

# Groton Daily Independent

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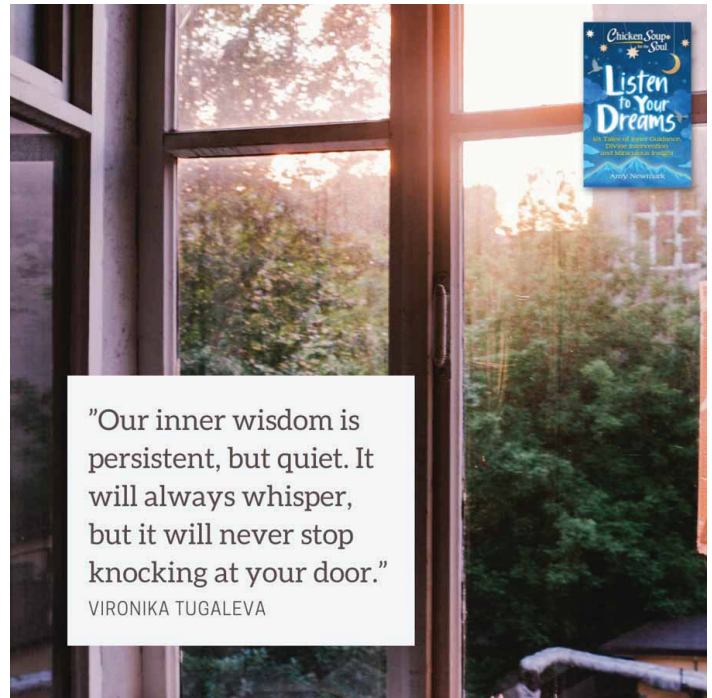
## Groton Community Calendar

### Thursday, March 9

Senior Menu: Meatloaf, baked potato with sour cream, creamed peas, fruit, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.  
School Lunch: Chicken sandwich, chips.  
Girls Basketball State Tournament in Watertown  
**Cancelled:** CDE at Wilmot

### Friday, March 10

Senior Menu: Potato soup, chicken salad sandwich, tomato spoon salad, cinnamon apple sauce.  
School Breakfast: Biscuits and Jelly.  
School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.  
Girls Basketball State Tournament in Watertown



"Our inner wisdom is persistent, but quiet. It will always whisper, but it will never stop knocking at your door."

VIRONIKA TUGALEVA

### Saturday, March 11

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.

Girls Basketball State Tournament in Watertown

### Sunday, March 12

DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME BEGINS

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

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

Open Gym: Grades JK-8; 2:00 PM to 3:30 PM, Grades 6-12; 3:30 PM to 5:00 PM

St. John's Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.; Zion Lutheran worship, 11 a.m.

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

United Methodist: Confirmation Sunday. Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school and sing in church at 10:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.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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## Groton's Ag Business Management team takes first at Redfield CDE

The Redfield Career Development Event was held March 3. The Ag Business Management team placed first. Here are the results from the event with over 900 FFA members competing in the different Career Development Events.

### **Ag Business Management – 1st Place**

Kaleb Antonsen – 5th

Cole Bisbee – 8th

Caleb Hanten – 10th

Ethan Gengerke – 21st

### **Milk Quality & Evaluation – 3rd Place**

Layne Hanson – 4th

Logan Ringgenberg – 10th

Hannah Monson – 12th

Colby Dunker – 24th

### **Livestock Evaluation – 5th Place Team**

Blake Pauli – 5th

Porter Johnson – 18th

Lexi Osterman – 35th

Jayla Jones – 44th

Turner Thompson – 57th

Emma Schinkel – 71st

### **Vet Science – 9th Place Team**

Ashlyn Sperry – 23rd

Faith Flihs – 24th

Cadence Feist – 42nd

Ava Wienk – 48th

### **Agronomy – 11th Place Team**

Payton Mitchell – 18th

Kellen Antonsen – 38th

Ashley Johnson – 44th

Logan Warrington – 59th

### **Natural Resources**

Karter Moody – 28th

Austin Aberle – 87th

### **Remaining Schedule:**

**Cancelled:** March 9 - Wilmot

March 14 - Northwestern

March 28 - Miller

March 31 - Little I

April 6 - Groton

April 16-18 - State Convention

## The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

### World in Brief

despite having never been charged with a crime.

- A 6-year-old boy accused of shooting a teacher at his Virginia elementary school will not be charged, said the local prosecutor. The teacher, Abigail Zwerner, sustained a gunshot wound to the chest in January.
- Israeli actor and singer Chaim Topol, best known for his performance as Tevye the Milkman in Fiddler on the Roof, has died at 87, Israel's president has announced.
- JP Morgan Chase is suing the former head of private banking Jes Staley over his alleged failure to disclose potentially damaging ties to sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, claiming Staley had also been accused of sexual assault.
- Former Prime Minister of Malaysia Muhyiddin Yassin will be charged with corruption-related offenses on Friday over the alleged diversion of funds to his party, allegations Muhyiddin denies.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Institute for the Study of War said that Russian troops now occupy at least half of the city of Bakhmut but may be unable to "rapidly exploit a breakthrough" beyond the city.

- The government of Georgia is abandoning its controversial "Foreign Agent" law following days of protests over fears the legislation was a slide toward authoritarianism.

- A federal judge in Florida has handed a major victory to the GOP after he struck down Joe Biden's controversial "catch-and-release" immigration policy, claiming it has "turned the Southwest border into a meaningless line in the sand."

- The U.S. has repatriated Saudi national Ghassan Al Sharbi to his home country following his release from Guantanamo Bay, where he has been held for 21 years

## Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Yesterday, Governor Noem signed the following 21 bills into law:

SB 5 extends the termination date of the Juvenile Justice Oversight Council and modifies its membership requirements;

SB 6 authorizes community response teams to recommend alternative community-based resources for children alleged to be delinquent and children alleged to be in need of supervision prior to adjudication;

SB 50 revises the crime of witness tampering;

SB 72 revises provisions related to the discharge of a defendant restored to competency;

SB 78 creates the South Dakota Board of Physical Therapy and makes an appropriation therefor;

SB 81 repeals outdated sections regarding enhanced concealed carry permit requirements;

SB 86 requires candidates for party precinct committeeman or committeewoman to include an email address and phone number in the written statement submitted to the county auditor;

SB 132 revises the appointment of legislators to the Agricultural Land Assessment Implementation and Oversight Advisory Task Force;

SB 182 establishes a uniform method for calculating high school credit received from completing post-secondary courses;

SB 198 allows medical cannabis establishments to maintain certain cardholder data;

SB 204 expands critical incident stress management to health care facility personnel providing emergency services;

HB 1006 increases the funding for construction of an addition to the Kinsman Building in Pierre and makes an appropriation therefor;

HB 1007 adds emergency medical services personnel to Class B public safety membership of the South Dakota Retirement System;

HB 1009 updates and clarifies certain provisions relating to the South Dakota Retirement System;

HB 1032 makes an appropriation for the demolition and reconstruction of the agricultural-use structures at the South Dakota State University;

HB 1056 modifies the limit of consecutive terms for members of the Board of Technical Education;

HB 1114 revises the qualifications to be a member of a county recount board;

HB 1162 authorizes employers to acquire and make available opioid antagonists;

HB 1189 requires certain entities owning agricultural land to report foreign beneficial ownership interests;

HB 1191 clarifies the duties of truancy officers; and,

HB 1215 revises certain provisions regarding the operation of a golf cart on a state or county highway.

Governor Noem has signed 118 bills into law and vetoed 1 this legislative session.

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*Cub Cadet.*

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### **3X** 30" HD

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

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

MSRP  
**\$1,999\***



### **3X** 26" TRAC

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

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

MSRP  
**\$2,099\***



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

- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
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- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- 16"x6.5" X-Trac tires
- High-arc steel chute
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty

MSRP  
**\$1,899\***

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## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

# House and Senate deadlocked on tax relief deal with time running out

**Senator predicts 'high potential that there is no tax cut'**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 8, 2023 7:27 PM**

PIERRE — Lawmakers have just one regular day of business left in the 2023 legislative session to pass a tax cut for South Dakotans – and they still haven't reached a deal.

Five options to reduce the state sales tax remain in the mix among leaders in the Senate and House of Representatives, ranging from a \$70 million cut to \$140 million. Also undetermined is whether the tax cut will be permanent or temporary.

This comes after weeks of whittling down tax relief proposals, including the rejections of a Gov. Kristi Noem-backed grocery tax repeal and a property tax rebate program. It was Noem's promise to repeal the state sales tax on groceries that kick-started tax cut debates in September.

After reconvening at 5 p.m. Wednesday following hours of public and private talks, legislators agreed to postpone further work until 8 a.m. Thursday, the last regular day of the legislative session until lawmakers return March 27 to consider vetoed bills.

A budget cannot be adopted until legislators resolve their tax cut negotiations. And Noem has threatened – without using the word "veto" – to withhold her support for the budget if lawmakers don't pass her proposal to eliminate the sales tax on groceries.

House leaders so far have held out for a permanent, across-the-board state sales tax reduction from 4.5% to 4.2%, worth about \$104 million.

But senators proposed four other options, three of them within hours of each other, in hopes of convincing the House to agree to some sort of temporary tax cut.

The latest option suggested Wednesday night by the Senate Republican Caucus was a reduction to 4.2% paired with a formula. The formula would trigger a return to 4.5% if state revenues decline by \$15 million compared to the prior year. The last time that happened was in 2010, due to the Great Recession.

Rep. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, described the proposals as an attempt to "see what sticks" with the House.

Karr is a member of the conference committee that's trying to work out a deal, and he's the architect of House Bill 1137, which is the main tax cut legislation still in play. He said this session is the right time to give South Dakotans a tax break. Implementing a sunset or trigger wouldn't be responsible, he said, because it's an automatic decision rather than a debated and analyzed decision from lawmakers to raise taxes again.

He said a tax cut should be permanent.

"We just need to implement good tax policy, and I think that is," Karr said. "And then we come back every year, we analyze and we appropriate accordingly."

Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, who isn't on the conference committee, criticized the trigger-formula proposal.

"I think this recession trigger is probably the worst tax policy idea that I've heard all session long," Hansen said. "I think when a recession kicks in is the last time to be taking more money out of the pockets of people and giving it to the government. I hope that it gets defeated soundly."

Senate Majority Whip Ryan Maher, R-Isabel, who introduced the trigger-formula amendment, predicted

there won't be a tax cut at all because the two chambers won't agree on what is needed for South Dakota. He also expressed concern about the eventual loss of federal American Rescue Plan Act funding that has contributed to a state budget surplus.

"We know we're going to have a lot of the ARPA money leave the economy. We know we're bringing prisons online. We know Medicaid expansion's coming on and that's going to cost us money, and the potential for another sales tax repeal on food is out there," Maher said, referencing an ongoing petition drive to put a food tax repeal on the ballot in 2024. "You've got five different things that are going to happen that all affect our revenue in big ways."

He said the state will need \$200 million in additional ongoing revenue by 2026 to sustain state projects and obligations.

"There's a high potential that there is no tax cut," Maher said.

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

## Daktronics reports improving conditions since December stock plunge

**BY: SETH TUPPER - MARCH 8, 2023 1:43 PM**

A homegrown, publicly traded scoreboard manufacturing company in South Dakota reported improving business conditions Wednesday, three months after public disclosures from the company caused its stock price to plummet.

Brookings-based Daktronics released a quarterly earnings report showing sales of \$185 million, which was described as a company record for the third quarter.

Daktronics Chairman, President and CEO Reece Kurtenbach spoke to investors Wednesday on a conference call.

"Overall, we believe we have adjusted our strategies to the market conditions, which enabled Daktronics' emergence from this period healthy, profitable and continuing to grow," Kurtenbach said.

In December, the company issued a delayed earnings report that revealed financial problems, difficulties obtaining manufacturing supplies during the pandemic, a large backlog of orders, and a \$13 million loss in the second quarter.

As a result of that news, the company's stock price fell from \$3.32 per share on Dec. 6 to \$1.75 on Dec. 8. One of the company's major shareholders, Alta Fox Capital Management, called for the replacement of Daktronics' top executives.

Since then, Daktronics' stock price has climbed above \$4, while Kurtenbach and Chief Financial Officer Sheila Anderson have retained their positions.

Wednesday's earnings report showed nearly \$4 million in net income during the third quarter. The report also detailed some continuing problems, including a "historically high" backlog of \$430 million worth of orders.

Kurtenbach said supply chain problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are easing, and the company has adjusted its financing and pricing while selectively chasing more profitable business opportunities.

He also issued several thank-yous: to employees for "adjusting to the uncertain and volatile supply chain conditions," to suppliers and vendors for helping the company "through these challenging times," and to investors for "patience and support."

"We do believe that the levels of uncertainty and volatility will not be as great in the coming months and will continue to stabilize in the coming calendar year," Kurtenbach said.

*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.*

## Former Minnesota governors: Sanford should not control U of M hospital

BY: MICHELLE GRIFFITH - MARCH 8, 2023 11:03 AM

Two former Minnesota governors on Tuesday expressed concerns to lawmakers about a potential merger between two already large health care systems — Fairview Health Services and Sanford Health.

Former Govs. Tim Pawlenty, the last Minnesota Republican to win statewide office, and his DFL successor Mark Dayton, came together to urge lawmakers to prioritize Minnesotans' interests in the face of Sioux Falls-based Sanford Health proposing to absorb Fairview to create one health care system run by the South Dakota company.

This was a rare appearance from Dayton, who has been dealing with health issues for years. He attended Tuesday's hearing alongside his wife and walked slowly with the help of a cane. Both Pawlenty and Dayton turned spectators' heads when they walked in, and they posed for a photo with their arms around each other in front of press photographers.

"This is the first time he and I have spoken together publicly, which underscores the great importance we attach to these critical matters," Dayton told members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee Tuesday.

At the heart of the former governors' concerns is the University of Minnesota Medical Center. In 1997, Fairview purchased the medical center, which is the university's primary teaching hospital. As a land-grant institution dedicated to bettering Minnesota under the state's constitution, the U cannot have an out-of-state company running the teaching hospital, Dayton and Pawlenty said.

Dayton, who served two terms, condemned the proposed merger and told senators that it should be prohibited.

"The prospect of governance of the University of Minnesota's academic health center could shift to a South Dakota-based enterprise is alarming and should never be allowed to happen," Dayton said. "To allow any other arrangement would be a terrible betrayal of the trust bestowed by the people of Minnesota."

Pawlenty, wearing a University of Minnesota quarter-zip sweatshirt, emphasized how important the university is to Minnesota's success.

"When you think about what M Health is — that big sign out front, that big maroon 'M' on the front door of all these buildings all across Minnesota — it's there for a reason," Pawlenty said. "It doesn't stand for, you know, out-of-state health ... It stands for Minnesota Health."

After pushback from Minnesota lawmakers a few months ago, Sanford and Fairview delayed the merger's deadline from March 31 to May 31, but Attorney General Keith Ellison on Tuesday said he wishes the date would be delayed further.

Ellison said this would give his office more time to thoroughly investigate the merger for any breaches of charity laws — both Fairview and Sanford are nonprofits — and antitrust laws. Ellison on Tuesday didn't disclose details about his ongoing investigation, but he did say his office is still seeking "significant information" that it believes it should have already received from Sanford and Fairview.

"Our office is working tirelessly to ensure that Minnesota's interests will be served," Ellison said.

Fairview CEO James Hereford and Sanford CEO Bill Gassen told lawmakers on Tuesday that the merger will improve health care for Minnesotans.

"This merger is a forward-looking step to strengthen our organizations and protect our shared mission as we navigate a rapidly evolving health care," Hereford said.

In addition to concerns over the University of Minnesota Medical Center, critics are also alarmed about the impact a potential merger could have on abortion and gender-affirming care in Minnesota. Gassen told lawmakers the merger wouldn't affect those types of care.

