gotta be kidding me.”

Leonid: “Whoever doesn’t have any — socks, clean underwear, T-shirts, sweaters.”

THREE: The enemy is everybody.

Leonid tells his mother about the terror of going on patrol and not knowing what or who they will encounter. He describes using lethal force at the slightest provocation against just about anyone.

At first, she seems not to believe that Russian soldiers could be killing civilians.

Leonid tells her that civilians were told to flee or shelter in basements, so anyone who was outside must not be a real civilian. Russian soldiers had been told, by Putin and others, that they’d be greeted as liberators and anyone who resisted was a fascist, an insurgent — not a real civilian.

This was a whole-of-society war. Mercy was for suckers.

Mother: “Oh Lyonka, you’ve seen so much stuff there!”

Leonid: “Well ... civilians are lying around right on the street with their brains coming out.”

Mother: “Oh God, you mean the locals?”

Leonid: “Yep. Well, like, yeah.”

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Mother: "Are they the ones you guys shot or the ones ... "

Leonid: "The ones killed by our army."

Mother: "Lyonya, they might just be peaceful people."

Leonid: "Mom, there was a battle. And a guy would just pop up, you know? Maybe he would pull out a grenade launcher ... Or we had a case, a young guy was stopped, they took his cellphone. He had all this information about us in his Telegram messages — where to bomb, how many we were, how many tanks we have. And that's it."

Mother: "So they knew everything?"

Leonid: "He was shot right there on the spot."

Mother: "Mhm."

Leonid: "He was 17 years old. And that's it, right there."

Mother: "Mhm."

Leonid: "There was a prisoner. It was an 18-year-old guy. First, he was shot in his leg. Then his ears were cut off. After that, he admitted everything, and they killed him."

Mother: "Did he admit it?"

Leonid: "We don't imprison them. I mean, we kill them all."

Mother: "Mhm."

FOUR: What it takes to get home alive.

Leonid tells his mother he was nearly killed five times. Things are so disorganized, he says, that it's not uncommon for Russians to fire on their own troops — it even happened to him. Some soldiers shoot themselves just to get medical leave, he says.

In another call, he tells his girlfriend he's envious of his buddies who got shot in the feet and could go home. "A bullet in your foot is like four months at home with crutches," he says. "It would be awesome."

Then he hangs up because of incoming fire.

Mother: "Hello, Lyonechka."

Leonid: "I just wanted to call you again. I am able to speak."

Mother: "Oh, that's good."

Leonid: "There are people out here who shoot themselves."

Mother: "Mhm."

Leonid: "They do it for the insurance money. You know where they shoot themselves?"

Mother: "That's silly, Lyonya."

Leonid: "The bottom part of the left thigh."

Mother: "It's bull——, Lyonya. They're crazy, you know that, right?"

Leonid: "Some people are so scared that they are ready to harm themselves just to leave."

Mother: "Yeah, it is fear, what can you say here, it's human fear. Everybody wants to live. I don't argue with that, but please don't do that. We all pray for you. You should cross yourself any chance you get, just turn away from everyone and do it. We all pray for you. We're all worried."

Leonid: "I'm standing here, and you know what the situation is? I am now 30 meters (100 feet) away from a huge cemetery." (giggling)

Mother: "Oh, that's horrible ... may it be over soon."

Leonid says he had to learn to empty his mind.

"Imagine, it's nighttime. You're sitting in the dark and it's quiet out there. Alone with your thoughts. And day after day, you sit there alone with those thoughts," he tells his girlfriend. "I already learned to think of nothing while sitting outside.

He promises to bring home a collection of bullets for the kids. "Trophies from Ukraine," he calls them.

His mother says she's waiting for him.

"Of course I'll come, why wouldn't I?" Leonid says.

"Of course, you'll come," his mother says. "No doubts. You're my beloved. Of course, you'll come. You

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are my happiness.”

Leonid returned to Russia in May, badly wounded, but alive. He told his mother Russia would win this war.

IVAN

Ivan dreamed of being a paratrooper from the time he was a boy, growing up in a village at the edge of Siberia. He used to dress up in fatigues and play paintball with friends in the woods. A photo shows him at 12 years old, smiling with a big Airsoft rifle and a slimy splotch of green near his heart — a sign of certain death in paintball.

Ivan’s dream came true. He entered an elite unit of Russian paratroopers, which crossed into Ukraine the very first day of Putin’s Feb. 24 invasion, one year ago.

ONE: Ivan’s road to war.

Ivan was in Belarus on training when they got a Telegram message: “Tomorrow you are leaving for Ukraine. There is a genocide of the Russian population. And we have to stop it.”

When his mother found out he was in Ukraine, she said she stopped speaking for days and took sedatives. Her hair went gray. Still, she was proud of him.

Ivan ended up in Bucha.

Ivan: “Mom, hi.”

Mother: “Hi, son! How ...”

Ivan: “How are you?”

Mother: “Vanya, I understand they might be listening so I’m afraid ...”

Ivan: “Doesn’t matter.”

Mother: “... to ask where you are, what’s happening. Where are you?”

Ivan: “In Bucha.”

Mother: “In Bucha?”

Ivan: “In Bucha.”

Mother: “Son, be as careful as you can, OK? Don’t go charging around! Always keep a cool head.”

Ivan: “Oh, come on, I’m not charging around.”

Mother: “Yeah, right! And yesterday you told me how you’re gonna f—— kill everyone out there.” (laughs)

Ivan: “We will kill if we have to.”

Mother: “Huh?”

Ivan: “If we have to — we have to.”

Mother: “I understand you. I’m so proud of you, my son! I don’t even know how to put it. I love you so much. And I bless you for everything, everything! I wish you success in everything. And I’ll wait for you no matter what.”

TWO: Love and fear.

Russian soldiers had been told by Putin and others that they’d be welcomed by their brothers and sisters in Ukraine as liberators. Instead, Ivan finds that most Ukrainians want him dead or gone. His mood darkens.

He calls his girlfriend, Olya, and tells her he had a dream about her.

Ivan: “F—, you know, it’s driving me crazy here. It’s just that ... You were just ... I felt you, touched you with my hand. I don’t understand how it’s possible, why, where ... But I really felt you. I don’t know, I felt something warm, something dear. It’s like something was on fire in my hands, so warm ... And that’s it. I don’t know. I was sleeping and then I woke up with all these thoughts. War ... You know, when you’re sleeping — and then you’re like ... War ... Where, where is it? It was just dark in the house, so dark. And I went outside, walked around the streets, and thought: damn, f— it. And that’s it. I really want to come see you.”

Olya: “I am waiting for you.”

Ivan: “Waiting? OK. I’m waiting, too. Waiting for the time I can come see you ... Let’s make a deal. When

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we see each other, let's spend the entire day together. Laying around, sitting together, eating, looking at each other — just us, together."

Olya: (Laughs) "Agreed."

Ivan: "Together all the time. Hugging, cuddling, kissing ... Together all the time, not letting each other go."

Olya: "Well, yeah!"

Ivan: "You can go f—— crazy here. It's so f—— up, the s—— that's happening. I really thought it would be easy here, to tell you the truth. That it's just gonna be easy to talk, think about it. But it turned out to be hard, you need to think with your head all the time. So that's that."

Ivan: "We are really at the front line. As far out as you could be. Kyiv is 15 kilometers (about 10 miles) from us. It is scary, Olya. It really is scary."

Olya: "Hello?"

Ivan: "Do you hear me?"

The line drops.

THREE: The end.

As things get worse for Ivan in Ukraine, his mother's patriotism deepens and her rage grows. The family has relatives in Kyiv, but seems to believe this is a righteous war against Nazi oppression in Ukraine — and the dark hand of the United States they see behind Kyiv's tough resistance. She says she'll go to Ukraine herself to fight.

Mother: "Do you have any predictions about the end ...?"

Ivan: "We are here for the time being. We'll probably stay until they clean up the whole of Ukraine. Maybe they'll pull us out. Maybe not. We're going for Kyiv."

Mother: "What are they going to do?"

Ivan: "We're not going anywhere until they clean up all of these pests."

Mother: "Are those bastards getting cleaned up?"

Ivan: "Yes, they are. But they've been waiting for us and preparing, you understand? Preparing properly. American motherf—— have been helping them out."

Mother: "F—— f——. F—— kill them all. You have my blessing."

Death came for Ivan a decade after that boyhood paintball game.

In July, a local paper published a notice of his funeral with a photo of him, again in fatigues holding a large rifle. Ivan died heroically in Russia's "special military operation," the announcement said. We will never forget you. All of Russia shares this grief.

Reached by the AP in January, Ivan's mother at first denied she'd ever talked with her son from the front. But she agreed to listen to some of the intercepted audio and confirmed it was her speaking with Ivan.

"He wasn't involved in murders, let alone in looting," she told the AP before hanging up the phone.

Ivan was her only son.

MAXIM

Maxim is drunk in some of the calls, slurring his words, because life at the front line is more than he can take sober.

It's not clear what military unit Maxim is in, but he makes calls from the same phone as Ivan, on the same days.

He says they're alone out there and exposed. Communications are so bad they're taking more fire from their own troops than from the Ukrainians.

He has a bad toothache and his feet are freezing. The hunt for locals — men, women and children — who might be informing on them to the Ukrainian military is constant.

Maxim's mood flips between boredom and horror — not just at what he has seen, but also what he has done.

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ONE: Gold!

The only reason Maxim is able to speak with his family back in Russia is because they've been stealing phones from locals. He says they're even shaking down kids.

"We take everything from them," he explains to his wife. "Because they can also be f—— spotters."

Stuck just outside Kyiv, bored and unsure why they're in Ukraine in the first place, Maxim and a half-dozen other guys shot up a shopping mall and made off with all the gold they could carry.

Back home Maxim has money troubles, but here his hands are heavy with treasure. He gleefully calculates and recalculates what his pile of gold might be worth. He says he offered a wad of money the size of his fist to Ukrainian women and children.

"I wanted to give it to normal families with kids, but the people out there were drunks," he tells his wife.

In the end, he handed the cash off to a random, clean-shaven man he thought looked decent. "I told him: 'Look here, take it, give it to families with kids and take something for yourself. You'll figure it out, make it fair.'"

On calls home, the high sweet voice of Maxim's own young child bubbles in the background as he talks with his wife.

Maxim: "Do you know how much a gram of gold costs here?"

Wife: "No."

Maxim: "Roughly? About two or three thousand rubles, right?"

Wife: "Well, yeah ..."

Maxim: "Well, I have 1½ kilograms (more than three pounds). With labels even."

Wife: "Holy f——, are we looters?!"

Maxim: "With labels, yeah. It's just that we f—— up this ... We were shooting at this shopping mall from a tank. Then we go in, and there's a f—— jewelry store. Everything was taken. But there was a safe there. We cracked it open, and inside ... f—— me! So the seven of us loaded up."

Wife: "I see."

Maxim: "They had these f—— necklaces, you know. In our money, they're like 30-40,000 a piece, 60,000 a piece."

Wife: "Holy crap."

Maxim: "I scored about a kilo and a half of necklaces, charms, bracelets ... these ... earrings ... earrings with rings ..."

Wife: "That's enough, don't tell me."

Maxim: "Anyway, I counted and if it's 3,000 rubles a gram, then I have about 3.5 million. If you offload it."

Wife: "Got it. How's the situation there?"

Maxim: "It's f—— OK."

Wife: "OK? Got it."

Maxim: "We don't have a f—— thing to do, so we go around and loot the f—— shopping mall."

Wife: "Just be careful, in the name of Christ."

TWO: Propaganda.

Maxim and his mother discuss the opposing stories about the war being told on Ukrainian and Russian television. They blame the United States and recite conspiracy theories pushed by Russian state media.

But Maxim and his mother believe it's the Ukrainians who are deluded by fake news and propaganda, not them. The best way to end the war, his mother says, is to kill the presidents of Ukraine and the United States.

Later, Maxim tells his mother that thousands of Russian troops died in the first weeks of war — so many that there's no time to do anything except haul away the bodies. That's not what they're saying on Russian TV, his mother says.

Maxim: "Here, it's all American. All the weapons."

Mother: "It's the Americans driving this, of course! Look at their laboratories. They are developing bio-

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logical weapons. Coronavirus literally started there.”

Maxim: “Yeah, I also saw somewhere that they used bats.”

Mother: “All of it. Bats, migrating birds, and even coronavirus might be their biological weapon.”

Mother: “They even found all these papers with signatures from the U.S. all over Ukraine. Biden’s son is the mastermind behind all of this.”

Mother: “When will it end? When they stop supplying weapons.”

Maxim: “Mhm.”

Mother: “Until they catch (Ukrainian President Volodymyr) Zelenskyy and execute him, nothing will end. He’s a fool, a fool! He’s a puppet for the U.S. and they really don’t need him, the fool. You watch TV and you feel bad for the people, the civilians, some travelling with young kids.”

Mother: “If I was given a gun, I’d go and shoot Biden.” (Laughs)

Maxim: (Laughs)

THREE: War and peace.

The Ukrainian government has been intercepting Russian calls when their phones ping Ukrainian cell towers, providing important real-time intelligence for the military. Now, the calls are also potential evidence for war crimes.

But phones have been dangerous for the soldiers in another, more personal sense. The phone acts as a real-time bridge between two incompatible realities — the war in Ukraine and home.

In Maxim’s calls with his wife, war and peace collide. Even as she teaches their daughter the rules of society — scolding the child for throwing things, for example — Maxim talks about what he’s been stealing. His wife’s world is filled with school crafts and the sounds of children playing outside. In his, volleys of gunfire crack the air.

One night last March, Maxim was having trouble keeping it together on a call with his wife. He’d been drinking, as he did every night.

He told her he’d killed civilians — so many he thinks he’s going crazy. He said he might not make it home alive. He was just sitting there, drunk in the dark, waiting for the Ukrainian artillery strikes to start.

Wife: “Why? Why are you drinking?”

Maxim: “Everyone is like that here. It’s impossible without it here.”

Wife: “How the f— will you protect yourself if you are tipsy?”

Maxim: “Totally normal. On the contrary, it’s easier to shoot ... civilians. Let’s not talk about this. I’ll come back and tell you how it is here and why we drink!”

Wife: “Please, just be careful!”

Maxim: “Everything will be fine. Honestly, I’m scared s—less myself. I never saw such hell as here. I am f—— shocked.”

Wife: “Why the f— did you go there?”

Minutes later, he’s on the phone with his child.

“You’re coming back,” the child says.

“Of course,” Maxim says.

FOUR: The end?

In their last intercepted call, Maxim’s wife seems to have a premonition.

Wife: “Is everything all right?”

Maxim: “Yeah. Why?”

Wife: “Be honest with me, is everything all right?”

Maxim: “Huh? Why do you ask?”

Wife: “It’s nothing, I just can’t sleep at night.”

Maxim is a little breathless. He and his unit are getting ready to go. His wife asks him where they’re going.

“Forward,” he tells her. “I won’t be able to call for a while.”

The AP has been unable to determine what happened to Maxim.

Trans youth care ban headed to Tennessee governor's desk

By JONATHAN MATTISE and KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Transgender youth in Tennessee would be banned from receiving gender-affirming care under legislation currently headed to the desk of Republican Gov. Bill Lee, who has voiced support for the bill.

House lawmakers voted 77-16 on Thursday, with three Democrats joining their Republican colleagues to pass the bill.

Civil rights groups have vowed an immediate lawsuit if and when the bill becomes law — setting up the potential for a lengthy legal battle over the coming months.

"These children do not need these medical procedures to be able to flourish as adults," said House Majority Leader William Lamberth. "They need mental health treatment. They need love and support, and many of them need to be able to grow up to become the individuals that they were intended to be."

Across the United States, state lawmakers have introduced legislation attacking gender-affirming medical care for young people even as such services have been available in the U.S. for more than a decade and are endorsed by major medical associations.

Similar bills have advanced in Nebraska, Mississippi, Oklahoma and South Dakota. In Utah, the Republican governor recently signed a transgender medical ban into law. Meanwhile, a federal judge who blocked Arkansas' ban on gender-affirming care for minors is now considering whether to strike down the law as unconstitutional. A similar ban in Alabama has also been temporarily blocked by a federal judge.

If enacted in Tennessee, doctors would be prohibited from providing gender-affirming care to anyone under the age of 18, including prescribing puberty blockers and hormones — and could even be penalized.

However, the legislation spells out exceptions, including allowing doctors to perform these medical services if the patient's care had begun prior to July 1, 2023 — which is when the ban is proposed to go into effect. The bill then states that that care must end by March 31, 2024.

The bill then allows the attorney general to investigate health care providers who may violate the statute, which carries a \$25,000 penalty.

"We have taken away a woman's right to determine her health care and her health outcomes — and now we've gone to children," said Democratic Rep. Gloria Johnson, referencing the state's strict abortion ban that was allowed to go into effect last year.

"If a doctor and a family feels that taking hormone blockers is going to be healthy and productive and life-saving for these children, that's a decision that should be made," she added.

Tennessee in particular has been caught in the center of the conflict over transgender youth medical care — ever since video surfaced on social media last year of a Nashville doctor touting that gender-affirming procedures are "huge money makers" for hospitals.

The video prompted calls by Tennessee's Republican leaders for an investigation into Vanderbilt University Medical Center, but to date, it's unknown if any authorities have done so. The private nonprofit hospital said it had provided only a handful of gender-affirming surgeries to minors over the years but has put a temporary pause on the procedures to review its policies.

On average, Vanderbilt University Medical Center says it provided five gender-affirming surgeries to minors every year since its transgender clinic opened in 2018. All were over the age of 16 and had parental consent, and none received genital procedures.

But not every red state has enacted such bans with gusto.

In Wyoming, a bill stalled in a legislative committee earlier this week amid worries that health insurers would run afoul of federal law by denying coverage for gender-conforming procedures.

The bill, which had passed the state Senate, failed 5-2 in a House committee after lawmakers removed the insurance coverage prohibition. To succeed now, it would need to be revived on the state House floor before a Monday deadline — a challenging prospect.

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Wyoming, despite having one of the most Republican-dominated legislatures, has a long tradition of skepticism toward culture war bills.

"It's a bill that seeks to demonize, it's a bill that already knows who its enemies are. And it's not a bill that's about solving a Wyoming problem," Sara Burlingame, director of the LGBTQ+ advocacy group Wyoming Equality and a former state lawmaker herself, told the committee.

Meanwhile, Tennessee's House Republicans on Thursday also advanced legislation that would severely limit where drag shows can take place. A slightly different version had passed the GOP-led Senate chamber earlier this month, meaning lawmakers must wrestle out the difference before it can go to Gov. Lee's desk.

Similar to the gender-affirming medical youth care bill, Lee is expected to sign the legislation.

Ukraine: Drone footage shows scale of Bakhmut's destruction

By The Associated Press undefined

BAKHMUT, Ukraine (AP) — Amid the smoking ruins, a lone dog pads in the snow, surely unaware — or perhaps too hungry to care — that death rains down regularly from the skies on the remnants of this Ukrainian city that Russia is pounding into rubble.