University Medical School Dean Dr. Jakub Tolar told lawmakers that the university is opposed to the merger for multiple reasons, including the risk the South Dakota company could change its position on providing abortion and gender-affirming care.



In South Dakota, abortion and gender-affirming care for youth is banned.

Myron Frans, the university's senior vice president of finance and operations, said the U is trying to gain ownership of the medical center. The university has asked the Legislature for \$950 million to buy and operate the medical center on its own without the financial ownership of an outside corporation.

The Star Tribune on Tuesday reported Fairview is willing to relinquish control of the U's medical center to prevent ownership by Sanford.

— *This story was originally published by Minnesota Reformer, which, like South Dakota Searchlight, is part of States Newsroom, a network of news bureaus supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity. Minnesota Reformer maintains editorial independence. Contact Editor Patrick Coolican for questions: info@minnesotareformer.com. Follow Minnesota Reformer on Facebook and Twitter.*

*Michelle Griffith covers Minnesota politics and policy for the Minnesota Reformer, with a focus on marginalized communities. Most recently she was a reporter with The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead in North Dakota where she covered state and local government and Indigenous issues. For two years she was also a corps member with Report for America, a national nonprofit that places journalists in local newsrooms and news deserts. She lives in St. Paul and likes to knit and watch documentaries in her free time.*

## Progressive agriculture groups rally for land access, climate-smart policies in farm bill

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - MARCH 8, 2023 4:13 PM

WASHINGTON — Farmers and leaders from more than 20 progressive agricultural groups gathered this week to march on the U.S. Capitol, and promote climate solutions and underserved producers as priority issues for lawmakers in the upcoming farm bill.

"As farmers, we are close to the land. We love the land. We understand the sanctity and the sacredness of water. We understand the essence of life," said Duane "Chili" Yazzie, a regenerative farmer in New Mexico and member of Shiprock Chapter of the Navajo Nation, to dozens of demonstrators at Freedom Plaza Tuesday.

"We demand that we — as small farmers, as the BIPOC farmers, as the farmers that need a helping hand — must have the provisions in the farm bill that make sense to us."

During the three-day "Rally for Resilience," headed by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, attendees met with lawmakers and hosted a demonstration at Freedom Plaza. Organizers called for sustainable practices, decreased industry consolidation, and improved land access for people of color and family farmers.

The farm bill is a multiyear omnibus spending law which authorizes an array of agricultural and food programs, including federal crop insurance, food stamp benefits, international food aid and farm resource conservation.

The roughly \$500 billion bill is renewed close to every five years, and includes mandatory spending that must be in line with previous farm bills. The legislation is up for renewal in 2023.

### Sustainable agriculture and climate change

Speakers at the Rally for Resilience lobbied for legislators to embrace regenerative agriculture in the upcoming farm bill, and help farmers become part of the climate solution amid worsening growing conditions.

Regenerative agriculture is a set of farming and grazing practices that work to restore soil ecosystem health, and can sequester carbon dioxide while increasing resilience to climate change.

"It makes me angry, and it makes me frustrated to see people in positions of power deny the reality and the severity of climate change," said Marielena Vega, a farm worker organizer with the Idaho Organization of Resource Councils, at the Tuesday demonstration.

Vega said that extreme heat is making summers increasingly difficult for farmworkers in Idaho, who face

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rising threats of heat stroke and dehydration along with the ever-present concern of pesticide exposure. Norysell Massanet, a farmer from Puerto Rico, spoke Tuesday about the devastation of the island's agricultural community after two major hurricanes in 2017. She said that Puerto Rico's basic infrastructure is still recovering, and these hurricane events will only become more frequent as the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean warm.

"We need climate solutions that consider the well being of all lands, and all people," Massanet said.

She urged Congress to provide a farm bill that "follows the science" and places renewable agriculture and rural development at its forefront.

David Senter, a founder of the American Agriculture Movement, which mobilized a 1979 Tractorcade in Washington for industry reform, lobbied for regenerative and small-scale family farmers as part of the climate solution.

"Family producers care about the soil and water," Senter said at the Tuesday rally. "Corporations care about the bottom line."

Yadi Wang, a first-generation regenerative farmer in Tucson, Arizona, said that he is part of a growing number of farmers who believe land stewardship is more important than land ownership.

Wang said regenerative practices have allowed his employer, Oatman Flats Ranch, to maintain a resilient and profitable grain-and-livestock operation in one of the driest climates in the country.

"Congress needs to invest more money on land management, on soil and water conservation so that we can truly have viable land and farmers can continue to grow food for the people," Wang said at the Tuesday rally. "Regenerative agriculture is the way forward."

## Antitrust and consolidation

Democratic U.S. Rep. Ro Khanna of California joined rally organizers for a Wednesday media event, and said farmers' ability to be a part of the climate solution has been muted by corporate consolidation of farmland and "monopolistic concentration of power." He touted his just-introduced Farm System Reform Act as a potential tool to curtail some of these business models.

"A lot of the people who are running a lot of these farms don't live in the communities where those farms are," Khanna said. They don't care about the pollution. They don't care if they're destroying the land, but maximizing profits."

Johanna Chao Kreilick, president of the Union of Concerned Scientists, said at the Wednesday press event that farmers live and work on the front lines of the climate emergency.

She added that corporate farms, and the resource-intensive inputs they depend on, are a key driver of this increased volatility in farming.

"We need to be super clear about the role that corporate agriculture, Big Ag, has played in our agricultural system and how it's contributing to the climate crisis," Chao Kreilick said.

Angela Dawson, a fourth-generation reclamation Black farmer from Sandstone, Minnesota, said at the Tuesday rally that people are aware that over the last 50 years, the farm bill has set the stage for a highly consolidated food system. Dawson defines reclamation farming as reclaiming and working the farm her family lost two generations ago.

She added that five major egg corporations control the grocery sector, four large companies control the beef industry, and two companies control the bulk of the commodity seed market.

"We're calling on Congress to create a farm bill that puts community over corporations, people over profits, and reduces and repairs the harm that has been done to the environment," Dawson said.

Lindsay Klaunig, who runs a regenerative produce-and-livestock farm near Athens, Ohio, spoke at the Wednesday event and added that more work must be done to reduce consolidation in seed sales, especially as overseas supply chains experience disruption and regenerative regional agriculture grows.

"We need publicly supported, farmer-driven breeding and research to ensure that all growers at any scale, in any setting, have access to locally adapted seeds without the restrictions of privately-owned companies," Klaunig said.

## Land access, support for underserved producers

Other speakers pointed to the opportunity for the farm bill to rectify historical injustices, including land access for farmers who are people of color, and increased health protections for farmworkers.

Dorothy Barker, a Black dairy farmer from Oxford, North Carolina, spoke at the Wednesday press event to advocate for land access and increased technical assistance for farmers of color.

Barker said she does not believe there has been a farm bill “written with Black people in mind,” amid a “bleak climate” for these producers. She said Black farmers are often manipulated by predatory buyers and legal advisers into lowering prices for their goods and problematic land sales.

“We as Black women, we speak up for our rights,” Parker said. “But over years and years — in some states for over 400 years — we have been traumatized and marginalized. Always the lack of markets.”

Julieta Saucedo, a small-scale farmer from El Paso, Texas, spoke at the Tuesday rally about a lack of land access for marginalized farmers. She said that oftentimes, these underserved producers only have land that has been ruined by decades of mismanagement and extractive farming.

“When I see soil erosion by wind and water, when I see depleted soil, depleted lands from monocropping, soil so compacted that it will break your shovel, I also see it as the consequences of old and modern slavery,” Saucedo said.

She advocated for increased access to farmland for small producers and people of color, along with holding corporations accountable for the damage done to the land.

Klaunig said that a theme she heard repeatedly during the event resonated: farmer-led solutions should come first.

“Too often farmers are handed directives from — maybe well intentioned — institutions, but they’re out of touch,” she said. “Farmers know how to find cheap, effective and adaptable solutions to our climate crisis, let them and help them.”

*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.*

## Lawmakers hear theories on COVID-19 origins in U.S. House hearing

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 8, 2023 2:52 PM

WASHINGTON — Democrats and Republicans mostly agreed Wednesday that scientists and the intelligence community should fully investigate the origins of COVID-19 without political interference over whether the virus emerged from nature or through a lab leak.

Members from both political parties said throughout the U.S. House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic hearing that determining the origins could help prepare the United States and other countries to fare better during the next pandemic, or even prevent it.

The experts who testified before the panel, however, noted that there may never be enough evidence for the scientific community to coalesce around an origin.

“There’s no consensus yet about the virus’s origins,” said Paul Auwaerter, clinical director of the Division of Infectious Diseases and a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. He is also a former president of the Infectious Diseases Society of America

“The Department of Energy with low confidence determined the virus escaped from a laboratory in China based on classified information unavailable to the public. The FBI reached its conclusion with moderate confidence,” Auwaerter said. “On the other hand, many virologists believe compelling evidence points to an animal origin. They conclude that coronavirus most likely jumped from a caged, wild animal into people at a seafood market.”

“We may never know the origin conclusively — making claims that cannot be supported sufficiently by

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available data only fuels confusion and mistrust," Auwaerter added.

## Competing views

Robert Redfield, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during the Trump administration, testified that there are two competing views within the scientific community about the origins of COVID-19.

The first is that the virus moved from an animal population to humans, sometimes referred to as a spill-over event from nature, and then began to spread from there.

"This is a situation in which the virus naturally mutates and becomes more transmissible from one species to another," Redfield said. "In this case, from bats to humans via an intermediate species. This is what happened in previous outbreaks of SARS and MERS and earlier coronavirus that emerged from bats and spread through an intermediate animal."

The second hypothesis about the origins of the virus, he said, is that it evolved in a research laboratory involved in gain-of-function research.

"This is a type of research in which scientists seek to increase the transmissibility or pathogenicity of an organism in order to better understand that organism and inform preparedness efforts and the development of countermeasures such as therapeutics and vaccines," Redfield said. "Under this theory, COVID infected the general population after it was accidentally leaked from a lab in China."

Redfield testified that he believes COVID-19 "more likely was a result of an accidental lab leak than a result of a natural spillover event."

Redfield later testified doesn't personally support gain-of-function research, though he wanted to stress to the committee "the men and women that support it are people of good faith, because they truly believe it's going to lead to a potential benefit."

## New evidence

Jamie Metzl, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, a think tank that tends to focus on foreign policy, told the panel that everyone should be open to both hypotheses as new evidence emerges about the origins of COVID-19.

Metzl, who is not a scientist or a medical researcher but a nonresident senior fellow for technology and national security, testified he believes current information makes a lab leak more likely.

"There is no smoking gun proving a laboratory origin hypothesis, but the growing body of circumstantial evidence suggests a gun that is at very least warm to the touch," Metzl said.

He noted following a question from panel chairman Brad Wenstrup, an Ohio Republican, that the Chinese government has searched without success for COVID-19 in some of its animal population.

"We know that the Chinese government has actually been very aggressive in trying to find that kind of intermediary host animal. They've sequenced about 100,000 animals. They haven't found anything," Metzl said. "Everybody has a reason to want to find it, particularly the Chinese government. And I think it's very telling that after three years, we still haven't found it."

Auwaerter, however, noted in response to the same question that researchers still haven't found that type of link with respect to Ebola.

"Regarding finding intermediaries there are examples, for example, with Ebola virus, where we have not yet found a clear intermediary despite looking very hard. And no one thinks that came about from a lab accident, you know, decades ago," Auwaerter said.

"So I think it's still an open question. I think everything does need to be explored," Auwaerter added. "And there's always opposing points of view here that need to be weighed and not all hypotheses are weighed equally."

## Objections to GOP witness

While the vast majority of members of the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic agreed the search for the origins of COVID-19 should be nonpartisan and insulated from political interference, there were still partisan moments during the hearing.

Democrats took issue with Republicans inviting Nicholas Wade, a former science and health editor at

The New York Times, former editor of Science and former editor of Nature, to testify.

Maryland Democratic Rep. Kweisi Mfume, as well as the panel's ranking member, Raul Ruiz of California, and Rep. Jill Tokuda of Hawaii, all criticized statements Wade made in his book, "A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History."

Mfume noted that several white supremacists have praised the book and that it was "promoted on a neo-Nazi forum that is linked to almost 100 racially motivated attempted murders over the last five years."

"I have read your book and I'm appalled by it," Mfume said. "I would hope that giving you this platform does not paint or taint the issue that we're trying to get to and deal with here."

Ruiz noted that Wade's book "suggests that different racial and ethnic groups have evolved to possess genetic variations and traits and behaviors tied to whether they prosper or not."

"The notion that people of different racial or ethnic groups are more successful or intellectually superior to another because of predisposed genetic makeup is grossly inconsistent with the consensus of scientific and medical scholarship," Ruiz said.

A few GOP lawmakers on the panel repeatedly criticized the work of Dr. Anthony Fauci, former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, including his support of the hypothesis that COVID-19 emerged from a spillover event.

And Maryland Democratic Rep. Jamie Raskin rebuked former President Donald Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, displaying one of the tweets in which Trump praised Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Raskin said that on at least 42 occasions Trump "openly praised and defended the performance" of the Chinese president and Raskin questioned why Trump never launched an investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

"Whatever the origins of COVID-19, whether it's bats or bureaucrats, no finding will ever exonerate or rehabilitate Donald Trump for his lethal recklessness in mismanaging the crisis in America," Raskin said.

"Indeed, if COVID-19 was actually the product of a lab leak or the worst bioweapon of mass destruction ever invented — as some have argued and obviously we don't have the scientific evidence to say any of this yet — it would not only not remove Donald Trump's culpability, it would only deepen his culpability in the most profound way."

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

## **This International Women's Day, U.S. anti-abortion laws violate human rights, groups say**

**BY: SOFIA RESNICK - MARCH 8, 2023 9:15 AM**

Ahead of International Women's Day, hundreds of U.S. and global human rights groups, doctors, and attorneys have asked the United Nations to intervene on behalf of the millions of women in the U.S. who have been left without access to legal abortion and vital forms of reproductive health care in the wake of last summer's monumental U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.

"Eight months on from this catastrophic legal decision, it is now apparent that the consequences are even worse than feared," states a letter signed by nearly 200 rights and justice groups and individual health care providers and attorneys, which was first shared with *The Guardian* last week. "Women and girls in need of reproductive health care are being met with systematic refusals, huge financial burdens, stigma, fear of violence, and threats of criminalization. Thousands are being forced to remain pregnant against their will."

Addressing the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls and more than a dozen UN officials specializing in a wide range of human rights, the letter's authors write that nearly 22 million women, girls and gender-nonconforming persons of reproductive age are now living in states where abortion has been banned or is in other ways inaccessible.

The more than 50-page letter — dense with devastating anecdotes from news articles and studies and doctor interviews — argues that the effects of *Dobbs* and the resulting state and local anti-abortion policies

have compromised Americans' rights to life, health, privacy, and liberty. The letter authors argue that the U.S. is violating various human rights treaties it has signed.

"These human rights obligations include, but are not limited to, the rights to: life; health; privacy; liberty and security of person; to be free from torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief; equality and non-discrimination; and to seek, receive, and impart information," the authors write. "The US has committed to respect and protect these rights; instead, it is infringing them through restrictions on abortion access."

They ask the UN officials to make an official visit to the U.S. to witness these harms, to convene a virtual stakeholder meeting with U.S. civil society, and to call for private companies to take action to protect reproductive rights. They also call on the UN to ask the U.S. to comply with its obligations under international law.

"The Dobbs decision abandoned the constitutional right to abortion, violated U.S. legal obligations under treaties such as ICCPR [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights], and exposed the fact that Roe was never enough," said Lauren Wranosky, research and program associate at Pregnancy Justice, one of the signatories, in a statement. "Many will continue to be jailed, convicted, and sentenced to prison for having abortions, experiencing pregnancy losses, or giving birth to healthy babies. This destroys families, inflicts trauma, and targets the most vulnerable by replacing healthcare with criminalization. We know this humanitarian crisis will only get worse, and we demand that the U.S. government join international peers as a leader in securing reproductive justice for all."