But for now Bakhmut stands — growing as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance with each additional day that its defenders hold out against Russia's relentless shelling and waves of Russian troops taking heavy casualties in a months-long but so far futile campaign to capture it.

New video footage of Bakhmut shot from the air with a drone for The Associated Press shows how the longest battle of the year-long Russian invasion has turned the city of salt and gypsum mines in eastern Ukraine into a ghost town, its jagged destruction testament to the folly of war.

The footage — shot Feb. 13 — shows no people. But they are still there -- somewhere, out of sight, in basements and defensive strongholds, trying to survive. Of the prewar population of 80,000, a few thousand residents have refused or been unable to evacuate. The size of the garrison that Ukraine has stationed in the city is kept secret.

Tire tracks on the roads and footprints on the paths covered with snow speak to a continued human presence. In one shot, a car drives swiftly away in the distance. Graffiti spray-painted on the charred, pockmarked outer walls of a blown-out storefront also show people are or were here.

"Bakhmut loves Ukraine," it reads. Next to that is the stenciled face of Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the commander-in-chief of Ukraine's armed forces, holding up two fingers in a V-for-victory gesture. "God and Valerii Zaluzhnyi are with us," reads writing underneath.

A top Ukrainian intelligence official this week likened the fight for Bakhmut to Ukraine's dogged defense of Mariupol earlier in the war, which tied up Russian forces for months, preventing the Kremlin from deploying them elsewhere.

Likewise, "Bakhmut is also an indicator and a fortress," the official, Vadym Skibitskyi, said in an AP interview. He said the city has come to represent "the indomitability of our soldiers" and that by holding it, Ukraine is inflicting "unacceptable" casualties on the Russians.

From the air, the scale of destruction becomes plain to see. Entire rows of apartment buildings have been gutted, just the outer walls left standing and the roofs and interior floors gone, exposing the ruins' innards to the snow and winter frost — and the drone's prying eye.

Like a caver descending into a chasm, the drone drops slowly into one of the blown-out hulks — all four of its floors now collapsed into a pile of ashes, rubble and rusting metal at the bottom.

Another five-story apartment building has a giant bite torn out of it. A black crow flies through the gap. The drone peers into a kitchen, a once-intimate family place now exposed because one of its outer walls has been torn away. There is still a strainer in the sink and plates on the drying rack above, as though someone still lives there. But the undisturbed dusting of snow on the cloth-covered table suggests they are long gone.

As the drone continues its journey, along streets where crowds no longer walk and past stores where they no longer shop, over parks where children no longer play and where old-timers no longer chew the

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fat, the names of towns and cities flattened in previous wars spring to mind.

Fleury-devant-Douaumont, France — a village razed in World War I, changing hands 16 times in fighting between French and German troops from June to August 1916. Never rebuilt, it was later declared to have “Died for France” — along with eight other villages destroyed in the fearsome battle for the French town of Verdun.

Or Oradour-sur-Glane, also in France, destroyed in World War II. Its ruins have been left untouched as a memorial to 642 people killed there on June 10, 1944. Nazi troops from the fanatical SS “Das Reich” division herded civilians into barns and a church and torched the village — the biggest civilian massacre by France’s wartime occupiers.

For Ukrainians, Bakhmut also is becoming etched indelibly in the collective consciousness. Its defense is already hailed in song. The track “Bakhmut Fortress,” by Ukrainian band Antytila, has racked up more than 3.8 million views.

“Mom, I’m standing,” they sing. “Motherland, I’m fighting.”

In other developments Thursday:

— The Moldovan government appealed for calm and urged the public to follow only “official and credible” sources of news after Russia alleged Ukraine is planning an “armed provocation” in Moldova’s Moscow-backed breakaway region of Transnistria. Russia maintains about 1,500 “peacekeeping” troops in the region, which is internationally recognized as part of Moldova.

Shortly before the Russian Defense Ministry’s claim, an adviser to Ukraine’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, Anton Herashchenko, said Ukraine and NATO could together return Transnistria to Moldova within 24 hours.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has previously stated that Ukraine is ready to provide all necessary assistance to Moldova.

Moscow alleged, citing intelligence data without presenting any evidence, that Ukrainian soldiers disguised as Russian troops planned to launch a false flag attack to blame Russia for invading Ukraine from Transnistria that Kyiv would then use as a pretext for an invasion of the territory.

Late Thursday, the Russian Defense Ministry issued another warning of what it described as an impending Ukrainian “provocation,” reporting a massive Ukrainian military buildup near Transnistria including artillery in positions ready for combat.

“The Russian armed forces will adequately respond to the provocation planned by the Ukrainian side,” the ministry said.

— Russian President Vladimir Putin gave another signal he is digging in for a protracted war, saying his government will prioritize strengthening Russia’s defense capabilities. Speaking on Defender of the Fatherland Day, a public holiday, he announced the deployment of the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile system and the delivery of a massive supply of Zircon sea-launched hypersonic missiles to Russian forces. He added that three Borei-class nuclear submarines would be added to the fleet in the coming years.

— The U.N. General Assembly approved a nonbinding resolution Thursday urging Russia to end hostilities in Ukraine and to withdraw its forces.

— At least three civilians were killed and eight others were wounded in Ukraine over the past 24 hours, the presidential office reported. Russian forces over the past day launched more than 80 artillery barrages of six towns and villages in northeastern Ukraine’s Sumy region, which borders Russia, local Ukrainian authorities reported. Ukrainian forces also repelled about 90 Russian attacks in the country’s east, where fierce fighting has raged for months, the Ukrainian military said.

Review: ‘Cocaine Bear,’ 100% pure, uncut junk with no high

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

Yes, there’s a giant bear and, yes, it does a ton of coke. And, yes, just as you probably suspected, the movie blows.

We have officially sunk very low with “Cocaine Bear,” way past other films where the title alone describes the only thing that happens, like “Snakes on a Plane,” “We Bought a Zoo” or “Sharknado.”

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Aping other genres of filmmaking, this one never finds its own voice or a way to integrate the ultra-violence with the dark comedy. It's like a parody of a parody that director Elizabeth Banks has turned limp and pointless. If you think it's hysterical to see a bear do a bump off a severed leg stump, by all means, the movie theater is this way.

But where does it all go from here? Just match an apex predator with a Schedule II drug and fall deeper into a movie future with "Oxycodone Osprey" or "Codeine Crocodile"?

The best thing to say is that, even at an efficient 95 minutes, "Cocaine Bear" just snorts along. When a drug runner in a plane in 1985 drops an outstanding amount of cocaine on Blood Mountain in Georgia, a 500-pound black bear ingests a brick of it and naturally wants more (At this point, we must call it Pablo Escobear, right?).

Unfortunately, there are different groups of people who happen to be in the woods at the same time — a pair of European backpackers, a teen and her friends skipping school for a hike, a trio of thugs, a pair of park ranger types, the drug runner's associates and a cop on the hunt.

The movie stars Keri Russell, Isaiah Whitlock Jr., Margo Martindale, Kristofer Hivju, O'Shea Jackson Jr., Alden Ehrenreich and the late Ray Liotta. All deserve hazard pay. This is not a career high.

Eagle-eyed viewers will note that the presence of Russell and Martindale plus a cameo from Matthew Rhys combines three members of the Cold War-era spy TV series "The Americans." That's an indication of the kind of meta humor here.

There's a reference to Pines Mall, which is a little nod to "Back to the Future," but who really cares? "Jane," the opening song, is an homage to "Wet Hot American Summer," which Banks co-starred in and had the same Jefferson Starship opening tune. Looking for Easter eggs takes your mind of the meandering script.

Banks and screenwriter Jimmy Warden have created a mashup of Quentin Tarantino bloodfests, Sam Raimi's scare tactics and the Coen brothers' absurdity. The bear will sneak up behind its victims, race silently, leap in slo-mo, luxuriate under a dust cloud of coke, behead enemies, climb trees and walk on its hind legs, snarling. If only it snorted enough coke to stay up all night and write a better plot.

The filmmakers are also clearly trying their hand at satire, but ham-fistedly. Set during the Reagan-era "Just Say No" period, "Cocaine Bear" hopes to remark on the demonization of drugs and it also seems to have something to say about how humans misunderstand the balance of nature. Neither work.

If you want to use a bear to talk about larger things, look no further than 1997's dark "The Edge," with a screenplay by David Mamet exploring masculinity and intellectualism, or even 1988's light "The Bear," about the nobleness of creatures — it even has a bear cub eating hallucination-inducing mushrooms. "Cocaine Bear" is like a dull butter knife against those two.

Remarkably, no real bears were used this time. Weta FX, the New Zealand-based special effects company founded by Peter Jackson, supplied the massive flaked-up and all-digital ursine, complete with a mangled ear and scars on its snout. The soundtrack is pure '80s — Scandal's "The Warrior," Berlin's "No More Words" and Depeche Mode's very appropriate "Just Can't Get Enough."

And in another bit of trickery, "Cocaine Bear" was shot largely in rural Ireland, which the creators say closely resembles the Georgia mountain wilderness. Actually, that reminds us of what else bears famously do in the woods. These filmmakers left us a pile of it.

"Cocaine Bear," a Universal Pictures release that hits theaters Friday, is rated R for "bloody violence and gore, drug content and language throughout." Running time: 95 minutes. Zero stars out of four.

Trump investigation: Could grand juror's words tank charges?

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Almost as soon as the foreperson of the special grand jury in the Georgia election meddling investigation went public this week, speculation began about whether her unusually candid revelations could jeopardize any possible prosecution of former President Donald Trump or others.

Emily Kohrs first spoke out in an interview published Tuesday by The Associated Press, a story that was followed by interviews in other print and television news outlets. In detailed commentary, she described some of what happened behind the closed doors of the jury room — how witnesses behaved, how pros-

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ecutors interacted with them, how some invoked their constitutional right not to answer certain questions.

Lawyers for Trump say the revelations offered by Kohrs shattered the credibility of the entire special grand jury investigation. People hoping to see the former president indicted worried on social media that Kohrs may have tanked a case against the former president. But experts said that while Kohrs' chattiness in news interviews probably aggravated Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, who's leading the investigation, they were not legally damaging.

Willis likely "wishes that this woman hadn't gone on the worldwide tour that she did," said Amy Lee Copeland, a former federal prosecutor and criminal defense attorney in Georgia who's not involved in the case. "But is this a headache that is grinding the machine to a halt? It's not. It's just one of the many frustrations that attends the practice of law."

Trump's attorneys in Georgia, however, are jumping on the interviews.

Drew Findling and Jennifer Little, who represent Trump in the Fulton County case, said they've had concerns about the panel's proceedings from the start but have kept quiet out of respect for the grand jury process. After Kohrs' interviews, they felt compelled to speak out.

"The end product is, the reliability of anything that has taken place in there is completely tainted and called into question," Findling said. But he also said he wasn't attacking "a 30-year-old foreperson."

"She's a product of a circus that cloaked itself as a special purpose grand jury," he said.

Findling and Little hadn't filed any challenges in the case by Thursday but said they're "resolute" as to Trump's innocence and keeping their options open.

"We're considering everything and anything to look after the interests of our client," he said.

The special grand jury was impaneled at the request of Willis, who is investigating whether Trump and his Republican allies committed crimes as they tried to overturn his narrow 2020 election loss in the state to Democrat Joe Biden. The panel didn't have the power to indict but instead offered recommendations for Willis, a Democrat, who will ultimately decide whether to seek charges from a regular grand jury.

Willis' office has declined to comment on Kohrs' media appearances, other than to say they weren't aware ahead of time that she planned to give interviews. Spokesperson Jeff DiSantis also declined Thursday to comment on the statements from Trump's attorneys.

The former president's lawyers expressed concern that the special grand jury had been allowed to watch and read news coverage of the case and was aware of some witnesses' efforts not to testify. Kohrs said prosecutors told the jurors they could read and watch the news but urged them to keep open minds.

Kohrs also shared numerous anecdotes from the proceedings that she found amusing and was very expressive in television interviews, sometimes laughing or making faces.

"It's not a joking matter," Findling said. "It's not a matter for giggles. It's not a matter for smiles."

Findling and Little said the district attorney's office, which advised the special grand jury, should have better educated the grand jurors about the solemnity of the process and the rules and limitations.

"That tone and that rhetoric begins from the top down, and that was set by the district attorney's office," Little said.

Trump himself criticized the process in a post on his social media network Wednesday, calling the Georgia investigation "ridiculous, a strictly political continuation of the greatest Witch Hunt of all time." He expressed dismay at Kohrs "going around and doing a Media Tour revealing, incredibly, the Grand Jury's inner workings & thoughts."

Though Kohrs did not publicly name anyone the special grand jury recommended for possible indictment, Trump's lawyers said she seemed to implicate him in response to questions.

They also said the judge overseeing the special grand jury could have instructed or strongly suggested that the grand jurors not speak publicly until the panel's full final report was made public. Several parts of the report were released last week, but Fulton County Superior Court Judge Robert McBurney said any section that recommended specific charges for specific people would remain secret for now.

During a hearing last month, a lawyer for a coalition of news outlets, including the AP, urged the immediate release of the full report.

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In the federal system, grand jurors are prohibited from talking about what witnesses say or anything that happens in the room. But the Georgia special grand jury oath says only that they cannot talk about their deliberations.

The special grand jury was dissolved Jan. 9, and Judge McBurney told the AP that he later met with grand jurors to discuss where things stood. He said he provided them with the "rules of the road" of what they were legally allowed and not allowed to discuss publicly.

He said they could discuss what witnesses said and what is in the report but could not talk about deliberations because that's what their oath said.

Trump lawyer Little said she believes some of what Kohrs discussed in interviews was in fact part of deliberations, including when she talked about the credibility of some witnesses, decisions to recommend multiple indictments and the reasons why the grand jurors did not seek to bring Trump in to testify.

Copeland, the former federal prosecutor and criminal defense attorney, noted that Kohrs was cautious — consulting a notebook where she'd written the judge's instructions before answering some questions — and didn't describe the discussion and debate that led to the special grand jury's outcomes.

"I wish she really hadn't talked about anything," Copeland added. "But she doesn't talk about the deliberations. She doesn't talk about the votes. She simply talks about other things that were happening in the grand jury session."

University of Georgia law professor emeritus Ron Carlson said that if Kohrs had revealed the names of anyone for whom the special grand jury recommended charges, it's possible those people could try to use that as grounds to dismiss an indictment. But he wasn't optimistic about the chances for success.

"I think that any kind of motion to dismiss an indictment based on her comments would have an uphill battle," Carlson said.

For donors, wartime Ukraine aid creates blurry ethical line

By THALIA BEATY Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Bulletproof vests and drones. Pickup trucks, walkie-talkies and tourniquets. These are just some of the items that individuals and nonprofits have donated to buy and ship to Ukraine, where sometimes they are then used by those fighting Russia's invasion.

"We've had these discussions countless times," said Igor Markov, a director of the nonprofit Nova Ukraine, about where to draw the line between what aid is humanitarian versus that which supports the active defense — the fighting — in his home country.

His Stanford, California-based organization, which delivered some \$59 million in aid to Ukraine since Russia invaded a year ago, decided ultimately not to support volunteer fighters.

"We realized there's a significant amount of money that would be ruled out," he said, pointing to platforms that facilitate matching employee donations, like Benevity, and some companies, like Google, that require nonprofits to promise their aid does not support active fighting as a condition of receiving contributions.

Throughout the past year, U.S. and European companies, individuals and organizations have navigated local and international regulations to provide aid and grappled with similar moral questions about whether or not to donate to an allied nation's defense.

Markov said he contributed to buying equipment for Ukraine's frontline defenders as an individual. And he points out that items like drones and pickup trucks may not usually be considered military equipment before asking, "Guess how they're used?"

"It could be used to just carry food. It could be used to carry munitions," he said of the vehicles, adding that Ukrainian fighters have been creative in using whatever equipment they have. Drones, meanwhile, have become an essential tool in the fighting.

Under U.S. laws, nonprofits are not allowed to donate to people in combat, said New York attorney, Daniel Kurtz, a partner at Pryor Cashman.

"You can't support war fighting, can't support killing people, even if it's killing the bad guys," he said. "It's not consistent with the law of charity."

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But Kurtz doubts the IRS will examine donations to Ukraine — in part for reasons of capacity, but also because of the political support for Ukraine's government.

"While I'm sure some of them are carefully lawyered, there's enormous pressure to provide this support," he said of nonprofits. "So my guess is probably a lot of people are just going ahead and doing it."

The reality, as described by some nonprofit leaders, is that everyone in Ukraine is fighting to defend the country, from children to an 80-year-old Holocaust survivor.

"We're open," said Dora Chomiak, president of Razom for Ukraine, a New York nonprofit that has seen the contributions it receives jump from around \$200,000 a year to at least \$75 million in 2022. "Our aid and our medical equipment and our communications equipment are going to people who are defending the country."

Though it has delivered more than a thousand drones, her organization ruled out fundraising for military equipment because it did not fit into the organization's charitable mission, said Chomiak. Getting the necessary licenses would also have delayed immediately impactful actions, such as delivering tens of thousands of specialized first aid kits to the frontlines.

Companies, which have given some of the largest publicly known donations to Ukraine, must also consider to what extent their donations are directly supporting Ukraine's war effort. Microsoft Corp. has donated at least \$430 million in services and cash in 2022, not including cybersecurity services.

Tom Burt, a Microsoft vice president, said he set up direct, encrypted communication channels with senior cybersecurity officials in Ukraine before the war began and continues to communicate with them regularly. At the start of the war, Microsoft helped move the Ukrainian government's digital infrastructure from physical servers in the country into the cloud. The company also helps protect Ukrainian devices and software from Russian cyber intrusions and attacks that are often coordinated with physical military campaigns.

"It's possible, of course, that some of those devices are being used by the military or by logistics organizations, both government and private sector, to provide both humanitarian aid and military supplies and equipment," Burt told The Associated Press. "That's not really our role to get engaged in that."

While supporting the Ukrainian government, Microsoft has learned a great deal about malware used by Russian-aligned groups.

"That's helping us build even more secure products and services," Burt said. "But the fundamental reason that we're doing this is because we think it's the right thing to do."

Microsoft has agreed to provide its services at no cost to Ukraine through 2023. But it's possible Ukraine will turn into a paying customer when the war ends.

Dana Brakman Reiser, a professor at Brooklyn Law School who co-wrote a recent book about corporate giving, said many companies use philanthropic activity for business development, to market their brand or motivate their employees.

"They're saying, 'This is philanthropic.' And that's a very subjective assessment. It may be largely philanthropic," she said. "It may have some business development and benefit for the company, especially in a very long-term sense."

Americans have previously fundraised or even fought in conflicts in which the U.S. government was not a party, said Andrew Morris, who teaches history at Union College. Before the U.S. entered World War II, Japanese-Americans were among several immigrant groups who sent aid back to their countries of origin, including packages directly to Japanese soldiers.

"It's not guns, but it's going directly to the military," he said. "Is that a distinction without a difference?"

The U.S. government eventually saw such relief efforts as evidence of Japanese disloyalty when they interred whole communities after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. But, it tolerated the work of another group that shipped weapons to Britain's home guard, who were ill-equipped, despite the U.S. being formally neutral at the time, Morris said.