As the authors note, the end of federal abortion rights has led to 13 states criminalizing the procedure (with Georgia effectively outlawing the procedure with its six-week ban); dozens of clinic closures around the country; and increased travel times and delays for abortion care, even in situations when the pregnancy has become life-threatening. They write that the UN Human Rights Committee has already established that denial of abortion in other countries can cause suffering and amount to torture.

And they stress that in the U.S., racial minorities and marginalized groups disproportionately face health and legal harms because of the policies enacted after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.

"Dobbs is devastating for all people who can become pregnant, but it has had and will have an outsized impact on certain marginalized groups who already face documented discrimination within and outside the healthcare system," the authors write. "This includes BIPOC women, people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, migrants, persons with disabilities, people who are low-income or living in poverty, children, and rural residents. These groups often have poorer health outcomes compared to other populations, Dobbs will worsen these disparities, since individuals who belong to these groups have fewer resources and face discrimination from the healthcare community."

*Sofia Resnick is a national reproductive rights reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. She has reported on reproductive-health politics and justice issues for more than a decade.*

## As COVID protections end, patients classified as 'medically needy' fear new barriers to care

**Boosted pandemic-era benefits may push some over the income line as disenrollments resume**

**BY: SHALINA CHATLANI - MARCH 8, 2023 7:00 AM**

Courtney Blake and her 10-year-old daughter live on their own in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Both of them struggle with chronic mental health issues and have been using Medicaid to help pay for their behavioral health care needs. But like millions of people across the country, Blake is worried that at the end of this health emergency she might not be able to access the services she desperately needs to take care of herself and her daughter.

"As a single mother who is raising her child I've had no help financially for a really long time now," Blake said. "I had some help from our family a few years ago, but we're estranged now. So it's just me and her."

Usually, in order to receive Medicaid benefits, beneficiaries must recertify every year that they actually

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qualify, by meeting income criteria, for example. But during the first years of the pandemic, the federal government said states could get increased federal matching funds in exchange for allowing “continuous enrollment” and agreeing not to eject anyone from the program for any reason. Disenrollments were paused in early 2020 for states that opted in, including Michigan.

That’s scheduled to end on March 31 nationwide. And the public health emergency status is expected to expire shortly after that, in mid-May.

New estimates from the Kaiser Family Foundation show that since states stopped cutting people off from their health benefits as the pandemic began, 23.3 million more people enrolled in Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). A total 95 million people in the U.S. will be using those programs by the end of this month, when disenrollments resume.

But now around 7 million people are likely at risk of losing their Medicaid, according to early estimates from federal officials. In fact, Idaho already dropped thousands of people. The result is that people may not realize they no longer have insurance until they actually need care.

The situation is causing distress to many who are certainly at risk of being disenrolled, but there are other people like Blake who may fall just over the income threshold to qualify for full access to Medicaid services.

## Falling into the gap

Blake is considered “medically needy,” and one of the ways she’s qualified for Medicaid in Michigan is by deducting her medical expenses from her income in order to meet the income threshold — what’s known as a “spend down,” which is like a deductible. After paying this amount, she can get her Medicaid benefits.

But during the public health emergency, she didn’t have to pay those higher co-pays for her medical bills, because the continuous enrollment provision got rid of that requirement. Now, people like her would have to pay those fees again, according to a spokesperson from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

After the Medicaid expansion expires, when someone is determined to be eligible again, they will “need to meet a new spend down to maintain Medicaid eligibility if they are not eligible through a separate Medicaid eligibility pathway,” said a spokesperson at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

Blake was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2006, so she qualified for Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare. But during the pandemic, her Social Security benefit check increased.

“It’s a significantly higher amount than I’ve had in the past, but inflation happened and they cut off my food stamps in June. I’ve struggled every month since then and have had very little money left each month. It’s very stressful,” Blake said.

Now, she said she’s worried that the added Social Security income puts her just above the threshold for her to pay a “significantly high” spend down before her Medicaid kicks in.

The problem is that her income still isn’t high enough for her to afford all those mental health care expenses out of pocket. And she says Medicare only covers 80% of her outpatient medical fees.

The scenario only gets more dire if her child’s benefits are cut, too, she said.

“I don’t want my daughter’s Medicaid to be messed with at all. What if she can’t go to the community mental health center? She needs those services.”

Blake worked as a nurse between 2017 and 2019, right before the pandemic began. But after a distressing mental health episode, she had to quit her job.

At the same time, Blake said her daughter’s behavioral health needs had become more significant, and after some violent incidents, she needed closer supervision and care. So, Blake said, these services are necessary in order to take care of her child.

“She often has to go to the emergency room,” Blake said. “I couldn’t work. I had to take care of her.”

## A greater toll

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing mental health issues, particularly for people with low incomes and those who’ve been marginalized. Studies have shown that the pandemic increased anxiety, depression, and stress among families with lower incomes. But accessing services has long been chal-

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lenging for this population. The American Psychological Association's 2015 workforce survey found that almost two-thirds of responding psychologists rarely serve those with lower incomes. But even those providers who are serving patients with greater need, often find it difficult to accept Medicaid, due to low reimbursement rates. Still, the pandemic widened accessibility by creating flexibility by how people access mental health care — including telehealth for patients on Medicaid. More people were able to get therapy in general, said Rachel Soule, director of Business Regulations & Independent Practice at the American Psychological Association. "There's going to be implications for people as they get kicked off, but it's still unclear how many people are going to be impacted," Soule said. "And there's all sorts of stigmas that prevent people from even accessing services. If anything the COVID-19 pandemic made the lack of access to mental health services so much more apparent." But, for people like Courtney Blake, the public health emergency still eliminated barriers, such as a high spend down or deductible, that were causing them to avoid seeking treatment. Blake's situation with losing some access to Medicaid due to Social Security payments is fairly specific, but it's not uncommon. For example, Dawn Williams, who also lives in Michigan, is worried her 16-year-old son Christian, who has special needs, will lose his access to Medicaid. Williams said her husband recently went on disability and while there were more children at home in the past, they've moved out. Their financial situation has technically changed since they no longer have as many dependents at home. "We're concerned my husband's Social Security payment and my income from work raises our income above the threshold to qualify Christian for Medicaid. And since Christian is 16, he won't qualify until he turns 18," Williams said. "We are looking for other alternatives to get him on Medicaid once the health emergency ends ... we're just watching and waiting." According to recent data from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Medicaid is the biggest public payer for mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) issues in the U.S. And as of 2019, nearly a quarter of adult and adolescent Medicaid beneficiaries used their coverage to receive mental health or substance use services. Research from the Kaiser Family Foundation shows that when individuals are disenrolled from Medicaid, 65% have a period of being uninsured over the following 12 months and many re-enroll in Medicaid — but may have gaps in coverage. "That's obviously problematic for people who have chronic conditions ... and we know that being uninsured makes it more likely that you may not access care when you need it," said Robin Rudowitz, a vice president at the Kaiser Family Foundation who directs the program on Medicaid and the uninsured. "Gaps in coverage have bigger consequences for individuals with mental health, substance abuse or other chronic conditions because without coverage individuals may not be able to access needed care or prescriptions," Rudowitz said. People experiencing mental health crises or other issues in rural areas may also be challenged to find care as rural hospitals also are struggling with the loss of pandemic funding. "Before COVID-19 more than half of rural hospitals were operating at a loss, said Alan Morgan, head of the National Rural Hospital Association. "The federal government stepped in with help [...] and it had a significant impact. Over the last two years, we've seen fewer than five rural hospitals close nationwide," Morgan said. "Since December, we've seen three rural hospitals close already." These rural facilities are often key safety-net providers for people experiencing substance use disorders, especially. And Morgan said with lower payments coming in from decreased Medicaid enrollments, in addition to high costs of hiring labor, their ability to stay open will be threatened.

## **Policy options can help close the gap**

Courtney Blake is hoping that she can work through her spend-down at a community mental health center, which may be able to cover those co-pays for her. Similarly, Williams is hoping that the state Medicaid agency would make an exception for her son through the state's "Children's Waiver Program," or "Children with Serious Emotional Disturbance" waiver program that would allow him to get Medicaid for his special mental health needs. Williams' is worried though, because once the public health emergency ends, her son won't have access to a community living support worker, without having to pay for that service out-of-pocket. A CLS worker is a trained specialist that can work with people who have special needs. Williams said her son's mental health needs have been "extremely expensive." "The services that he will not get, which will become very expensive, are his counselor that we've had for a long time, and he will not be able



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to see his psychiatrist who prescribes his different medications. And I'm sure those will be expensive too," she said. "If those services are discontinued it could be very traumatic." Soule said applying for waivers from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid is one way states can expand access by creating exceptions for people with special needs who wouldn't otherwise qualify for Medicaid coverage. Many states have also adopted specific Section 1115 waivers, which allow local Medicaid departments to test programs related to substance use disorders and mental health. This provides more opportunities for beneficiaries with special needs to have their care covered. So far Washington, D.C., and nearly three dozen states, including Michigan, have been approved for waivers to provide coverage for serious behavioral health issues. "We are doing a multitude of things across the board on expanding access and capacity to behavioral health and substance use disorder services. We are actively reviewing where flexibilities exist and continue to work with the Michigan Legislature to secure funding for direct care recruitment and retention initiatives," said Bob Wheaton, spokesman for Michigan Department of Health & Human Services, who added that the state offers behavioral health loan repayment programs. Soule said it's also important for mental health services to be reimbursed by Medicaid at a higher rate, so there are more providers who have financial flexibility to offer services to people who are uninsured or underinsured with sliding fee scales or pro-bono work. "Even if you want to get paid and you're submitting all the documents, often insurers give providers the runaround and by the time they get paid it's six months out and a lot of practitioners don't have the capacity to wait that long to get paid," Soule said, adding that it's harder for groups to make up the cost because they can't see as many patients. "While a doctor may see you for 10 minutes, when it comes to behavioral health services your standard of service is at least an hour."

## Some federal options already in the works

The Biden Administration announced a national mental health crisis strategy in March last year and unveiled the HHS Roadmap for Behavioral Health Integration in September. Some of the actions include:

Federal funding for Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics, which can offer mental health services at a lower cost especially for people on Medicaid, with lower income backgrounds, and those in rural areas. Last year, the administration awarded hundreds of millions of dollars to CCBHCs, and additionally awarded planning grants to 10 states, including Michigan, to expand the presence and services of CCBHCs.

The establishment of a nationwide directory of opportunities for people to become crisis counselors for the "988" phone-line initiative that connects patients in crisis to information and resources on mental health care.

Mental health training programs for peer support specialists to provide alternatives for people who cannot afford to see a psychologist or a licensed mental health professional. For example, the administration says the Department of Housing and Urban Development will launch a national effort to train housing counselors, among others, to recognize signs of emotional distress in residents and help connect them to mental health resources.

Another new flexibility that is likely here to stay is public health spending on telehealth services.

"There are some states that tied their telehealth Medicaid waivers to the federal public health emergency, so once that's declared over there's obviously an expiration on those waivers," said Mei Kwong, executive director of the Center for Connected Health Policy. "But many states have already settled on their telehealth policies permanently."

Kwong said although the policies are "all over the place," there is one silver lining, which is that all states currently are reimbursing for telehealth services through Medicaid in some way.

For now, though, in anticipation of the end of the public health emergency, Blake and Williams say they're trying to work with state Medicaid agents to see what their options are.

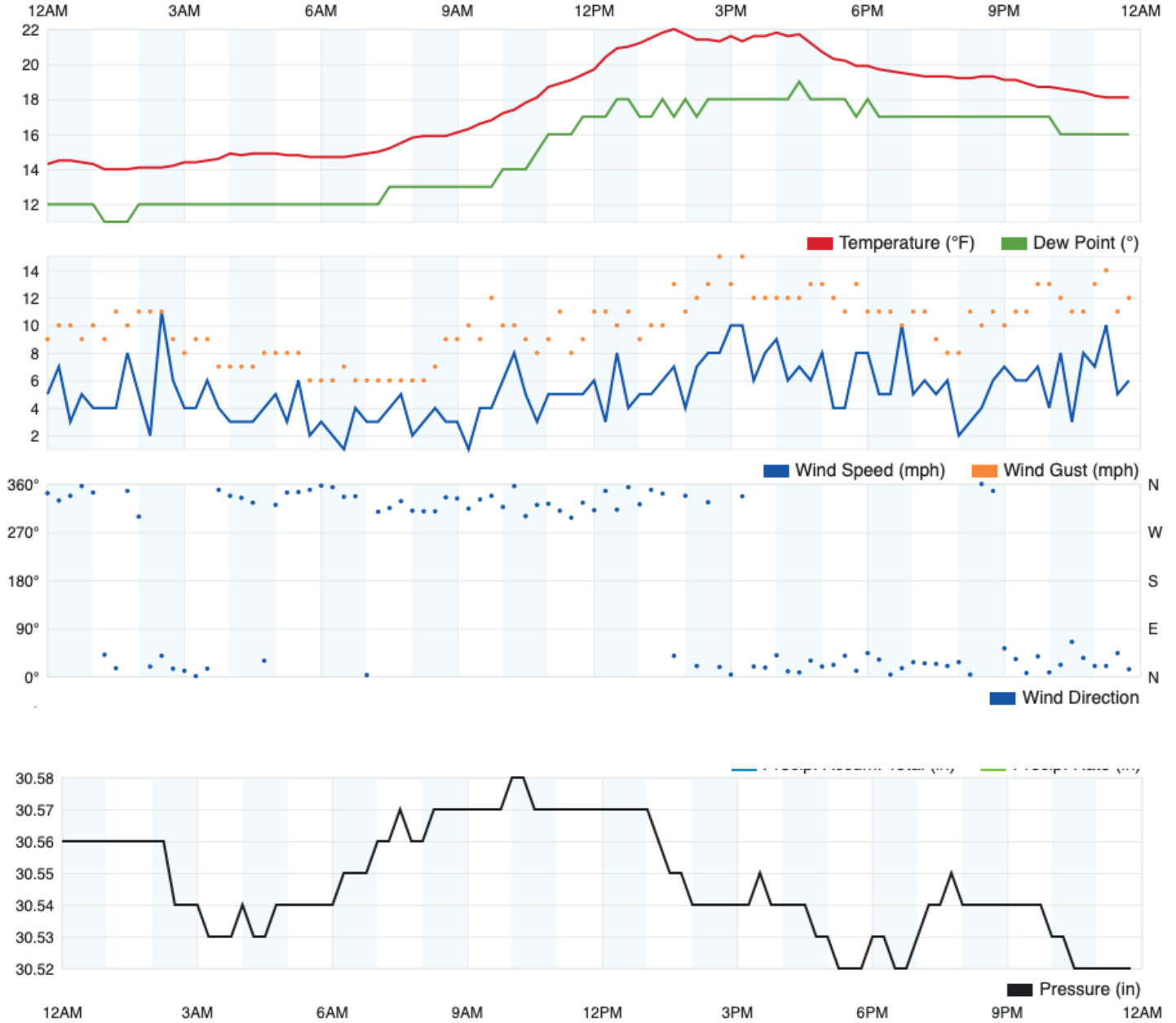
"I'm hoping with how angry and concerned people are with this that something is going to change, that they aren't going to unfreeze this and they figure something else out," Blake said. "How are you expecting us to pay our bills, put food on our tables, and pay our bills?"