"I think that makes it a lot easier for this private sector, voluntary donations to flow in the direction that U.S. foreign policy is," he said, though generally, the government discourages individuals from pursuing their own foreign policy objectives.

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Greg Schneider, executive vice president of The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which supports around 10,000 Holocaust survivors in Ukraine, many of whom are now in their eighties and nineties, said it carefully tracks the food, water and medicine it has sent into the country since the war.

"Most of the funding comes from the German government through us," he said. "So, it's very clear to us that it doesn't cross over into any non-humanitarian efforts."

Rihanna will sing 'Lift Me Up' at the Oscars next month

By The Associated Press undefined

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Rihanna will follow-up her soaring Super Bowl halftime show with a performance at the Super Bowl of movies — the Oscars.

Producers of the telecast said Thursday that the music superstar will sing "Lift Me Up" from "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever."

"Lift Me Up," with music by Tems, Rihanna, Ryan Coogler and Ludwig Göransson and lyric by Tems and Ryan Coogler, is nominated for original song. It is Rihanna's first Oscar nomination.

Earlier this month, the Barbadian superstar, dressed in a bright red jumpsuit, plowed through 12 of her hits in 13 minutes, at the Super Bowl at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Arizona. The performance doubled as an announcement to the world that she was pregnant with her second child.

Hosted by Jimmy Kimmel, the 95th Oscars will air live on ABC and broadcast outlets worldwide on March 12.

Among Oscar competitors that Rihanna faces is Lady Gaga, who was nominated for "Hold My Hand" from "Top Gun: Maverick." Lady Gaga co-wrote the song with BloodPop and it's her fourth nomination; she won an Oscar in 2019 for "Shallow" with Bradley Cooper.

Another nominee is Diane Warren, who received her 14th Oscar nomination through her song "Applause" from "Tell It Like a Woman." The prolific songwriter was recognized with an honorary Oscar at the Governors Awards last year.

Other best original song nominees are M.M. Keeravaani's "Naatu Naatu" from "RRR," which was written by Chandrabose, and "This is a Life" from "Everything Everywhere All at Once." The latter track was created by Mitski, David Byrne and Ryan Lott, who along with his band Son Lux was also nominated for best original score.

China's global influence worries U.S. majority: AP-NORC poll

By JOSH BOAK and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just 40% of U.S. adults approve of how President Joe Biden is handling relations with China, a new poll shows, with a majority anxious about Beijing's influence as the White House finds its agenda increasingly shaped by global rivalries.

About 6 in 10 say they are gravely concerned about China, the world's second-largest economy after the United States, according to the survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Biden has portrayed his domestic agenda on infrastructure and computer chip development as part of a broader competition with China, arguing that the future is at stake.

Tensions with China are crackling after government officials discovered and shot down a Chinese spy balloon two weeks ago. The Biden administration has preserved tariffs on imports from China and restricted the sale of advanced computer chips to the country, angering Chinese officials who want to fuel faster economic growth.

There are additional concerns over whether China will provide some form of military support for Russia's war in Ukraine. As the war nears its one-year mark, the poll shows that serious concern about the threat Russia poses to the U.S. has fallen. Concern about China now outpaces that about Russia; last year, about even percentages had named the two countries as a threat.

Biden has tried to frame relations with China as a competition with boundaries, rather than as a larger

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geopolitical clash.

"We seek competition, not conflict, with China," Biden said last week. "We're not looking for a new Cold War. ... We'll responsibly manage that competition so that it doesn't veer into conflict."

Approval of Biden's foreign policy is roughly in line with views of his presidency more broadly, a possible sign that his agenda is not viewed through its individual components but larger perceptions of the president himself.

The poll found that 45% of U.S. adults say they approve of Biden's overall performance, while 54% disapprove. That's similar to views of Biden in recent months. Forty-one percent praised the president in late January and 43% did in December.

Concern about China's global influence as a threat to the U.S. is similar to last year but has grown steadily in recent years from 54% just after Biden took office and 48% in January 2020.

Melvin Dunlap, 68, said Biden needed to be careful with China, given the U.S. reliance on Chinese manufacturing. The Peyton, Colorado, resident said he believes Biden "has a good heart" and "means well," generally approving of Biden's approach.

"You tread cautiously," said Dunlap, who retired from law enforcement. "You show strength, not weakness."

Fewer adults feel as wary about Russia as they did just after its military invaded Ukraine last year. Now, 53% say they're seriously concerned about Russia, down from 64% in March 2022.

Michael Marchek, 33, an engineer in the Atlanta area, said Russia's military has struggled in Ukraine, failing to achieve its goal of taking the capital of Kyiv and sustaining steep casualties that showed a sense of disarray.

"I was more concerned about Russia before they proved they were less effective than they appeared to be on the surface," Marchek said. "They played their hand and they did not play their hand effectively. They have nuclear capabilities and other things, but I don't think they're interested in using them."

Biden made a surprise visit to Kyiv on Monday, declaring to that country's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "You remind us that freedom is priceless; it's worth fighting for for as long as it takes. And that's how long we're going to be with you, Mr. President, for as long as it takes."

To Ukraine's defense, the U.S. has committed tanks, armored vehicles, a thousand artillery systems, more than 2 million rounds of artillery ammunition and more than 50 advanced launch rocket systems, and anti-ship and air defense systems.

While Biden views the preservation of NATO and countering Russian aggression as necessary, most U.S. adults say it should not come at the expense of their economy. Oil, natural gas and food prices initially worsened after Russian President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Ukraine last February, causing U.S. inflation to hit a 40-year high in June. Inflation has since eased, and the U.S. and much of Europe have so far evaded recessions despite the expected damage. Russia has adapted to financial sanctions and export controls designed to erode its ability to fund the war.

Yet in a late January AP-NORC poll, a majority of U.S. adults -- 59% -- said limiting damage to the American economy is more important than penalizing Russia, even if that means sanctions are less effective. The balance of opinion had been the reverse in the early months after the invasion.

The U.S. economy remains a sensitive subject for Biden. People are generally unimpressed by the 3.4% unemployment rate. Nor has a seven-month decline in inflation -- which is still running high -- done much to assuage fears.

While economists have yet to declare a recession, respondents to the survey feel as though the economy is mired in a downturn.

Overall, the new poll shows 32% say the economy is in good shape. That's a slight improvement from 24% in January, which was consistent with views late last year. Still, 68% say the economy is in bad shape, and approval of Biden's job handling the economy has remained negative. Only 36% say they approve of the president on the economy, similar to last month and late last year.

"It's basically the inflation that we're all worried about," said Adriana Stan, 36, a teacher in Columbia, South Carolina.

Stan bought a house in December at a 5.5% mortgage rate, more than double the rate during the coro-

navirus pandemic. The Federal Reserve has increased its own benchmark interest rates in order to push down inflation, a move that has also driven up borrowing costs for homebuyers. Stan said her grocery bills are also much higher.

"We buy the same stuff," Stan said. "But at the end of the month I feel like I'm paying so much more."

Israel's rightward shift is straining its ties with US Jews

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

An array of U.S. Jewish leaders are sounding alarms about what they see as a threat to Israel's democracy posed by its new government, fearing it will erode the independence of its judiciary and legal protections for minority groups.

While some Jewish leaders dismiss such fears as overblown, a solid majority of mainstream Jewish American groups are voicing unprecedented criticism of the Israeli government, raising fears about a growing rift between Israel and the predominately liberal American Jewish population. Some progressive voices have gone even further, saying Israel can never truly be a democracy as long as it rules over millions of Palestinians who do not have the right to vote.

The controversies come even amid a flare-up of deadly violence involving Israelis and Palestinians. On Wednesday, Israeli troops conducted a raid in the West Bank, triggering fighting that killed at least 11 Palestinians and wounded scores.

Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu took office as prime minister in December after the country's fifth election in less than four years. His coalition allies include ultra-Orthodox parties and ultranationalist parties dominated by hardline West Bank settlers.

Critics are alarmed about coalition members' wish list of expanded settlements, narrowing the eligibility for would-be immigrants claiming Jewish heritage, and restricting non-Orthodox access to a sacred site.

They see a planned judicial overhaul as threatening the checks and balances on Israel's government — echoing concerns voiced by tens of thousands of Israeli street protesters in recent weeks.

"Here we are, about to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Jewish democratic state of Israel that we love," said Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, a liberal denomination representing the largest U.S. Jewish religious population. Yet that anniversary is approaching amid fears for "the weakening of Israel's democratic foundations," Jacobs said.

Rabbi Moshe Hauer, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, an umbrella group for Orthodox Jews in the U.S., said Netanyahu's government and its political opposition share responsibility for the tensions.

"Is the government's initial proposal extreme and in need of correction? Probably," Hauer said. But he said there's room for compromise.

The Knesset, dominated by Netanyahu and his allies, voted this week for bills that would give the governing coalition control over judicial appointments — currently made by an independent committee that includes lawyers, politicians and judges — and curtail the Supreme Court's ability to review the legality of major legislation. The Knesset also voted to empower lawmakers to overturn high court decisions by simple majorities.

The bills require additional votes before becoming law.

Representatives of the influential American Jewish Committee have urged Israeli government officials to consult with opposition leaders, judges and others, said Jason Isaacson, the AJC's chief policy and political affairs officer.

"If you're going to fundamentally alter a system that's been in place for a number of years and guarantees the independence of the judicial system ... do it carefully, do it slowly," Isaacson said.

That said, "the sky is not falling," Isaacson said, predicting Israel would retain a robust democracy.

Opponents say the proposals would push Israel toward a system like Hungary and Poland, where the executive wields control over all major levers of power. Under Israel's system, the prime minister already controls the legislature through his majority coalition.

There could be widely acceptable changes to judicial selection, Jacobs said, but current proposals will

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“cause deep harm to the structure of the rule of law.”

Attempts by Israel’s figurehead president to broker a compromise — efforts supported by many U.S. Jewish organizations — have failed to make headway.

A weakened court would particularly affect groups that have relied on judicial rulings for protections, including Palestinians, LGBTQ people and members of the more liberal Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism, whose ranks are small in Israel but comprise the majority of American Judaism.

The Jewish Federations of North America - which rarely comments on internal Israeli politics — opposed legislation that would give a simple Knesset majority power to override Supreme Court decisions. “The essence of democracy is both majority rule and protection of minority rights,” it said.

Amichai Chikli, the diaspora affairs minister in Netanyahu’s government, pushed back against the criticism.

“To say that we are changing the fundamental basis of the Israeli regime from a democracy to tyranny or dictatorship, this is complete nonsense,” he told The Associated Press.

Irving Lebovics, co-chair of Am Echad, supported changes in the judiciary, though he said specifics can be negotiated. Am Echad, a branch of Agudath Israel of America, communicates with the Israeli government on concerns of American Orthodox Jews, including haredi or strictly observant communities.

The Supreme Court, he said, has too much power in deciding both the law and its own membership, he maintained. “The Supreme Court opines on whatever they choose to opine about,” he said.

Some cabinet members are also seeking to narrow eligibility under the Law of Return, which currently allows anyone with one Jewish grandparent to immigrate to Israel.

There’s also talk of curbing the already limited space for egalitarian or mixed-gender prayer at Jerusalem’s Kotel, or Western Wall — the holiest place where Jews can pray, where most of the adjacent plaza is reserved for separate men’s and women’s sections as per Orthodox practice.

This has importance for visiting American Jews who want to pray at the wall in egalitarian worship.

Supporters of the progressive group Women of the Wall — who pray monthly in the women’s section while using practices and vestments reserved to men in Orthodox Judaism — fear it will face new curbs.

In a show of solidarity, Reform rabbis from the U.S. and other countries joined the Women of the Wall at their monthly gathering on Wednesday, parading with Torah scrolls.

Orthodox protesters, including teenagers, heckled and harassed the group.

“I am bound by my personal values and by my Jewish values to support not only the Women of the Wall but to stand here and proudly hold the Torah for all the women who are told they cannot worship freely and openly at the Kotel,” said Rabbi Hara Person, chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the rabbinic arm of the Reform movement in the U.S.

“Under the most oppressive government in Israel’s history, the rights and dignity of not only all Jewish women but of all inhabitants of Israel must be respected, supported, and protected,” she said.

Chikli told the AP that it’s unlikely that an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall would be expanded under the current government.

Jews in progressive circles say the major established organizations have failed to connect the debate over the legal overhaul with the fate of the Palestinians. They say that Israel cannot be a true democracy when its Palestinian citizens suffer from discrimination, and millions of Palestinians in the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza don’t have the right to vote in Israeli elections.

“The movement against Mr. Netanyahu is not like the pro-democracy opposition movements in Turkey, India or Brazil,” commentator Peter Beinart wrote recently in The New York Times. “It’s a movement to preserve the political system that existed before Mr. Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition took power, which was not, for Palestinians, a genuine liberal democracy in the first place.”

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, senior rabbi of Central Synagogue, a Reform congregation in New York City, said it’s unacceptable to have Israeli government leaders claiming to act in the name of Judaism while voicing “unabashedly racist” statements about Palestinians and expanding settlements with no effort at a peace agreement.

“We can’t feel comfortable sitting in the light of sovereignty next to a community living in darkness and expect to have peace,” Buchdahl said in a recent sermon.

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She still finds hope for Israel's democracy — not in its current government but in grassroots action. She recently visited the Middle East as an advisory board member of the Partnership for Peace Fund. The U.S. initiative supports programs that bring together Jews and Palestinians in such areas as medical training and addressing climate change's impact on the Jordan River watershed.

"That's what we need to be investing in," she said. "Working together in common cause."

US mass killings linked to extremism spiked over last decade

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of U.S. mass killings linked to extremism over the past decade was at least three times higher than the total from any other 10-year period since the 1970s, according to a report by the Anti-Defamation League.

The report, provided to The Associated Press ahead of its public release Thursday, also found that all extremist killings identified in 2022 were linked to right-wing extremism, with an especially high number linked to white supremacy. They include a racist mass shooting at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, that left 10 Black shoppers dead and a mass shooting that killed five people at an LGBT nightclub in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"It is not an exaggeration to say that we live in an age of extremist mass killings," the report from the group's Center on Extremism says.

Between two and seven domestic extremism-related mass killings occurred every decade from the 1970s to the 2000s, but in the 2010s that number skyrocketed to 21, the report found.

The trend has since continued with five domestic extremist mass killings in 2021 and 2022, as many as there were during the first decade of the new millennium.

The number of victims has risen as well. Between 2010 and 2020, 164 people died in ideological extremist-related mass killings, according to the report. That's much more than in any other decade except the 1990s, when the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City killed 168 people.

Extremist killings are those carried out by people with ties to extreme movements and ideologies.

Several factors combined to drive the numbers up between 2010 and 2020. There were shootings inspired by the rise of the Islamic State group as well as a handful targeting police officers after civilian shootings and others linked to the increasing promotion of violence by white supremacists, said Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the ADL's Center on Extremism.

The center tracks slayings linked to various forms of extremism in the United States and compiles them in an annual report. It tracked 25 extremism-related killings last year, a decrease from the 33 the year before.

Ninety-three percent of the killings in 2022 were committed with firearms. The report also noted that no police officers were killed by extremists last year, for the first time since 2011.

With the waning of the Islamic State group, the main threat in the near future will likely be white supremacist shooters, the report found. The increase in the number of mass killing attempts, meanwhile, is one of the most alarming trends in recent years, said Center on Extremism Vice President Oren Segal.

"We cannot stand idly by and accept this as the new norm," Segal said.

US ending extra help for groceries that started during COVID

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Nearly 30 million Americans who got extra government help with grocery bills during the pandemic will soon see that aid shrink — and there's a big push to make sure they're not surprised.

Officials in 32 states and other jurisdictions have been using texts, voicemails, snail mail, flyers and social media posts — all in multiple languages — to let recipients know that their extra food stamps end after February's payments.

"One of the scenarios you don't want to see is the first time they're aware of it is in the checkout line at the grocery store," said Ellen Vollinger, an official with the Food Research & Action Center, a nonprofit organization.

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For the average recipient, the change will mean about \$90 less per month, though for many, it could be much more, an analysis shows. Benefits will return to usual levels, which are based largely on a household's income, size and certain expenses, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

A public notice in Michigan urged the 1.3 million recipients in that state to "seek needed resources" to make up for the cuts.

"We want to make sure our clients are prepared for this change, as we realize inflation is affecting all of us," said Lewis Roubal with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Jacqueline Benitez, 21, who works as a preschool teacher in Bellflower, California, expects a significant cut, perhaps half, of the \$250 in food benefits she has received since 2020 through CalFresh, the state's SNAP program.

"It's such a lifesaver," said Benitez, who was previously homeless, but now lives in a subsidized one-bedroom apartment. "Food is such a huge expense. It's a little nerve-wracking to think about not having that."

Benitez said she's already thinking twice about paying \$5 for fresh fruit.

"What happens if it goes bad?" she said.

The emergency program was enacted by Congress at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and expanded a year later. Originally, the extra benefits were intended to continue as long as the COVID-19 public health emergency was in force. It's now set to expire in May.

But 18 states have already rolled back payments for more than 10 million people and Congress decided to end the program early, trading the extra benefits for a new permanent program that provides extra money to low-income families to replace school meals during the summer.

Experts credit the emergency funds with making sure most Americans had enough food to eat, despite the pandemic. About 10% of U.S. households had trouble obtaining sufficient food in 2020 and 2021, roughly unchanged from pre-COVID levels.

SNAP benefits can rise and fall with inflation and other factors. Maximum benefits went up by 12% in October to reflect an annual cost-of-living adjustment boosted by higher prices for foods and other goods. But payments went down for those who also receive Social Security because of the 8.7% cost-of-living increase in that program on Jan 1.

In most such cases, purchasing power should hold steady, said Stacy Dean, USDA deputy undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services.

"The emergency allotments were always intended to be temporary and they did tremendous good during a very difficult time in our country," Dean said. "The process of unwinding from them will certainly be difficult for families who are counting on those benefits."

The rollback is coming during a time when inflation, though improving, remains elevated and food prices are still high.

Shelley Boyd, 45, of Beaver, Pennsylvania, expects to make more trips to her local food pantry starting next month. She and her fiancé and teenage son started getting food stamps last year after both adults lost their jobs and unemployment benefits ran out. The family receives about \$630 per month. They expect to lose about \$95, if not more.

"That's where our food pantry comes in," Boyd said. "We visit them and do what you gotta do."

At the same time, food pantries nationwide remain under "immense strain," said Vince Hall, an official with Feeding America, a network of more than 200 food banks. Demand for help remains far above pre-pandemic levels, even as food banks face continued supply chain disruptions, higher food and transportation costs and lower food donations.

Andrew Cheyne, managing director of public policy for GRACE, a California-based anti-poverty organization, urged recipients to reach out now to county offices to update their eligibility and ensure they're getting the maximum benefit possible. Changes in costs for shelter, child care, elder care and other expenses can affect food stamp benefits.

Recipients can also check other benefits, such as the federal Women, Infants and Children program and

seek out refundable tax credits.