*Shalina is the national health care reporter for the States Newsroom. She is focused on in-depth accountability journalism that looks at the changing landscape of health care infrastructure in the nation, and whether local legislatures are prioritizing underserved communities.*

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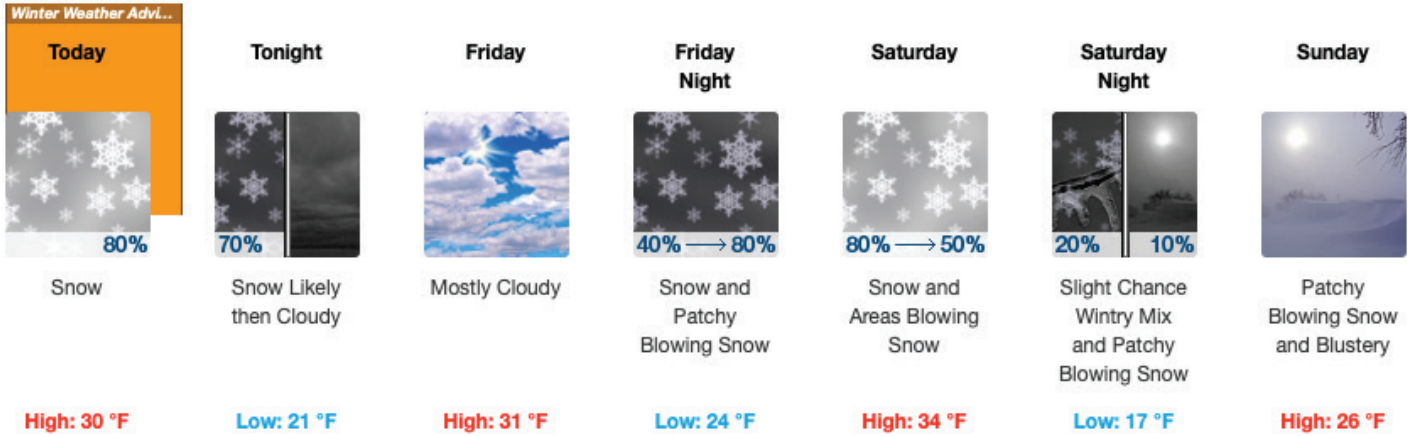
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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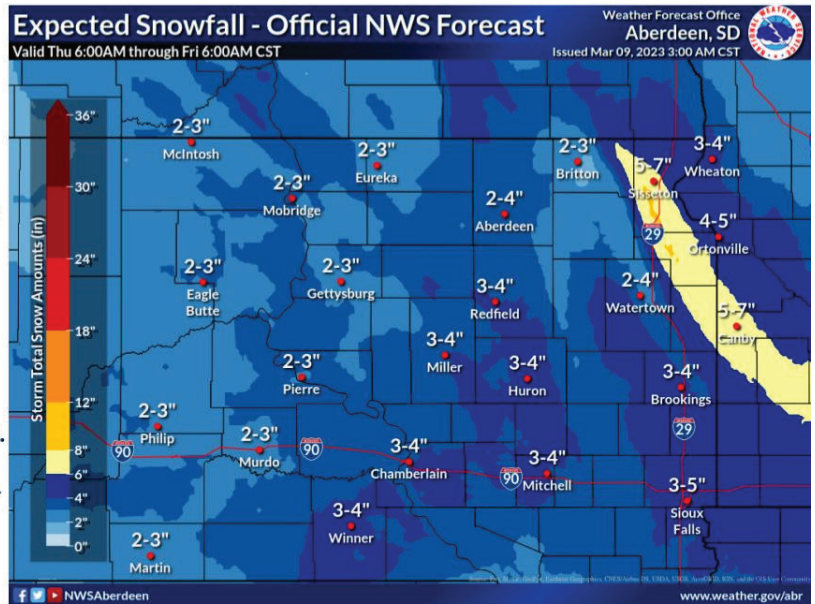
## Widespread Snow through this Evening March 9, 2023 4:29 AM



Through this Evening: Snow slowly spreading north and east during the morning hours. Snow diminishing over south central SD this afternoon.

Storm total snow of 2 to 5 inches, with locally higher amounts of 5 to 7 inches near the eastern slopes of the Sisseton Hills. Light freezing drizzle possible before the snow starts.

Relatively light winds will reduce the chance for widespread blowing or drifting snow.



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Although snowfall amounts have diminished slightly, widespread snow amounts of 2 to 5 inches will remain possible through this evening. Expect higher amounts near and along the eastern slopes of the Sisseton hills of 5 to 7 inches. Relatively light winds will reduce the chance of widespread blowing or drifting snow.

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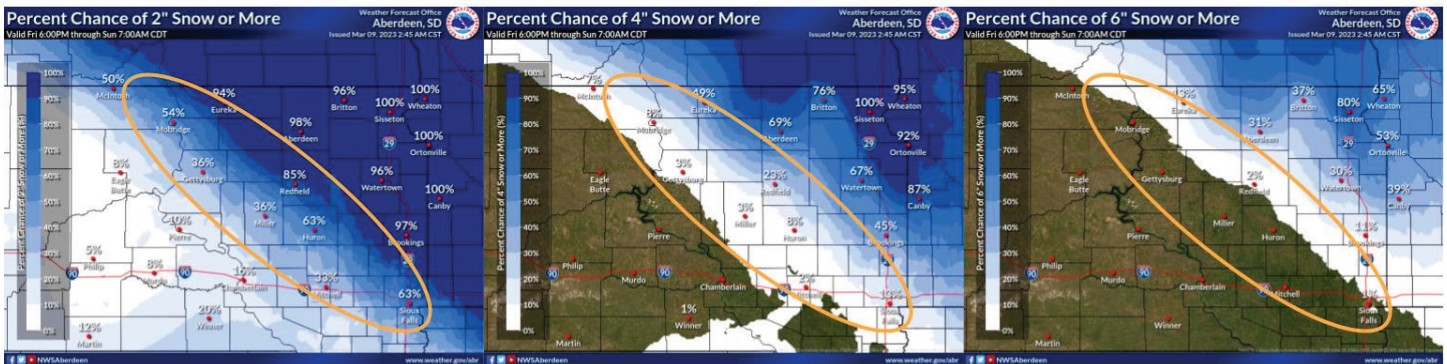


## Snow Friday night through Saturday night

March 9, 2023  
4:35 AM



- Most precipitation over northeastern SD, where temperatures will mostly stay below freezing.
- Lower confidence on precipitation type/snow amounts over central SD due to temperatures near or above freezing (area highlighted in orange in the images below)
- Timing: Light snow over central SD Friday evening, spreading across the entire area overnight while becoming a wintry mix over portions of central SD. Precipitation slowly ending southwest to northeast Saturday into Saturday night.
- Blowing snow possible Friday night through Saturday.



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

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Our next round of snow will be Friday night through Saturday night, with most of the snow falling across northeastern South Dakota into west central Minnesota. A wintry mix of precipitation, with temperatures near or above freezing for much of the period, will allow for lower confidence in overall snow amounts in the areas highlighted in orange. Light snow over central SD to spread across the entire area overnight. Precipitation should slowly end southwest to northeast Saturday into Saturday night. Blowing snow will be possible Friday night through Saturday.



## Precipitation Timing through Sunday

March 9, 2023  
4:38 AM

**Weather Forecast and Probability of Precipitation**  
2 rounds of mainly snow: Today through this evening, and Friday afternoon through Saturday night

	Weather Forecast														
	3/9 Thu		3/10 Fri				3/11 Sat				3/12 Sun				
	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	5am	11am	5pm	11pm
Aberdeen	85%	60%	5%	5%	5%	40%	85%	75%	40%	15%	10%	10%	10%	10%	0%
Britton	75%	50%	30%	0%	5%	30%	80%	85%	60%	30%	20%	20%	20%	15%	5%
Eagle Butte	60%	10%	0%	10%	15%	45%	55%	10%	5%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Eureka	75%	50%	0%	5%	15%	60%	85%	65%	30%	15%	10%	10%	5%	5%	0%
Gettysburg	75%	45%	0%	10%	15%	60%	75%	35%	10%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Kennebec	60%	5%	0%	0%	0%	25%	50%	10%	5%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
McIntosh	75%	45%	0%	10%	30%	70%	75%	35%	10%	10%	5%	5%	5%	0%	0%
Milbank	90%	80%	35%	0%	10%	10%	60%	90%	70%	30%	15%	20%	20%	20%	5%
Miller	60%	35%	0%	5%	0%	35%	75%	40%	20%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	0%
Mobridge	80%	50%	0%	10%	15%	55%	75%	40%	15%	5%	5%	5%	5%	0%	0%
Murdo	50%	5%	0%	5%	5%	30%	45%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Pierre	60%	5%	0%	5%	5%	35%	55%	10%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Redfield	75%	50%	0%	5%	5%	35%	80%	60%	30%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	0%
Sisseton	90%	85%	60%	0%	5%	15%	70%	90%	70%	35%	20%	20%	20%	20%	5%
Watertown	70%	55%	20%	0%	0%	15%	65%	80%	50%	20%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%
Webster	80%	55%	25%	0%	0%	20%	75%	80%	55%	25%	15%	20%	20%	10%	5%
Wheaton	85%	75%	35%	0%	0%	5%	55%	90%	80%	45%	25%	25%	25%	15%	5%

\*Created: 3 am CST Thu 3/9/2023. Shows most impactful weather for the period beginning at the time shown. Weather symbols display where Probability of Precipitation ≥ 0%.

- Fz Rain + - Wintry Mix + - Snow +

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

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

## Winter Weather Advisory

**URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE**

**National Weather Service Aberdeen SD**

**259 AM CST Thu Mar 9 2023**

Brown-Spink-  
Including the cities of Aberdeen and Redfield

...WINTER WEATHER ADVISORY REMAINS IN EFFECT FROM 6 AM THIS MORNING TO 6 PM CST THIS EVENING...

- \* WHAT...Snow expected. Total snow accumulations of 3 to 5 inches.
- \* WHERE...Brown and Spink Counties.
- \* WHEN...From 6 AM this morning to 6 PM CST this evening.
- \* IMPACTS...Plan on slippery road conditions. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute.
- \* ADDITIONAL DETAILS...Fog and freezing drizzle are expected before the snow begins. A light glaze of ice accumulation is possible.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Slow down and use caution while traveling.

In Minnesota, the latest road conditions can be obtained at [511mn.org](http://511mn.org), or by calling 5 1 1. In South Dakota, the latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 22 °F at 1:41 PM

Low Temp: 14 °F at 1:14 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 4:47 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 36 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 69 in 2021

Record Low: -20 in 1951

Average High: 38

Average Low: 16

Average Precip in March.: 0.22

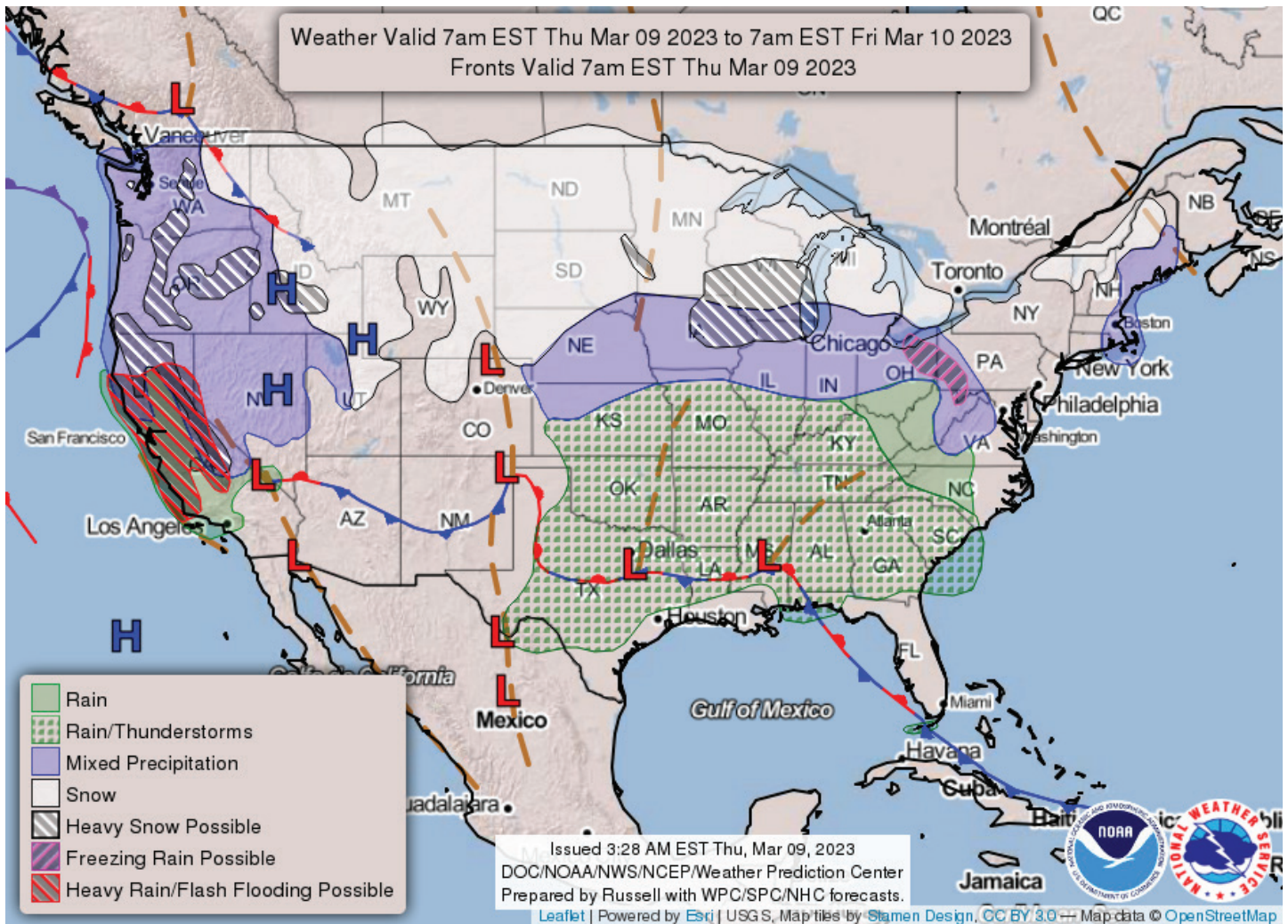
Precip to date in March.: 0.20

Average Precip to date: 1.39

Precip Year to Date: 1.78

Sunset Tonight: 6:31:22 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:52:35 AM



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## Today in Weather History

March 9, 1993: High winds gusting more than 50 mph moved east across South Dakota behind a strong cold front. Peak wind gusts reported included 62 mph at Pierre and 49 mph at Aberdeen. High winds flipped over a mobile home on top of a car and a utility shed near The Oahe Reservoir. In addition, a semi-tractor trailer was overturned while crossing Ft. Randall Dam. An office trailer was also tipped over at the exact location.

1891: From March 9 through the 13th, a blizzard struck southern England and Wales with gale-force winds. 220 people were killed; 65 ships foundered in the English Channel, and 6,000 sheep perished. Countless trees were uprooted, and trains were buried. Up to a foot of snow and snowdrifts of 11.5 feet were reported in Dulwich, London, Torquay, Sidmouth, and Dartmouth.

1956 - A whopping 367 inches of snow was measured on the ground at the Ranier Paradise Ranger Station in Washington. The snow depth was a state record and the second highest total of record for the continental U.S. (The Weather Channel)

1957: An earthquake measuring 8.6 struck the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. A Pacific-wide tsunami was generated that caused damage in Hawaii, but fortunately, no lives were lost. The most brutal hit was the island of Kauai, where houses were destroyed and roads washed away. Waves reached 34.1 feet high at Haena, HI.

1960 - A winter storm produced a narrow band of heavy snow from north central Kentucky into Virginia and the mountains of North Carolina. Snowfall amounts ranged from 12 to 24 inches, with drifts up to eleven feet high in western Virginia. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Gale force winds ushered arctic air into the north central U.S. Some places were 50 degrees colder than the previous day. Northeast winds, gusting to 60 mph, produced 8 to 15 foot waves on Lake Michigan causing more than a million dollars damage along the southeastern shoreline of Wisconsin. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A cold front brought high winds to the southwestern U.S. Winds in the Las Vegas Valley of Nevada gusted to 70 mph, and one person was injured by a falling tree. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-two cities in the southwestern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. In New Mexico, afternoon highs of 72 at Los Alamos, 76 at Ruidoso, and 79 at Quemado, were records for March. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in West Texas. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 71 mph at Lubbock, and golf ball size hail was reported at several other locations. Strong thunderstorm winds injured two persons north of the town of Canyon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2013: A supercell over eastern Oahu in Hawaii produced 4.25" hail NW of Kailua, the largest hailstone ever recorded in Hawaii. The storm also spawned a tornadic waterspout that came ashore and caused EF-0 damage.

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Our feet contain 26 bones and more than 100 muscles, tendons and ligaments. Most of us will walk 65,000 miles and take 125 million steps in our lifetime. That's enough "footwork" to make anyone tired before considering to begin such a journey.

Everyone's journey is different. All of us have different paths. When we awaken in the morning, we have no guarantee of what might happen or where we will be when night falls.

The writer of the first Psalm declared, "Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand with sinners or join in with scoffers." Clearly he urges us to avoid friendships or to even associate with those who do not honor God. Why? Because they may influence us to abandon the plans He has for us. Friends who do not encourage us in our walk with God may bring about an indifference to the plan and purpose He has for our lives. Often the ones we associate with have an enormous influence on our attitudes. And we must always be aware of the fact that our attitudes shape our behavior and can be manipulated by others.

The author also describes the benefit of those who walk a godly path: the Lord will watch over them. What a comforting thought for the believer to realize that every one of those steps in each of the many miles will have "the Lord watching over them." When we walk with Him, we have the promise of His presence and His power to protect us and provide for our every need.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to know and obey Your Word so that we may count on Your strength for our journey. Keep our feet on Your path as we follow in Your steps! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand with sinners or join in with scoffers. Psalm 1



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:  
03.07.23

15 22 25 28 69 21

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$203,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 26  
DRAW: Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

3 7 29 31 49 10

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$39,580,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 26  
DRAW: Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

1 16 31 36 44 5

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 14 Hrs 56 Mins  
DRAW: 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

9 11 26 30 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$84,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 26  
DRAW: Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

13 20 29 41 45 19

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 25  
DRAW: Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

26 27 43 61 69 4

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$45,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 25  
DRAW: Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell hospitalized after fall

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell was hospitalized after tripping at a local hotel, a spokesman for the senator said.

The Kentucky senator, who's 81, was attending a private dinner in Washington on Wednesday when he tripped. He was admitted to a hospital for treatment, spokesman Doug Andres said.

McConnell's office did not provide additional detail on his condition or how long he may be absent from the Senate.

In 2019, the GOP leader tripped and fell at his home in Kentucky, suffering a shoulder fracture. At the time, he underwent surgery to repair the fracture in his shoulder. The Senate had just started a summer recess, and he worked from home for some weeks as he recovered.

First elected in 1984, McConnell in January became the longest-serving Senate leader when the new Congress convened, breaking the previous record of 16 years.

The taciturn McConnell is often reluctant to discuss his private life. But at the start of the COVID-19 crisis he opened up about his early childhood experience fighting polio. He described how his mother insisted that he stay off his feet as a toddler and worked with him through a determined physical therapy regime. He has acknowledged some difficulty in adulthood climbing stairs.

The Senate, where the average age is 65, has been without several members recently due to illness.

Sen. John Fetterman, D-Pa., 53, who suffered a stroke during his campaign last year, was expected to remain out for some weeks as he received care for clinical depression. And Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., 89, said last week that she had been hospitalized to be treated for shingles.

The Democratic absences have proven a challenge for Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., who is already navigating a very narrow 51-49 majority.

The Republicans, as the minority party, have had an easier time with intermittent absences. It is unclear if McConnell will be out on Thursday and if that would have an effect on scheduled votes. South Dakota Sen. John Thune is the Senate's No. 2 Republican.

### Minnesota governor protects rights to gender affirming care

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) —

Gov. Tim Walz signed an executive order Wednesday protecting the rights of LGBTQ people from Minnesota and other states to receive gender affirming health care, as he slammed the tide of other states rolling back transgender rights.

"We want every Minnesotan to grow up feeling safe, valued, protected, celebrated, and free to exist as their authentic versions of themselves," Walz said. "Protecting and supporting access to gender affirming health care is essential to being a welcoming and supportive state."

Advocates for LGBTQ rights say Republican-led states across the country are trying to erase the legal existence of people who are trans and to restrict the expression of those who are nonbinary, gender-fluid or who perform in drag. According to the Human Rights Campaign, more than 150 bills targeting trans rights have been introduced in other states. Walz singled out neighboring South Dakota, where Gov. Kristi Noem signed a ban on gender affirming care for minors last month.

"I don't know what a group of people in Pierre who decide to make life miserable and more dangerous for people are thinking, but it's not going to happen in Minnesota," Walz said to applause from a room full of LGBTQ activists and their supporters.

Walz's executive order parallels legislation awaiting a floor vote in the state House to make Minnesota a "trans refuge state" by protecting trans people, families and care providers from a range of legal reper-

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cussions for traveling to Minnesota for gender affirming care, which includes a wide range of social and medical interventions.

While sponsors said they're optimistic about passage in the coming weeks, the governor said the accelerating trends against trans rights in other states made it urgent for him to impose protections immediately.

The bill is authored by Democratic Rep. Leigh Finke, of St. Paul, Minnesota's first openly transgender legislator. It would prohibit the state from enforcing court orders or child protection laws from other states if they interfere with a person's right to seek gender affirming care in Minnesota.

The importance of the governor's order to LGBTQ people across the nation can't be overstated, she said.

"The lives of trans and gender expansive people this nation are under attack," Finke said. "There is a full-scale movement in this nation against trans, nonbinary, two-spirit and gender expansive adults and children that seeks to make our community disappear."

A separate bill banning so-called conversion therapy for LGBTQ children and vulnerable adults won approval in the Minnesota House last month and is awaiting a floor vote in the Senate.

Conservatives said the governor's order will hurt vulnerable children instead of helping them.

"People who struggle with their gender identity deserve compassionate care that will help them become comfortable in their bodies, not mutilate them," John Helmberger, CEO of the Minnesota Family Council, said in a statement.

Elsewhere, recent efforts in Oklahoma to prohibit gender affirming medical care for trans children and pass other anti-trans legislation have led to heated demonstrations. The Arkansas Senate on Tuesday gave initial approval to criminalizing transgender people who use restrooms that match their gender identity. Tennessee's governor signed legislation last week that bans drag shows from taking place in public or in front of children.

"All children deserve to thrive, we can agree on that, but for transgender youth, that thriving and access to lifesaving gender affirming care is under threat in statehouses around the country," Dr. Kelsey Leonardsmith said. "It is under threat from bullies who hide behind junk science, and bullies who abuse their positions of power to hurt these precious children."

Leonardsmith runs clinics in Minneapolis and St. Paul that serve transgender youth, including families that have relocated from restrictive states. She said they provide "evidence-based care in line with international guidelines" and work closely with families to ensure that children and adolescents receive appropriate care consistent with their stages of intellectual and physical development.

"And there is no one else who belongs in that room making those decisions," she said.

## Netanyahu airlifted to airport after protesters block road

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had to be airlifted on Thursday to the country's main international airport for an official overseas trip, after throngs of cars and protesters prevented him from driving there.

The demonstrations were part of nationwide protests underway for more than two months against his contentious plan to overhaul the judiciary.

Protesters had made blocking Netanyahu's route to the airport a centerpiece of their intensifying efforts to oppose the legal changes, and the optics of the Israeli leader having to make alternate travel plans were a win for the demonstrators.

The helicopter ride, far from the snarling traffic triggered by the protest, was also sure to deepen Netanyahu's reputation as being out of touch with Israelis at a time when the country finds itself torn apart over the government plan and the economy is slowing.

Thursday's disruptions also took a toll on visiting U.S. Secretary of State Lloyd Austin, whose schedule was rearranged to keep his engagements close to the airport.

The protesters, launching a "day of resistance to dictatorship," descended on the country's main international airport waving Israeli flags, blocking the road leading to the departures area with their cars.

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Elsewhere, protesters blocked main intersections and scuffled with police in the seaside metropolis of Tel Aviv and other cities. A small flotilla of paddleboards and kayaks tried to close off a main maritime shipping lane off the northern city of Haifa. Some protesters barricaded the Jerusalem offices of a conservative think tank helping to spearhead the judicial changes.

"Israel is on the verge of becoming an autocratic country. The current government is trying to destroy our democracy, and actually destroy the country," said Savion Or, a protester in Tel Aviv.

The uproar over Netanyahu's legal overhaul has plunged Israel into one of its worst domestic crises. Beyond the protests, which have drawn tens of thousands of Israelis to the streets and recently became violent, opposition has surged from across society, with business leaders and legal officials speaking out against what they say will be the ruinous effects of the plan. The rift has not spared Israel's military, which is seeing unprecedented opposition from within its own ranks.

Netanyahu, who took office in late December after a protracted political stalemate, and his allies say the measures aim to rein in a court that has overstepped its authority. Critics say the overhaul will upset the delicate system of checks and balances and slide Israel toward authoritarianism.

Critics also say Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption, is driven by personal grievances and that he could find an escape route from the charges through the overhaul. Netanyahu denies wrongdoing, and says the legal changes have nothing to do with his trial.

Demonstrations were underway across the country as Netanyahu and his allies have pledged to press ahead with a series of bills that would strip the Supreme Court of its ability to review legislation and give coalition politicians control over judicial appointments. An attempt by Israel's ceremonial president to defuse the crisis through an alternative legal reform has so far been unsuccessful.

The protesters' main objective Thursday was to complicate Netanyahu's journey to the airport ahead of a state visit to Rome. Police, handing out traffic tickets as protesters held signs reading, "dictator: don't come back!" said they would clear the demonstrators by force if they did not move. There were no immediate reports of serious violence.

Netanyahu, who was meeting Austin before his departure, arrived to the airport in a police helicopter, circumventing the protesters, Israeli media reported. Netanyahu's office declined to comment.

Regular flights were not interrupted, an airport spokeswoman said, although some travelers said they had to leave their cars behind the protesters' convoy and reach the terminal by foot.

In an interview with the Italian daily La Repubblica ahead of the trip, Netanyahu played down the protests and vowed to push ahead with his program.

"The protests show how solid our democracy is," he said. "A reform is necessary. The judiciary must be independent, not omnipotent."

The police, overseen by ultranationalist National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, have pledged to prevent the disturbances and said they had already made arrests. Officers on horseback were stationed in central Tel Aviv, where protesters were marching, and a water cannon truck was parked nearby. Red billboards festooning the city's main highway reading, "resistance to dictatorship is mandatory." Police were dragging away protesters who had descended on the city's main highway.

Critics say Ben-Gvir, a key ally in Netanyahu's coalition government who has dubbed the protesters "anarchists", is trying to politicize the police.

"We support freedom of expression but not anarchy," Ben-Gvir told reporters while touring the airport.

Thursday's demonstration in Tel Aviv, the country's business center and its liberal heartland, was not nearly as large as the one last week, when police cracked down on what had otherwise been peaceful protests, lobbing stun grenades and scuffling with demonstrators. Those protests ended with Netanyahu's wife Sara being extracted from a ritzy Tel Aviv hair salon where demonstrators had gathered after catching wind of her presence.

Netanyahu and his wife have gained notoriety for enjoying lavish lifestyles and living off the largesse of taxpayers and wealthy supporters. Some media pundits questioned why Netanyahu was flying to Italy for three days at a time of deep national crisis, suggesting the couple were actually traveling to celebrate

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their wedding anniversary. His schedule includes a meeting with Italy's prime minister on Friday, but he does not return until Saturday night.

Thursday's visit by Austin, who is on a Mideast tour, was also being affected by the protests. An Israeli official said Austin's meetings were moved to a factory near the airport due to the disruptions. The protest movement has focused on central Tel Aviv, near the Defense Ministry. The Israeli official spoke on condition of anonymity under regulations.

Earlier Thursday, protesting military reservist barricaded the Jerusalem offices of the Kohelet Policy Forum, a conservative think tank that has helped craft the overhaul, with barbed wire and sandbags, and hung a banner outside reading "Kohelet is tearing Israel apart."

Several dozen people, including two former Navy chiefs, gathered in the waters off Haifa in kayaks, sailboats and on stand-up paddleboards in a bid to block the city's shipping lane.

## Court records show political pressure behind Fox programming

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and DAVID BAUDER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — In May 2018, the nation's top Republicans needed help. So they called on the founder of Fox News, Rupert Murdoch.

President Donald Trump and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell were trying to stop West Virginia Republicans from nominating Don Blankenship, who had been convicted of violating mine safety standards during a lethal accident in one of his coal mines, to challenge the state's incumbent senator, Democrat Joe Manchin.

"Both Trump and McConnell are appealing for help to beat unelectable former mine owner who served time," Murdoch wrote to executives at Fox News, according to court records released this week. "Anything during day helpful, but Sean (Hannity) and Laura (Ingraham) dumping on him hard might save the day."

Murdoch's prodding, revealed in court documents that are part of a defamation lawsuit by a voting systems company, is one example showing how Fox became actively involved in politics instead of simply reporting or offering opinions about it. The revelations pose a challenge to the credibility of the most watched cable news network in the U.S. at the outset of a new election season in which Trump is again a leading player, having declared his third run for the White House.

Blankenship, who ended up losing the primary, said in an interview Wednesday that he felt the change right away, with the network's coverage taking a harsher turn in the final hours before the primary.

"They were very smart about elections — they did their dumping the day before the election, so I had no time to react," said Blankenship, who filed a separate, unsuccessful libel suit against Fox.

On Wednesday, the network characterized Dominion Voting Systems' lawsuit as a flagrant attack on the First Amendment and said the company had taken statements out of context. According to Fox, that included an acknowledgement by Murdoch that he shared with Jared Kushner, the head of Trump's reelection campaign and the president's son-in-law, an ad for Joe Biden's presidential campaign that was to air on his network. Fox said the ad Murdoch forwarded to Kushner was already publicly available on YouTube and at least one television station.

"Dominion has been caught red handed again using more distortions and misinformation in their PR campaign to smear Fox News and trample on freedom of speech and freedom of the press," Fox said in a statement.

Fox has long been seen as a power in GOP politics with its large conservative fan base. But thousands of pages of documents released this week in the libel suit filed by Dominion show how the network blurred the line between journalism and party politics. Dominion sued after it became the target of 2020 election conspiracy theories, often promoted on Fox's airwaves.

Murdoch also told executives at Fox News to promote the benefits of Trump's 2017 tax cut legislation and give extra attention to Republican Senate hopefuls, the documents show. He wanted the network "banging on" Biden's low-profile presidential campaign during the height of the pandemic in 2020.

Nicole Hemmer, a Vanderbilt University history professor and author of the book "Partisans: The Conser-

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vative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s," said revelations in the lawsuit puncture Fox's long argument that there is a dividing line between its news and opinion sides.

"The real revelation here is how much of a fiction that division is," Hemmer said. "Some who know Fox have argued that for awhile, but now we have real evidence."

Hemmer cited text messages disclosed in the court documents from early November 2020 sent by Fox's chief political correspondent, Bret Baier, urging the network's leaders to retract its correct election night call that President Joe Biden won Arizona. Baier advocated for putting Arizona "back in his column," referring to Trump.

In the days after the election, as Trump was making increasingly wild allegations that fraud cost him the White House, Rupert Murdoch's son Lachlan Murdoch, who is executive chairman of the Fox Corp., texted with Fox News chief executive officer Suzanne Scott in alarm about a Trump rally.