Cheyne and other advocates said the emergency benefits should have been extended indefinitely instead of cut prematurely.

"It's just an unimaginable hunger cliff that folks were going to go over at some point," he said.

___ AP reporter Marc Levy and AP video journalist Eugene Garcia contributed to this story. ___

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Workplace is the heart of thrilling series 'The Consultant'

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Think your boss is bad? The one in the new TV series "The Consultant" phones his workers in the middle of the night, nixes all remote work, fires people with long-term illnesses, invites himself to after-work staff drinks and clips his nails at his desk. He might also be a murderer.

That's what awaits the nervous employees of the fictional Los Angeles-based gaming company CompWare every day as a new consultant steers the firm through tough economic times. The new boss is deeply weird and secretive, and likely to throw a gagged person into your car and tell you to just drive.

"There is a sense of just being off balance the entire time. You never know what to expect," says executive producer and pilot director Matt Shakman. "You don't know what to expect character-wise, story-wise, or even tone and style. And that's what really drew me to this. This felt like a world and a show that I had never seen before or been a part of creating before. It feels wholly original."

Creator, showrunner and executive producer Tony Basgallop started the series by wanting to do a work-based thriller and someone recommended Bentley Little's 2015 novel "The Consultant."

Basgallop started adapting it just before the pandemic really hit and was left wondering if he was too late. Was anyone ever going back to work? Would anyone want to see a TV series about work terrors?

"I was thinking, 'This is crazy. I've actually taken on something that's never going to get made.' But then I just made the choice: You know what? When we go back — if we ever go back — it's going to be worse than it was before," Basgallop says.

"So I took very much the premise of the book — very much the feeling of this evil presence, lurking over everyone and no one knowing whether he's the devil or just the boss from hell."

Starring Christoph Waltz as that boss, the Amazon Prime Video series which lands Friday also features Nat Wolff as a game developer, Aimee Carrero as the developer's fiancée and Brittany O'Grady as an aspiring executive.

The cast seems to have had a fine time despite the weirdness. "For making a show about such a toxic work environment, it was actually probably the most lovely work environment I've ever done," said Wolff.

The series comes at a tumultuous time for the tech world, with thousands of job layoffs driven by the biggest names in tech like Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Yahoo and Zoom.

The workers at CompWare are feeling the strain, obligated to do as the boss demands no matter how inconvenient. The days of just jumping to another tech firm are gone, leaving a trapped and nervous employee base.

The series plays off the sense that work is not a safe place anymore. "If something goes wrong, you're going to have to fix it. You're going to have to compromise. You have to take the bullet, in a sense," Basgallop says.

It's up to the CompWare employees to determine what their boss is really up to and uncover his murky past. In many ways, he's a satire of a modern business leader who manipulates others and is quick to expose and manipulate weaknesses. One song that plays is Elvis' "You're the Devil in Disguise."

Part of the chill of the show has to do with Waltz, the Oscar-winner with memorable roles in films like "Inglourious Basterds" and "Django Unchained." He is equally charming and menacing.

"There is a sense of humor about him that is unique. He is equally good at comedy and drama. There is no one better at fixing you with a stare and making you feel just uncomfortable," says Shakman.

Waltz took a leap of faith on the show, having only been sent the script for the pilot and not knowing

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where the character would end up. But based on conversations with the creators, he dived in. "I considered it risky," he said. "As an actor who actually lives in the moment, the prospective result almost becomes secondary."

The irony is that Waltz — whose last TV project was on the phone-based Quibi platform — is now playing a man who is leading a tech company, yet, the actor himself is anything but tech-savvy.

"In a Zoom situation, I'm usually the one who doesn't find the connection, who doesn't find the unmute button, who has the little lens covered — all of that," he said, laughing. "I'm not a digitally educated person."

Dr. Seuss' 'How the Grinch stole Christmas!' gets a sequel

By MARK PRATT Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Dr. Seuss fans might find their hearts growing three sizes this coming holiday season with the release of a sequel to the 1957 classic children's book "How the Grinch Stole Christmas!"

The new book picks up one year after the original, and like the first, teaches a valuable lesson about the true spirit of the holiday, Dr. Seuss Enterprises and Random House Children's Books announced Thursday.

The sequel entitled "How the Grinch Lost Christmas!" is not based on a newly discovered manuscript by Seuss — whose real name was Theodor Geisel — but was written and illustrated by an author and artist with previous experience in the Dr. Seuss universe.

"One of the most asked questions we receive from Seuss fans of all ages is 'What do you think happened to the Grinch after he stole Christmas?'" said Alice Jonaitis, executive editor at Random House Children's Books, in a statement.

The original Grinch book has sold nearly 10 million copies in North America alone and like other Seuss books has been translated into multiple languages. It was made into a 1966 animated TV special narrated by Boris Karloff, a 2000 live-action movie starring Jim Carrey and a computer-animated film in 2018 with Benedict Cumberbatch voicing the Grinch.

The new book, scheduled for release Sept. 5, is written by Alastair Heim and illustrated by Aristides Ruiz. Heim has written Seuss-themed books like "If I Ran Your School" and "I Am the Cat in the Hat." Ruiz has illustrated the Cat in the Hat's Learning Library books for more than two decades.

"All throughout writing the story, I couldn't fully believe that I was actually getting to play in the amazing creative sandbox Dr. Seuss created all those decades ago," Heim said in an email.

Working on the Grinch sequel was an awesome responsibility, Ruiz said via email.

"When I heard of the opportunity to be a part of this project, I jumped at the chance only to find that it was difficult and daunting to approach adding to or expanding such an esteemed and treasured part of the American Christmas canon," he said.

In the original, the Grinch tries to ruin Christmas for the people of Who-ville by making off in the middle of the night with all the material trappings and sumptuous food of the holiday.

When the Whos gather to sing on Christmas morning, the Grinch realizes that the holiday is not about toys and feasting, but about joyously celebrating with family and neighbors and as Seuss wrote, the Grinch's "heart grew three sizes that day."

In the sequel, the Grinch wants to show how much he loves the holiday by winning Who-ville's Christmas Crown with the most spectacular Christmas tree ever seen, according to Dr. Seuss Enterprises.

But when his plan goes awry, the Grinch turns into his old, cold-hearted self, until his friend Cindy-Lou Who, reminds him that Christmas is not all about winning.

Geisel, who died in 1991 at age 87, authored dozens of books, including "Green Eggs and Ham" and "The Cat in the Hat."

Some of his work has been criticized in recent years because of racist imagery that in 2021 prompted Dr. Seuss Enterprises to cease publication of six books, including "And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street" and "If I Ran the Zoo."

But his work remains popular. Forbes magazine ranked him eighth on a 2022 list of the highest-paid dead celebrities, with \$32 million in earnings.

Pregnant Russians flock to Argentina seeking new passports

By DÉBORA REY Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Shortly after Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine, Alla Prigolovkina and her husband, Andrei Ushakov, decided they had to flee their Sochi, Russia, home.

Ushakov had been detained for holding up a sign that read "Peace," and Prigolovkina, a pregnant ski instructor, feared he would soon be drafted and potentially killed, leaving their baby fatherless.

The original plan was to stay in Europe, but anti-Russian sentiment discouraged them.

"We chose Argentina because it has everything we needed: Fantastic nature, a large country, beautiful mountains," Prigolovkina, 34, told The Associated Press inside the home her family is renting in Argentina's western Mendoza province. "We felt it would be ideal for us."

They were hardly alone.

Over the past year, Argentine immigration authorities have noticed flights packed with dozens of pregnant Russians. But whereas Prigolovkina said her family intends to build a life here at the foot of the Andes mountains, local officials believe many of the other recent Russian visitors are singularly focused on receiving one of Argentina's passports.

All children born in Argentina automatically receive citizenship and having an Argentine child speeds up the process for the parents to obtain residency permits and, after a couple of years, their own passports.

Crucially, the navy blue booklets allow entry to 171 countries without a visa, a backup plan that Russians believe could come in handy in the ever-uncertain future. Due to sanctions, Russians have also had trouble opening bank accounts in foreign countries, something an Argentine passport could solve.

According to official figures, some 22,200 Russians entered Argentina over the last year, including 10,777 women — many of whom were in the advanced stages of pregnancy. In January, 4,523 Russians entered Argentina, more than four times the 1,037 that arrived in the same month last year.

After an investigation, Argentine officials concluded that Russian women, generally from affluent backgrounds, were entering the country as tourists with the plan to give birth, obtain their documentation and leave. More than half of the Russians who entered the country in the last year, 13,134, already left, including 6,400 women.

"We detected that they don't come to do tourism, they come to have children," Florencia Carignano, the national director for migration, said during a meeting with international media.

Although Argentina generally has a relatively permissive immigration process, the recent arrest of two alleged Russian spies who had Argentine passports in Slovenia raised alarms in the South American country, where officials reinforced immigration controls.

"We canceled residencies of Russians who spent more time outside than in," Carignano said, expressing concern the Argentine "passport will cease to have the trust it enjoys in all countries."

Immigration authorities have also called on the justice system to investigate agencies that allegedly offer assistance to Russian women who want to give birth in Argentina.

It's unclear how many women have left Russia to give birth in the last year, but the issue is big enough that lawmakers in Moscow this month raised the question of whether those who choose to give birth abroad should be stripped of the so-called maternity fund that all Russian mothers receive — a financial benefit of almost \$8,000 for the first child and about \$10,500 for the second.

There is no discussion on whether to cut off access to the maternity fund for Russian mothers who give birth abroad, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said.

The phenomenon also is not entirely new. Prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, Russian women were part of a wave of "birth tourists" in the U.S. and many paid brokers tens of thousands of dollars to arrange their travel documents, accommodations and hospital stays, often in Florida.