"News guys have to be careful how they cover this rally," Lachlan Murdoch wrote, according to the legal documents. "So far some of the side comments are slightly anti, and they shouldn't be. The narrative should be this huge celebration of the president. Etc."

Some of Fox's politicking — like star host Sean Hannity's frequent conversations with Trump during his presidency — is well known. But court papers show how Rupert Murdoch, the boss, inserted himself in the action, too.

Murdoch emailed Scott in November 2017 and urged her to promote Trump's tax cut proposal, which had passed the House and was nearing a Senate vote.

"Once they pass this bill we must tell our viewers again and again what they will get," Murdoch wrote in the email, included in the court records. "Terrific, I understand, for all under \$150k."

After the first presidential debate in 2020, a "horrified" Murdoch told Kushner that Trump should be more restrained in the next debate. (Trump canceled that event.)

"That was advice from a friend to a friend," Murdoch said in his deposition. "It wasn't advice from Fox Corporation or in my capacity at Fox."

"What's the difference?" asked Dominion's lawyer, Justin A. Turner.

"You've been — keep asking me questions as head of Fox," Murdoch said. "It's a different role being a friend."

Murdoch's email banter with Kushner led to the exchange of the Biden ad, according to court records. That exchange is now the subject of a complaint from the liberal watchdog group Media Matters for America to the Federal Elections Commission, arguing Fox made an illegal contribution to the Trump campaign by giving it information about Biden's advertisements. Fox said the sharing of public information can't be considered a contribution.

Court records show that on Sept. 25, 2020, Murdoch emailed Kushner that "my people tell me" that Biden's ads "are a lot better creatively than yours. Just passing it on."

The same month, Murdoch wondered in an email to Col Allan, the former editor of the Murdoch-owned New York Post, "how can anyone vote for Biden?" Allen responded that Biden's "only hope is to stay in his basement and not face serious questions."

"Just made sure Fox banging on about these issues," Murdoch responded, according to court records. "If the audience talks the theme will spread."

Another prominent politician Murdoch describes as a "friend" is McConnell, whose wife, Elaine Chao, then Trump's transportation secretary, had served on the Fox board. Murdoch said he would speak to the Republican Senate leader "three or four times a year."

In a special 2017 Republican Senate primary in Alabama, Murdoch said in his deposition, he told his top executives that he, like McConnell, opposed Roy Moore, a controversial former Alabama chief justice. Moore ultimately won the party's nomination but lost the general election after he was credibly accused of sexual misconduct, including pursuing relationships with teenagers when he was in his 30s. Moore denied the allegations.

Murdoch, in the deposition, also cited his personal friendship with an unnamed Senate candidate in his



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suggestion to Scott that the network give extra attention to Republicans in close Senate races.

Days before the 2020 election, after Fox business anchor Lou Dobbs was critical of Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., Murdoch asked Scott to have Hannity pump up Graham, who was facing an extremely well-funded challenge from Democrat Jamie Harrison.

"You probably know about the Lou Dobbs outburst against Lindsay Graham," Murdoch wrote on Oct. 27, misspelling the senator's first name in the copy of the message in the court documents. "Could Sean say something supportive? We can't lose the Senate if at all possible."

Scott replied that Graham was on Hannity's show the previous night "and he got a lot of time." She added, "I addressed the Dobbs outburst."

## North Korea fires ballistic missile toward sea, Seoul says

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's military said it detected that North Korea fired a short-range ballistic missile toward waters off its western coast on Thursday.

The South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the weapon was fired at around 6:20 p.m. from an area around the western coastal city of Nampo. It did not immediately release an assessment of how far the missile flew.

The launch came after the influential sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un warned Tuesday that her country is ready to take "quick, overwhelming action" against the United States and South Korea as the allies expand their military training to cope with a growing North Korean nuclear threat.

Coming off a record year in missile testing, North Korea has conducted more weapons demonstrations to 2023 including test launches of an intercontinental ballistic missile, short-range missiles and a purported long-range cruise missile system in recent weeks.

Experts say North Korea's weapons push is aimed at forcing the United States into accepting it as a nuclear power and at negotiating badly needed economic concessions from a position of strength.

Last week, the South Korean and U.S. militaries announced they will conduct computer-simulated command post training on March 13-23 and will resume their largest springtime field exercises, which were last held in 2018. The United States has also recently sent advanced warplanes, including the B-1B and B-52 long-range bombers, to train with South Korean aircraft in a show of strength, triggering protests from North Korea, which describes the allies' joint drills as invasion rehearsals.

The allies had canceled or scaled back some of their regular drills since 2018 to support now-dormant diplomacy with North Korea and guard against the COVID-19 pandemic. But they have been restoring their exercises after North Korea test-fired dozens of missiles last year and threatened to use its nuclear weapons in potential conflicts with its rivals.

## Russian missile barrage slams into cities across Ukraine

By HANNA ARHIROVA and ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia unleashed "a massive rocket attack" that hit critical infrastructure and residential buildings in 10 regions of Ukraine, the country's president said Thursday, with officials reporting at least six deaths in the largest such nighttime attack in three weeks.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the barrage that came while many people slept and knocked out power in cities across the country was an attempt by Moscow "to intimidate Ukrainians again."

"The occupiers can only terrorize civilians. That's all they can do," Zelenskyy said in an online statement.

The war has largely ground to a battlefield stalemate over the winter. The Kremlin's forces started targeting Ukraine's power supply last October in an apparent attempt to demoralize the civilian population and compel Kyiv to negotiate peace on Moscow's terms. The attacks later became less frequent, with analysts speculating Russia may have been running low on ammunition. The last major bombardment took place on Feb. 16.

Overall, Russia launched 81 missiles and eight exploding Shahed drones Thursday, according to Ukraine's chief commander of the armed forces, Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Thirty-four cruise missiles were intercepted, as were four drones, he said.

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The Russian defense ministry said the attacks were in retaliation for an alleged incursion into the Bryansk region of western Russia a week earlier by what Moscow claimed were Ukrainian saboteurs. Ukraine denied the claim and warned that Moscow could use the allegations to justify stepping up its own attacks.

The Russian defense ministry said Thursday's "massive retaliation" hit military and industrial targets in Ukraine "as well as the energy facilities that supply them."

Private electricity operator DTEK reported that three of its power stations had been hit, causing severe damage and bringing preventive emergency power cuts in the Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk and Odesa regions.

The strikes left almost half of consumers in Kyiv without heating, with temperatures at around 9 C (48 F). Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, was left without running water, heating, trams and trolleybuses after 15 missiles hit the region, mayor Ihor Terekhov told the Ukrainian public broadcaster.

Around 150,000 households were left without power in Ukraine's northwestern Zhytomyr region. In the southern port of Odesa, emergency blackouts occurred due to damaged power lines.

In southern Ukraine, the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, which is occupied by Russian forces, lost power as a result of the missile attacks, according to nuclear state operator Energoatom.

It's the sixth time that Europe's largest nuclear plant has been in a state of blackout since it was taken over by Russia months ago, forcing it to rely on diesel generators that can run the station for 10 days. Nuclear plants need constant power to run cooling systems and avoid a meltdown, and fears remain about the possibility of a catastrophe at Zaporizhzhia.

The head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog expressed alarm at the latest blackout, saying he was "astonished by the complacency" of members of the organization he leads, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"What are we doing to prevent this happening? We are the IAEA, we are meant to care about nuclear safety," IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi told its board of directors in a meeting Thursday, according to an IAEA statement.

"Each time we are rolling a dice," he said. "And if we allow this to continue time after time, then one day our luck will run out."

The agency has placed teams of experts at all four of Ukraine's nuclear power plants to reduce the risk of severe accidents.

Power supply to the plant can be restored "within a day or two," Leonid Oleinyk, a press secretary at Energoatom, told The Associated Press by telephone. He said emergency repairs have already begun.

Air raid sirens wailed through the night across Ukraine, including the capital, Kyiv, where explosions occurred in two western areas of the city. Defense systems were activated around the country.

Viktor Bukhta, a 57-year-old resident of Kyiv's Sviatoshynski district, where officials said three people were wounded and apartment windows were shattered, said a missile landed nearby at about 6:45 a.m. (0445 GMT).

"We went into the yard. People were injured, they helped, first-aid kits were handed out from the cars," he told The Associated Press. "Then the cars caught fire. We tried to extinguish them with car fire extinguishers. And I got a little burnt."

Ukrainian air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said he couldn't recall such an onslaught, with Moscow launching a broad variety of missiles, including six hypersonic Kinzhal cruise missiles.

Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba was scathing about the attack, tweeting: "No military objective, just Russian barbarism."

Kyiv's city administration said the capital was attacked with both missiles and exploding drones. Many were intercepted, but its energy infrastructure was hit.

Smoke could be seen rising from a facility in Kyiv's Holosiivskiy district and police had cordoned off all roads leading to it.

The alarm in Kyiv was lifted just before 8 a.m. (0600 GMT), with the air raid sirens falling silent after around seven hours.

Three men and two women were killed in the Lviv region after a missile struck a residential area, Lviv

Gov. Maksym Kozytskyi said. Three buildings were destroyed by fire, and rescue workers were combing through rubble looking for more possible victims, he said.

A sixth person was killed and two others wounded in multiple strikes in the Dnipropetrovsk region that targeted its energy infrastructure and industrial facilities, Gov. Serhii Lysak said.

Aside from the hail of missiles, Russian shelling killed six other civilians from Wednesday to Thursday, Ukrainian officials said, including three people at a bus stop in Kherson.

In the south, Odesa Gov. Maksym Marchenko said missiles struck residential buildings and several power lines were damaged in strikes on his region. He said six missiles and one drone were shot down.

Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko condemned the missile strikes as "another barbaric massive attack on the energy infrastructure of Ukraine," saying in a Facebook post that facilities in Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk and Zhytomyr regions had been targeted.

Ukrainian Railways reported power outages in certain areas, with 15 trains delayed.

## Jaded with education, more Americans are skipping college

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

JACKSON, Tenn. (AP) — When he looked to the future, Grayson Hart always saw a college degree. He was a good student at a good high school. He wanted to be an actor, or maybe a teacher. Growing up, he believed college was the only route to a good job, stability and a happy life.

The pandemic changed his mind.

A year after high school, Hart is directing a youth theater program in Jackson, Tennessee. He got into every college he applied to but turned them all down. Cost was a big factor, but a year of remote learning also gave him the time and confidence to forge his own path.

"There were a lot of us with the pandemic, we kind of had a do-it-yourself kind of attitude of like, 'Oh — I can figure this out,'" he said. "Why do I want to put in all the money to get a piece of paper that really isn't going to help with what I'm doing right now?"

Hart is among hundreds of thousands of young people who came of age during the pandemic but didn't go to college. Many have turned to hourly jobs or careers that don't require a degree, while others have been deterred by high tuition and the prospect of student debt.

What first looked like a pandemic blip has turned into a crisis. Nationwide, undergraduate college enrollment dropped 8% from 2019 to 2022, with declines even after returning to in-person classes, according to data from the National Student Clearinghouse. The slide in the college-going rate since 2018 is the steepest on record, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Economists say the impact could be dire.

At worst, it could signal a new generation with little faith in the value of a college degree. At minimum, it appears those who passed on college during the pandemic are opting out for good. Predictions that they would enroll after a year or two haven't borne out.

Fewer college graduates could worsen labor shortages in fields from health care to information technology. For those who forgo college, it usually means lower lifetime earnings — 75% less compared with those who get bachelor's degrees, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. And when the economy sours, those without degrees are more likely to lose jobs.

"It's quite a dangerous proposition for the strength of our national economy," said Zack Mabel, a Georgetown researcher.

In dozens of interviews with The Associated Press, educators, researchers and students described a generation jaded by education institutions. Largely left on their own amid remote learning, many took part-time jobs. Some felt they weren't learning anything, and the idea of four more years of school, or even two, held little appeal.

At the same time, the nation's student debt has soared. The issue has loomed large in the minds of young Americans as President Joe Biden pushes to cancel huge swaths of debt, an effort the Supreme Court appears poised to block.

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As a kid, Hart dreamed of going to Penn State to study musical theater. His family encouraged college, and he went to a private Christian high school where it's an expectation.

But when classes went online, he spent more time pursuing creative outlets. He felt a new sense of independence, and the stress of school faded.

"I was like, 'OK, what's this thing that's not on my back constantly?'" Hart said. "I can do things that I can enjoy. I can also do things that are important to me. And I kind of relaxed more in life and enjoyed life."

He started working at a smoothie shop and realized he could earn a steady paycheck without a degree. By the time he graduated, he had left college plans behind.

It happened at public as well as private schools. Some counselors and principals were shocked to see graduates flocking to jobs at Amazon warehouses or scratching together income in the gig economy.

The shift has been stark in Jackson, where just four in 10 of the county's public high school graduates immediately went to college in 2021, down from six in 10 in 2019. That drop is far steeper than the nation overall, which declined from 66% to 62%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Jackson's leaders say young people are taking restaurant and retail jobs that pay more than ever. Some are being recruited by manufacturing companies that have aggressively raised wages to fill shortages.

"Students can't seem to resist sign-on bonuses and wages that far exceed any that they've seen before," said Vicki Bunch, the head of workforce development for the area's chamber of commerce.

Across Tennessee, there's growing concern the slide will only accelerate with the opening of several new manufacturing plants. The biggest is a \$5.6 billion Ford plant near Jackson that will produce electric trucks and batteries. It promises to create 5,000 jobs, and its construction is already drawing young workers.

Daniel Moody, 19, was recruited to run plumbing for the plant after graduating from a Memphis high school in 2021. Now earning \$24 an hour, he's glad he passed on college.

"If I would have gone to college after school, I would be dead broke," he said. "The type of money we're making out here, you're not going to be making that while you're trying to go to college."

America's college-going rate was generally on the upswing until the pandemic reversed decades of progress. Rates fell even as the nation's population of high school graduates grew, and despite economic upheaval, which typically drives more people into higher education.

In Tennessee, education officials issued a "call to action" after finding just 53% of public high school graduates were enrolling in college in 2021, far below the national average. It was a shock for a state that in 2014 made community college free, leading to a surge in the college-going rate. Now it's at its lowest point since at least 2009.

Searching for answers, education officials crossed the state last year and heard that easy access to jobs, coupled with student debt worries, made college less attractive.

"This generation is different," said Jamia Stokes, a senior director at SCORE, an education nonprofit. "They're more pragmatic about the way they work, about the way they spend their time and their money."

Most states are still collecting data on recent college rates, but early figures are troubling.

In Arkansas, the number of new high school graduates going to college fell from 49% to 42% during the pandemic. Kentucky slid by a similar amount, to 54%. The latest data in Indiana showed a 12-point drop from 2015 to 2020, leading the higher education chief to warn the "future of our state is at risk."

Even more alarming are the figures for Black, Hispanic and low-income students, who saw the largest slides in many states. In Tennessee's class of 2021, just 35% of Hispanic graduates and 44% of Black graduates enrolled in college, compared with 58% of their white peers.

There's some hope the worst has passed. The number of freshmen enrolling at U.S. colleges increased slightly from 2021 to 2022. But that figure, along with total college enrollment, remains far below pre-pandemic levels.

Amid the chaos of the pandemic, many students fell through the cracks, said Scott Campbell, executive director of Persist Nashville, a nonprofit that offers college coaching.

Some students fell behind academically and didn't feel prepared for college. Others lost access to counselors and teachers who help navigate college applications and the complicated process of applying for

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federal student aid.

"Students feel like schools have let them down," Campbell said.

In Jackson, Mia Woodard recalls sitting in her bedroom and trying to fill out a few online college applications. No one from her school had talked to her about the process, she said. As she scrolled through the forms, she was sure of her Social Security number and little else.

"None of them even mentioned anything college-wise to me," said Woodard, who is biracial and transferred high schools to escape racist bullying. "It might be because they didn't believe in me."

She says she never heard back from the colleges. She wonders whether to blame her shaky Wi-Fi, or if she simply failed to provide the right information.

A spokesperson for the Jackson school system, Greg Hammond, said it provides several opportunities for students to gain exposure to higher education, including an annual college fair for seniors.

"Mia was an at-risk student," Hammond said. "Our school counselors provide additional supports for high school students in this category. It is, however, difficult to provide post-secondary planning and assistance to students who don't participate in these services."

Woodard, who had hoped to be the first in her family to get a college degree, now works at a restaurant and lives with her dad. She's looking for a second job so she can afford to live on her own. Then maybe she'll pursue her dream of getting a culinary arts degree.

"It's still kind of 50-50," she said of her chances.

If there's a bright spot, experts say, it's that more young people are pursuing education programs other than a four-year degree. Some states are seeing growing demand for apprenticeships in the trades, which usually provide certificates and other credentials.

After a dip in 2020, the number of new apprentices in the U.S. has rebounded to near pre-pandemic levels, according to the Department of Labor.

Before the pandemic, Boone Williams was the type of student colleges compete for. He took advanced classes and got A's. He grew up around agriculture and thought about going to college for animal science.

But when his school outside Nashville sent students home his junior year, he tuned out. Instead of logging on for virtual classes, he worked at local farms, breaking horses or helping with cattle.

"I stopped applying myself once COVID came around," the 20-year-old said. "I was focusing on making money rather than going to school."

When a family friend told him about union apprenticeships, he jumped at the chance to get paid for hands-on work while mastering a craft.

Today he works for a plumbing company and takes night classes at a Nashville union.

The pay is modest, Williams said, but eventually he expects to earn far more than friends who took quick jobs after high school. He even thinks he's better off than some who went to college — he knows too many who dropped out or took on debt for degrees they never used.

"In the long run, I'm going to be way more set than any of them," he said.

Back in Jackson, Hart says he's doing what he loves and contributing to the city's growing arts community. Still, he wonders what's next. His job pays enough for stability but not a whole lot more. He sometimes finds himself thinking about Broadway, but he doesn't have a clear plan for the next 10 years.

"I do worry about the future and what that may look like for me," he said. "But right now I'm trying to remind myself that I am good where I'm at, and we'll take it one step at a time."

## China's Xi calls for 'more quickly elevating' armed forces

BEIJING (AP) — China's leader Xi Jinping has called for "more quickly elevating the armed forces to world-class standards," in a speech just days after a top diplomat warned of the growing possibility of conflict with the U.S. unless Washington changes course.

China must maximize its "national strategic capabilities" in a bid to "systematically upgrade the country's overall strength to cope with strategic risks, safeguard strategic interests and realize strategic objectives," Xi said Wednesday.

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His remarks to delegates in the ceremonial parliament representing the People's Liberation Army, the military wing of the ruling Communist Party, and the paramilitary People's Armed Police, were carried by the official Xinhua News Agency.

Xi issued a series of calls to accelerate the build-up of self-reliance in science and technology, bolster strategic capabilities in emergency fields, make industrial and supply chains more resilient and make national reserves "more capable of safeguarding national security."

The program laid out by Xi dovetails with a number of national strategies already underway, including the "Made in China 2025" campaign to make China dominant in 10 key fields from integrated circuits to aerospace, and a decades-old campaign for civilian-military integration in the economy.

Xi also mentioned the need for "achieving the goals for the centenary of the PLA in 2027," a date by which, according to some U.S. observers, China intends to have the capability of conquering self-governing Taiwan, an American ally, by military means.

China has defined the centenary goals in mostly vague terms, such as greater "informatization" and raising the PLA to "world-class standards."

China needs to build "a strong system of strategic deterrent forces, raise the presence of combat forces in new domains and of new qualities, and deeply promote combat-oriented military training," according to a speech Xi gave last year.

On Tuesday, Foreign Minister Qin Gang had warned in unusually stark terms about the possibility of U.S.-China frictions leading to something more dire.

"If the United States does not hit the brake, but continues to speed down the wrong path, no amount of guardrails can prevent derailing and there surely will be conflict and confrontation," Qin said in his first news conference since taking up his post last year.

"Such competition is a reckless gamble, with the stakes being the fundamental interests of the two peoples and even the future of humanity," he added.

That echoed remarks made by Xi on Monday to delegates that seemed to underscore Chinese frustration with U.S. restrictions on access to technology and its support for Taiwan and regional military blocs in unusually blunt terms.

"Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented grave challenges to our nation's development," Xi was quoted as saying by the official Xinhua News Agency.

A State Department spokesperson, Ned Price, responded by saying Washington wants to "coexist responsibly" within the global trade and political system and has no intention of suppressing China.

"This is not about containing China. This is not about suppressing China. This is not about holding China back," Price said in Washington. "We want to have that constructive competition that is fair" and "doesn't veer into that conflict."

Meanwhile on Wednesday, Gen. Laura J. Richardson, Commander of the U.S. Southern Command, which is responsible for South America and the Caribbean, testified before the House Armed Services Committee that China and Russia were "malign actors" that are "aggressively exerting influence over our democratic neighbors."

China is "spreading its malign influence, wielding its economic might, and conducting gray zone activities to expand its military and political access and influence," Richardson said.

"This is a strategic risk that we can't accept or ignore," she added.

Among other activities, China has built a massive embassy in the Bahamas, just 80 kilometers (50 miles) off the coast of Florida.

"Presence and proximity absolutely matter, and a stable and secure Western Hemisphere is critical to homeland defense," Richardson said.

On Thursday, Beijing's Foreign Ministry dismissed U.S. questions and criticisms of Chinese intentions as an attempt to "make excuses for its military expansion and pursuit of hegemony."

"Before criticizing and blaming other countries, the U.S., as the only military superpower armed to the

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teeth, should reflect on what it can and should do," spokesperson Mao Ning said at a daily briefing.

In a nod to a China-U.S. relationship that has sunk to its lowest level in decades, she said Washington "should meet China halfway and push China-U.S. relations back on the track of sound and stable development, which is beneficial to both countries and the world."

## Shohei Ohtani and Japan: It's much more than just baseball

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — He'd paid about \$80 for his ticket. He wore a Japan cap above a blue Los Angeles Angels jersey. And as he enthused about the sensation that is Shohei Ohtani, baseball fan Hotaru Shiromizu was talking about far more than sports.

Shiromizu, 23, was part of the quilt of thousands of colorfully dressed fans outside the Tokyo Dome on Thursday afternoon. They paced, they camped out, and they discussed their hopes of seeing Ohtani pitch — and hit — against China in Japan's opening game in the World Baseball Classic.

"He's a legendary player, but he's more than just a good player," Shiromizu said, using his translator app to help clarify a few thoughts in English. "His aspirations — his achievements — have had a positive influence on all Japanese people."

He added: "All the kids want to be like Ohtani."

These days, Japanese culture and politics feel more tenuous than a few decades ago. The economy is stagnant. The birthrate is among the world's lowest. A former prime minister was assassinated a few months ago on the street. And despite the "Cool Japan" image abroad, the nation faces uncertainty on many fronts, a corruption scandal surrounding the pandemic-delayed 2020 Tokyo Olympics, and a giant Asian rival in neighboring China.

For many, Ohtani is the antidote.

### PART OF AN EVOLUTION

He does things modern players don't do. He's a throwback who pitches, bats and can play in the field. Many call him the finest player in the major leagues. If that's the case, then he's better than Americans — Latin Americans, too — at what they consider their own game.

He's the culmination — so far, at least — of an evolution in Japanese baseball that began when the game was introduced to the country in 1872 by an American professor. And his fame has now surpassed that of players like Ichiro Suzuki and Hideo Nomo, who came before him.

One of them could hit really well. One could pitch the same way. But Ohtani? He does both, and with more power — on the pitcher's mound and at bat — than either Ichiro or Nomo.

"I suppose the idolization of Ohtani in Japan reflects its own inferiority complex vis a vis the fatherland of baseball that is the U.S.," said Koichi Nakano, who teaches politics and culture in Tokyo at Sophia University.

"Baseball is so major here, but it has long been said that Japanese baseball, called *yakyu*, is different from 'real' baseball in America. Books have been written and published on the topic," Nakano said. "So each time where there is a Japanese 'export' that was hugely successful in MLB, the Japanese are enthralled."

The wait to see Ohtani play again in Japan is also driving the buzz around him — and the sellouts at the Tokyo Dome.

It had been almost 2,000 days since Ohtani played his last inning in Japan on Oct. 9, 2017, for the Nippon Ham-Fighters before leaving for California. That appearance drought ended in a practice game on Monday when Ohtani hit a pair of three-run homers off the Hanshin Tigers.

Keiichiro Shiotsuka, a businessman waiting outside the stadium, called Ohtani "a treasure of Japan."

"I don't know if such a player like him will ever exist in the future, so I'm happy he's now playing in Japan," he said.

### TALENT AND CHARACTER

Atop all the talent, Ohtani has a sterling reputation. No scandals. No tabloid stories about his social life. He's overflowing with \$20 million in endorsements, more than any other major leaguer. And he could sign the largest contract in baseball history — the number \$500 million has been kicked around — when he

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becomes a free agent after this season.

"He is very authentic," said Masako Yamamoto, standing in a ticket line outside the Tokyo Dome with her 12-year-old son Shutaro and other family members. Facing her was a pulsating billboard with Ohtani's image flashing.

"As a human, he's polite and very charming and good to people," she said. "He's special. His personality is so even. He seems to make the atmosphere."

Ohtani came out of Japan's regimented baseball system at Hanamaki Higashi High School in largely rural Iwate prefecture in northeastern Japan. Blue Jays pitcher Yusei Kikuchi attended the same high school a few years earlier. The military-like system has its critics, but Ohtani is making it look good.

"Ohtani was raised in this Japanese, martial arts-inspired training system where you join a baseball team and you play year-round," Robert Whiting, who has written several books on Japanese baseball and lived here off and on for 60 years, said in an interview last year with The Associated Press.

"Ichiro, in his first year in high school was probably the best player on the team, but he couldn't play. He had to do the laundry and cook the meals. He'd get up in the middle of night and practice his swing," Whiting said. "The same thing with Ohtani. He was cleaning toilets in high school during his first year."

Ohtani is the polar opposite of Ichiro, who had an edge. The Japanese phrase "deru kugi wa utareru" captures Ichiro: "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."

In explaining how baseball took root in Japan, Whiting and others have pointed to the importance of a game in 1896 in Yokohama between Japanese and Americans. Japan won 29-4, and many of the players were from Samurai families.

The result was front-page news in Japan. The victory is thought to have given Japan confidence as it was modernizing, coming out of centuries of isolation, and showed it could compete against the industrially advanced West.

"Ohtani is the latest of these idols, but he might be even bigger than any before him," said Nakano, the political scientist. He noted that only Ohtani hits and pitches both — just like the old-timers used to, which gives him a unique profile. "He is 'Made in Japan,' but more real now than America players."

## Chaim Topol, Israeli actor known for Fiddler's Tevye, dies

JERUSALEM (AP) — Chaim Topol, a leading Israeli actor who charmed generations of theatergoers and movie-watchers with his portrayal of Tevye, the long-suffering and charismatic milkman in "Fiddler on the Roof," has died in Tel Aviv, Israeli leaders said Thursday. He was 87.

The cause was not immediately released.

Israeli leaders on Thursday tweeted their memories and condolences to Topol's family.

Israel's ceremonial president, Isaac Herzog hailed Topol as "one of the most outstanding Israeli actors," who "filled the movie screens with his presence and above all entered deep into our hearts."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Topol's "contribution to Israeli culture will continue to exist for generations."

Benny Gantz, Israel's former minister of defense, praised Topol for helping Israelis connect to their roots.

"We laughed and cried at the same time over the deepest wounds of Israeli society," he wrote of Topol's performance.

Yair Lapid, head of Israel's opposition, said Topol taught Israelis "love of culture and love of the land."

Topol's charity, Jordan River Village, also announced his death, paying tribute to him as an "inspiration" whose "legacy will continue for generations to come."

A recipient of two Golden Globe awards and nominee for both an Academy Award and a Tony Award, Topol long has ranked among Israel's most decorated actors. More recently in 2015, he was celebrated for his contributions to film and culture with the Israel Prize for lifetime achievement, his country's most prestigious honor. Up until a few years ago, he remained involved in theater and said he still fielded requests to play Tevye.

Topol got his start in acting in a theatrical troupe in the Israeli army in the 1950s, where he met his



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future wife Galia. His first major breakthrough was the lead role in the 1964 hit Israeli film *Sallah Shabati*, about the hardships of Middle Eastern immigrants to Israel. The film made history as the first Israeli film to earn an Academy Award nomination and also gave Topol his first Golden Globe Award.

Two years later, he made his English-language film debut alongside Kirk Douglas in "Cast a Giant Shadow." But the role of his life arrived in the long-running musical "Fiddler on the Roof," in which he played the dairyman protagonist, Tevye, a Jewish father trying to maintain his family's cultural traditions despite the turmoil gripping their Russian shtetl.

With his rich voice, folksy witticisms and commanding stage presence, Topol's Tevye, driving his horse-drawn buggy and delivering milk, butter and eggs to the rich, became a popular hero in Israel and around the world.

After years of playing Tevye on stage in London and on Broadway, he scored the lead role in the 1971 Norman Jewison-directed film version, winning the Golden Globe award for lead actor and being nominated for a Best Actor Academy Award. He lost out to Gene Hackman in "The French Connection."

Topol played the part more than 3,500 times on stage, most recently in 2009. With the help of heavy makeup and costume work, he first portrayed the much older, burlier dairyman in his 30s and quite literally aged into the role.

Topol faced tough competition securing the role in Jewison's hit film — scores of talents have played Tevye in over a dozen languages since "Fiddler on the Roof" first appeared. Topol has said his personal experience as the descendant of Russian Jews helped him relate to Tevye and deepen his performance.

In an interview with The Associated Press from his Tel Aviv home in 2015, on the occasion of accepting the Israel prize for lifetime achievement, Topol traced his meteoric rise from modest beginnings to worldwide fame.

"I wasn't brought up in Hollywood. I was brought up in a kibbutz," he said. "Sometimes I am surprised when I come to China or when I come to Tokyo or when I come to France or when I come wherever and the clerk at the immigration says 'Topol, Topol, are you Topol?'"

Topol also starred in more than 30 other movies, including as the lead in "Galileo," Dr. Hans Zarkov in "Flash Gordon" and James Bond's foil-turned-ally Milos Columbo in "For Your Eyes Only" alongside Roger Moore.

But he became synonymous with just one role — Tevye. Pouring his heart out about his impoverished Jewish community over the years, Topol made audiences laugh and cry from Broadway and West End stages.

"How many people are known for one part? How many people in my profession are known worldwide?" he told the AP. "I'm not complaining."

Yet Topol said he sometimes needed to look outside of acting to find meaning in his life. He devoted much of his later years to charity as chairman of the board of Jordan River Village, a camp serving Middle Eastern children with life-threatening diseases.

"I am interested in charities and find it more fulfilling than running from one (acting) part to another," he said. "When you are successful in a film and the money flows, yes, obviously, it is very nice. But to tell you that is the most important thing, I am not sure."

Topol is survived by his wife and three children.

## Why is Indonesia moving its capital from Jakarta to Borneo?

By EDNA TARIGAN and VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Jakarta is congested, polluted, prone to earthquakes and rapidly sinking into the Java Sea. Now the government is in the process of leaving, moving Indonesia's capital to the island of Borneo.

Indonesian officials say the new metropolis will be a "sustainable forest city" that puts the environment at the heart of the development and aims to be carbon-neutral by 2045.

But environmentalists warn that the capital will cause massive deforestation, threaten the habitat of

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endangered species such as orangutans and imperil the homes of Indigenous communities.