Embarking on a long journey during an advanced pregnancy can be particularly perilous, and Russians in Argentina insist that their decision to leave their homes goes beyond a new passport. Despite the government's claims, some at least seem eager to make Argentina their new home.

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In spite of the language barrier and the unfamiliar, stifling summer heat, Prigolovkina and Ushakov have quickly adopted Argentine customs since their July move. Prigolovkina said they especially enjoy spending time in the park with their dogs. And while the family may not have been interested in soccer in Russia, they happily cheered when their newly adopted country won the World Cup late last year.

Still, she also concedes that obtaining a passport for their newborn son, Lev Andrés, was a motivating factor for the move: "We wanted our baby to have the chance to not just be Russian and have a single passport."

Some experts say a country in which migrants once made up as much as 30% of the population should be particularly sensitive to the plight of Russians trying to start a new life. The South American country was transformed in the late 19th and early 20th century by the influx of millions of European migrants, including many from Italy and Spain.

"Given our history of migration, a country like ours should empathize more with the humanitarian dimension" of these recent immigrants, Natalia Debandi, a social scientist and migrations expert who is a researcher at the publicly funded CONICET institute, said. "They are not terrorists, they are people."

A study by immigration agents based on interviews with 350 newly arrived Russians concluded that most are married and largely well-off professionals who have remote jobs in finance and digital design or live off savings.

Days before giving birth to a boy named Leo, 30-year-old Russian psychologist Ekaterina Gordienko lauded her experience in Argentina, saying "the health care system is very good, and people are very kind. My only problem is Spanish. If the doctor doesn't speak English, I use the (Google) translator."

Gordienko arrived in the nation's capital of Buenos Aires in December with her 38-year-old husband, Maxim Levoshin. "The first thing we want is for Leo to live in a safe country, without a war in his future," Levoshin said.

In Mendoza, Prigolovkina is excited for her family's new life in Argentina and optimistic they will be able to give back to the country that has welcomed them.

"We have left everything behind to live in peace. I hope that Argentines understand that Russians can be very useful in different areas of life, in business, the economy, in science," she said. "They can help make Argentina better."

US women win SheBelieves Cup with 2-1 victory over Brazil

FRISCO, Texas (AP) — Alex Morgan and Mallory Swanson scored and the United States defeated Brazil 2-1 on Wednesday night to win the SheBelieves Cup for the fourth straight year.

Japan, which defeated Canada 3-0 in the earlier match at Toyota Stadium, was runner-up in the four-team, round-robin tournament. All four SheBelieves Cup teams will play in Women's World Cup this summer in Australia and New Zealand.

Morgan's curling goal sailed out of reach of Brazilian goalkeeper Lorena. Morgan now has five goals all-time in SheBelieves matches.

It was Morgan's 14th goal since the birth of her daughter in 2020, giving her the national team record for most goals as a mom.

"That was huge," Swanson said. "I think we needed it, we needed the momentum to kind of shift in our favor. (It was) Alex doing Alex things. Simple, left foot, classic. She was getting beat up all first half and ultimately she punished them."

Swanson scored in the 63rd minute, her fourth goal of the tournament and seventh overall goal this year, matching her total of all of last year.

"I think honestly it's been a good run. I've really just tried to focus on being present and just taking it day by day, game by game," Swanson said.

Swanson, formerly Mallory Pugh, married Chicago Cubs shortstop Dansby Swanson in December.

Ludmila scored in stoppage time for Brazil to avoid the shutout. It was the first goal the United States has allowed this year. The United States is undefeated in five overall matches.

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"We need to be on the same page. But not only when it comes to reading the game, but also the emotional game, we need to be on the same page. If we can do that, I think we'll have a great World Cup. If we can't, it will be very difficult. So that's why I'm saying we have a long way to go," Brazil coach Pia Sundhage said.

Midfielder Rose Lavelle started for the United States after missing the first two matches of the tournament with a minor injury.

Japan snapped a four-game losing streak with its win over Canada. Japan had not scored in four straight matches, including two SheBelieves games, until Kiko Seike put her team in front with a goal in the 26th minute.

The Canadian players, in the midst of a labor dispute with their federation, again wore purple T-shirts reading "Enough is Enough" for the anthems and they wore purple wristbands during the match.

Players for the United States also wore purple wristbands in solidarity with Canada.

The SheBelieves Cup started in 2016. The United States has won six of the eight tournaments.

"I don't think we're going to talk a lot about the title. We're actually going to talk a lot about the play and the details, and we're going to use these games to prepare for the World Cup," U.S. coach Vlatko Andonovski said. "So that's what is good about this, it's not necessarily the title -- obviously we enjoy winning, we enjoy winning the title -- but it's the outcome of these game is what is more important for us."

Today in History: FEB 24, Russia begins invasion of Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 24, the 55th day of 2023. There are 310 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 24, 1942, the SS Struma, a charter ship attempting to carry nearly 800 Jewish refugees from Romania to British-mandated Palestine, was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine in the Black Sea; all but one of the refugees perished.

On this date:

In 1803, in its Marbury v. Madison decision, the Supreme Court established judicial review of the constitutionality of statutes.

In 1868, the U.S. House of Representatives impeached President Andrew Johnson by a vote of 126-47 following his attempted dismissal of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton; Johnson was later acquitted by the Senate.

In 1981, a jury in White Plains, New York, found Jean Harris guilty of second-degree murder in the fatal shooting of "Scarsdale Diet" author Dr. Herman Tarnower. (Sentenced to 15 years to life in prison, Harris was granted clemency by New York Gov. Mario Cuomo in December 1992.)

In 1986, the Supreme Court struck down, 6-3, an Indianapolis ordinance that would have allowed women injured by someone who had seen or read pornographic material to sue the maker or seller of that material.

In 1988, in a ruling that expanded legal protections for parody and satire, the Supreme Court unanimously overturned a \$150,000 award that the Rev. Jerry Falwell had won against Hustler magazine and its publisher, Larry Flynt.

In 1989, a state funeral was held in Japan for Emperor Hirohito, who had died the month before at age 87.

In 1993, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (muhl-ROO'-nee) resigned after more than eight years in office.

In 2002, the Salt Lake City Olympics came to a close, the same day Canada won its first hockey gold in 50 years (the U.S. won silver) and three cross-country skiers were thrown out of the games for using a performance-enhancing drug.

In 2008, Cuba's parliament named Raul Castro president, ending nearly 50 years of rule by his brother Fidel.

In 2011, Discovery, the world's most traveled spaceship, thundered into orbit for the final time, heading

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toward the International Space Station on a journey marking the beginning of the end of the shuttle era.

In 2015, the Justice Department announced that George Zimmerman, the former neighborhood watch volunteer who fatally shot Trayvon Martin in a 2012 confrontation, would not face federal charges.

In 2020, former Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was convicted in New York on charges of rape and sexual assault involving two women. (Weinstein was sentenced to 23 years in state prison.)

Ten years ago: Pope Benedict XVI bestowed the final Sunday blessing of his pontificate on a cheering crowd in St. Peter's Square. At the Academy Awards, "Argo" won best picture while Ang Lee was named best director for "Life of Pi"; Daniel Day-Lewis won best actor for "Lincoln" while Jennifer Lawrence received the best actress award for "Silver Linings Playbook." Jimmie Johnson won his second Daytona 500, beating his Hendrick Motorsports teammate Dale Earnhardt Jr., who made a late move to finish second. Danica Patrick, the first woman to win the pole, finished eighth.

Five years ago: The U.N. Security Council unanimously demanded a 30-day cease-fire across Syria to deliver humanitarian aid and evacuate the wounded, as the death toll reached 500 from a Syrian bombing campaign in the rebel-held suburbs of Damascus. (The cease-fire failed to take hold.) The body of the Rev. Billy Graham arrived at the library bearing his name in Charlotte, North Carolina, where Graham would lie in repose for two days. At the Winter Olympics in South Korea, American men won the gold medal in curling in a decisive upset of Sweden; it was only the second curling medal in U.S. history.

One year ago: Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launching airstrikes on cities and military bases and sending troops and tanks from multiple directions. Ukraine's government pleaded for help as civilians piled into trains and cars to flee the violence. World leaders condemned the attack and many promised sanctions. Three former Minneapolis police officers were convicted of violating George Floyd's civil rights by depriving Floyd of his right to medical care when Officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for 9 1/2 minutes as the 46-year-old Black man was handcuffed and facedown on the street.

Today's birthdays: Actor-singer Dominic Chianese is 92. Opera singer-director Renata Scotto is 89. Singer Joanie Sommers is 82. Actor Jenny O'Hara is 81. Former Sen. Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., is 81. Actor Barry Bostwick is 78. Actor Edward James Olmos is 76. Singer-writer-producer Rupert Holmes is 76. Rock singer-musician George Thorogood is 73. Actor Debra Jo Rupp is 72. Actor Helen Shaver is 72. News anchor Paula Zahn is 67. Baseball Hall of Famer Eddie Murray is 67. Country singer Sammy Kershaw is 65. Actor Mark Moses is 65. Actor Beth Broderick is 64. Actor Emilio Rivera is 62. Singer Michelle Shocked is 61. Movie director Todd Field is 59. Actor Billy Zane is 57. Actor Bonnie Somerville is 49. Jazz musician Jimmy Greene is 48. Former boxer Floyd Mayweather Jr. is 46. Rock musician Matt McGinley (Gym Class Heroes) is 40. Actor Wilson Bethel is 39. Actor Alexander Koch is 35. Actor Daniel Kaluuya (Film: "Get Out") is 34. Actor O'Shea Jackson Jr. is 32.