While access to the new capital's site is usually limited, The Associated Press was allowed to tour parts of the site to view construction progress in early March.

Here's a look at why the capital is moving, the government's plans and why activists are worried about how it will impact the environment, endangered species and Indigenous communities located near the project site.

## WHY IS INDONESIA MOVING ITS CAPITAL?

Jakarta is home to about 10 million people and three times that number in the greater metropolitan area. It has been described as the world's most rapidly sinking city, and at the current rate, it is estimated that one-third of the city could be submerged by 2050. The main cause is uncontrolled ground water extraction, but it has been exacerbated by the rising Java Sea due to climate change.

Its air and groundwater are heavily polluted, it floods regularly and its streets are so clogged that it's estimated congestion costs the economy \$4.5 billion a year.

President Joko Widodo envisions the construction of a new capital as a nostrum for the problems plaguing Jakarta, reducing its population while allowing the country to start fresh with a "sustainable city."

## WHAT WILL THE NEW CAPITAL BE LIKE?

Widodo's plan to establish the city of Nusantara — an old Javanese term meaning "archipelago" — will entail constructing government buildings and housing from scratch. Initial estimates were that over 1.5 million civil servants would be relocated to the city, some 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) northeast of Jakarta, though ministries and government agencies are still working to finalize that number.

Bambang Susantono, head of the Nusantara National Capital Authority said that the new capital city will apply the "forest city" concept, with 65% of the area being reforested.

The city is expected to be inaugurated on Aug. 17 next year to coincide with Indonesia's Independence Day. New capital authorities said that the final stages of the city, however, likely won't be completed until 2045, marking the nation's hundredth anniversary.

## WHY ARE ENVIRONMENTALISTS CONCERNED?

Skeptics worry, however, about the environmental impact of building a sprawling 256,000-hectare (990-square-mile) city down in Borneo's East Kalimantan province, which is home to orangutans, leopards and a wide array of other wildlife.

Forest Watch Indonesia, an Indonesian nongovernmental organization that monitors forestry issues, warned in a November 2022 report that most of the forested areas in the new capital are "production forests" meaning permits could be granted for forestry and extractive activities that would lead to further deforestation. Until now there has been no certainty regarding the protection status of the remaining natural forests in the new capital city area, the report said.

Data analysis from AP also showed that the region can expect more days of extreme heat in years to come.

## HOW ARE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IMPACTED?

At least five villages with more than 100 Indigenous Balik people are relocating because of the construction, with more villages expected to be uprooted as the building site expands.

The government said the new capital has received support from local community leaders, and has provided compensation to people whose land is being used for the city.

But Sibukdin, an Indigenous leader who like many in the country only uses one name and lives in Sepaku, a ward very close to the construction area, said community members felt compelled to take the money they were offered by the government without knowing how compensation is calculated or if it was fair, he said.

## Indonesia unveils construction site of new capital city

By EDNA TARIGAN and VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

PENAJAM PASER UTARA, Indonesia (AP) — Orange-red ground has been broken in the jungle of East Borneo, where the Indonesian government has begun construction of its new capital city.

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Officials promise a “sustainable forest city” that puts the environment at the heart of development and aims to be carbon-neutral by 2045. But the project has been plagued by criticism from environmentalists and Indigenous communities, who say it degrades the environment, further shrinks the habitat of endangered animals such as orangutans and displaces Indigenous people that rely on the land for their livelihoods.

Indonesia began construction of the new capital in mid 2022, after President Joko Widodo announced that Jakarta — the congested, polluted current capital that is prone to earthquakes and rapidly sinking into the Java Sea — would be retired from capital status.

Plans for the new capital — about twice the size of New York City — are grandeur. Officials tout the creation of a futuristic green city centered on forest, parks and food production that utilizes renewable energy resources, “smart” waste management and green buildings.

“We have to think beyond what is happening today and try to tackle (things) that are futuristic,” said Bambang Susantono, chairman of Nusantara National Capital Authority, speaking about the city’s design and ability to answer future challenges.

Digital renderings shared by the government show a city surrounded by forest, with people walking on tree-lined sidewalks and buildings with plant-covered rooftops surrounded by walking paths, ponds, clean creeks and lush forest.

Building architecture is inspired by modern urban towers combined with traditional Indonesian architecture: the presidential palace in the shape of a Garuda — a mythical bird and the national symbol of Indonesia — and other buildings that give a stylistic nod to traditional architecture used by Indigenous groups around the archipelago.

In its current state, the new city is far from the tidy finish presented by its planners, but there is progress. Basuki Hadimuljono, Indonesia’s minister for public works and housing, said in February that the city’s infrastructure is 14% completed.

Some 7,000 construction workers are clearing, plowing and building the first phases of the site. Worker dormitories, basic roads and a helipad are already being used. Construction of key buildings — such as the presidential palace — is expected to be completed by August 2024.

Sites visited by The Associated Press in early March showed mounds of freshly turned earth with excavators and cranes around them. At least one site has a sign with a QR code that visitors can scan to see 3D visuals of what the area will look like when finished; others have printed signboards showing what’s to come.

The government has said it’s working to be considerate of the environment. Signs of a more-conscious approach to construction are visible: patches of trees remain fenced-off to protect them from machinery, a plant nursery has already started for the replanting process officials promise and industrial forest surrounds the site.

But with construction set to ramp up this year, environmentalists warn building a metropolis will speed up deforestation in one of the world’s largest and oldest stretches of tropical rainforest. Forests, called the lungs of the world, suck in planet-warming carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and are home to numerous wildlife species. The island has already been compromised by palm oil plantations and coal mines.

Dwi Sawung, an infrastructure specialist at the Indonesian Forum for Living Environment, an environmental nongovernmental organization that has been monitoring the new capital project, said that the government’s plans lack consideration of the region’s unique wildlife like orangutans and sun bears. The new city cuts through an important animal corridor.

“The animals should be relocated first and then build the construction,” he said. “But since they need to hurry up, they just built the area without relocating the animals first.”

Experts have also expressed concerns about how the new capital will be powered. While the government vows the city will rely on a “smart energy” system, groups worry that some of the region’s coal-fired power plants could be used in the short term.

Indonesia has significant energy potential from solar, hydropower, geothermal, wind and other sources, but only some 12% of them are tapped, according to the International Renewable Energy Agency. And

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while user-friendly public transport might keep cars off the city's roads, there will likely be extensive air travel between the new capital and Jakarta, about 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) away.

Indigenous groups that reside in the region and already lost parts of their land fear that urban sprawl from the new capital could make things even worse.

Officials have vowed to respect Indigenous rights and compensate those losing their homes. Local officials said they would verify all land claims and accept documents of proof of ownership, but much of the area is passed down through families without paperwork and not all tribal areas are formally recognized.

"We do not want to be relocated. We do not want they move our graves of our ancestors, or make changes or remove our historical site," said Sibukdin, an Indigenous community leader, who like many in the country only uses one name and lives in Sepaku, a ward very close to the construction area.

Susantono said that Indigenous residents have "a couple of options for them to be included in the process" including compensation, relocation or share ownership of stores that will open.

"We are going to always persuade them and tell them about the future of the city," he said. "Hopefully they will understand that this is for the sake of everybody."

But as Indonesia continues to court investors, construction is moving forward, with the government planning to inaugurate the city on Aug. 17 next year to coincide with Indonesia's Independence Day.

"Nusantara is the city for tomorrow," said Susantono. "It will become a vibrant city, not just a government city."

## Ex-Navajo President Zah, guided by love for people, dies

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Peterson Zah, a monumental Navajo Nation leader who guided the tribe through a politically tumultuous era and worked tirelessly to correct wrongdoings against Native Americans, has died.

Zah died late Tuesday at a hospital in Fort Defiance, Arizona, after a lengthy illness, his family and the tribe announced. He was 85.

Zah was the first president elected on the Navajo Nation — the largest tribal reservation in the U.S. — in 1990 after the government was restructured into three branches to prevent power from being concentrated in the chairman's office. At the time, the tribe was reeling from a deadly riot incited by Zah's political rival, former Chairman Peter MacDonald, a year earlier.

Zah vowed to rebuild the tribe, and to support family and education, speaking with people in ways that imparted mutual respect, said his longtime friend Eric Eberhard. Zah was as comfortable putting on dress clothes to represent Navajos in Washington, D.C., as he was driving his old pickup truck around the reservation and sitting on the ground, listening to people who were struggling, he said.

"People trusted him, they knew he was honest," Eberhard said Tuesday.

Zah will be buried Saturday morning at a private service. A community reception will follow just outside Window Rock, Arizona. His family expressed thanks for the outpouring of love and support they've received.

"It's heartwarming to hear from the many people who share stories about Peterson, which provide comfort for the family," they said in a statement late Wednesday.

Aspiring politicians on and off the Navajo Nation sought Zah's advice and endorsement. He rode with Hillary Clinton in the Navajo Nation parade a month before Bill Clinton was elected president. Zah later campaigned for Hillary Clinton in her bid for the presidency.

He recorded countless campaign advertisements over the years in the Navajo language that aired on the radio, mostly siding with Democrats. But he made friends with Republicans, too, including the late Arizona U.S. Sen. John McCain, whom he endorsed in the 2000 presidential election as someone who could work across the aisle.

Zah was born in December 1937 in remote Low Mountain, a section of the reservation embroiled in a decades-long land dispute with the neighboring Hopi Tribe that resulted in the relocation of thousands of Navajos and hundreds of Hopis. He attended boarding school, graduating from the Phoenix Indian School, and rejected notions that he wasn't suited for college, Eberhard said.

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Zah attended community college, then Arizona State University on a basketball scholarship, where he earned a degree in education. He went on to teach carpentry on the reservation and other vocational skills. He later co-founded a federally funded legal advocacy organization that served Navajos, Hopis and Apaches that still exists today.

Despite never having held a major elected position, Zah captured the tribal chairman's post in 1982, campaigning in a white, battered 1950s International pickup that he fixed up himself, drove for decades and which became a symbol of his low-key style, Eberhard said.

Under Zah's leadership, the tribe established a now multi-billion-dollar Permanent Fund in 1985 after winning a court battle with Kerr McGee that found the tribe had authority to tax companies that extract minerals from the 27,000 square-mile (69,000 square-kilometer) reservation. All coal, pipeline, oil and gas leases were renegotiated, which increased payments to the tribe. A portion of that money is added annually to the Permanent Fund.

Former Hopi Chairman Ivan Sydney, whose tenure overlapped with Zah's as chairman, said the two mended the acrimonious relationship between the neighboring tribes over the land dispute. They agreed to meet in person, without any lawyers, to come up with ways to help their people. Even after their terms ended, they attended tribal inaugurations and other events together.

Zah would say "let's go turn some heads," Sydney recalled Wednesday after visiting with Zah's family. "We would go together, sit together and get introduced together."

Zah sometimes was referred to as the Native American Robert Kennedy because of his charisma, ideas and ability to get things done, including lobbying federal officials to ensure Native Americans could use peyote as a religious sacrament, his longtime friend Charles Wilkinson said last year.

Zah also worked to ensure Native Americans were reflected in federal environmental laws like the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act.

Zah told The Associated Press in January 2022 that respecting people's differences was key to maintaining a sense of beauty in life and improving the world for future generations. He struggled to name the thing he was most proud of after receiving a lifetime achievement award from a Flagstaff-based environmental group.

"It's hard for me to prioritize in that order," he said. "It's something I enjoyed doing all my life. People have passion, we're born with that, plus a purpose in life."

Zah said he could not have done the work alone and credited team efforts that always included his wife, Rosalind. Throughout his life, he never claimed to be an extraordinary Navajo, just a Navajo with extraordinary experiences.

That resonated with students at Arizona State University, where Zah served as the Native American liaison to the school's president for 15 years, boosting the number of Native students and the number of Native graduates. Zah also pushed colleges and universities to accept Navajo students — regardless of whether they graduated in the Arizona, New Mexico or Utah portion of the reservation — at in-state tuition rates.

"It's thousands upon thousands of Native students not only from Navajo who he encouraged to stay in school, seek advanced degrees and was available to counsel when they hit the rough spots," said Eberhard, who worked for Zah while he was chairman. "He completely altered the way Arizona State University works with Native students."

Current Navajo President Buu Nygren said he first interacted with Zah as a student at ASU, struck by Zah's speech that he described as quiet and structured but powerful and vivid.

"To see him on the ASU campus brought a lot of inspiration to myself," he said. "I probably wouldn't have gone into construction management if he wasn't so influential at ASU."

Zah remained active in Navajo politics after he left ASU, as a consultant to other Navajo leaders on topics ranging from education, veterans and housing.

"He was a good and honest man, a man with heart," former Navajo President Joe Shirley Jr. said late Tuesday. "And his heart was with his family, with the people, with the youth and, certainly, with our nation, our culture and our way of life."

## Biden budget seeks big deficit cuts in challenge to GOP

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With the government at risk of defaulting, President Joe Biden on Thursday will make his opening offer in a high-stakes debate over federal finances as he proposes a federal budget that would cut deficits by nearly \$3 trillion over the next decade.

It's part of a broader attempt by the president to call out House Republicans, who are demanding severe cuts to federal spending in return for lifting the government's legal borrowing limit. But the GOP has no counter offer so far, other than a flat "no" to a budget plan that could form the policy spine of Biden's yet-to-be-declared campaign for reelection in 2024.

"We see this as a value statement," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters Wednesday. "This is something that shows the American people that we take this very seriously when we think about the fiscal responsibility, when we think about how do we move forward."

Biden's package of tax and spending priorities is unlikely to pass the House or Senate as proposed. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., predicted in advance that the plan "will not see the light of day," a sign that it might primarily serve as a messaging document going into the 2024 elections.

Biden will unveil his spending plan in the battleground state of Pennsylvania, staking out what he believes is popular terrain that will make it hard for Republicans to criticize without risking blowback. Biden wants to impose tax hikes on the wealthy to limit federal borrowing, including a reversal of the 2017 tax cuts made by then President Donald Trump on people earning above \$400,000. The added revenues would help to improve Medicare, the government health insurance program for adults over 65.

In the run-up to the plan's release, Biden has floated a new tax on incomes above \$100 million that would target billionaires. He's called for lower prescription drug prices. The tax that companies pay on stock buybacks would be quadrupled, and those earning above \$400,000 would pay an additional Medicare tax that would help to keep the program solvent beyond the year 2050.

Biden's budget would seek to close the "carried interest" loophole that allows wealthy hedge fund managers and others to pay their taxes at a lower rate, and prevent billionaires from being able to set aside large amounts of their holdings in tax-favored retirement accounts, according to an administration official. The plan also projects saving \$24 billion over 10 years by removing a tax subsidy for cryptocurrency transactions.

The official who provided the budget details spoke on condition of anonymity to preview the plan before its official release.

Biden's budget plan also would:

- Expand the ability of Medicare to negotiate on pharmaceutical drug prices, saving an estimated \$160 billion over a decade.
- Auction off rights to the radio spectrum, generating \$50 billion.
- Take new steps to reduce identity theft and unemployment insurance fraud.
- Target insurance companies that overcharge Medicaid, with anticipated savings of \$20 billion through repayments to the government.
- End subsidies valued at \$31 billion for oil and gas companies.
- Scrap a \$19 billion tax break for real estate investors.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., has called for putting the U.S. government on a path toward a balanced budget. But by refusing to raise taxes or cut Social Security and Medicare spending, GOP lawmakers face some harsh math that makes it hard to slash deficits without risking a voter backlash ahead of a presidential election.

McCarthy told The Associated Press that his plan's release has been pushed back because Biden's proposal is only just being issued.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., expressed skepticism in a Monday speech that McCarthy has any coherent plan that House Republicans can coalesce around.

"Enough with the dodging, enough with the excuses," Schumer said. "Show us your plan. And then show us how it's going to get 218 votes on your side of the aisle."

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Biden's deficit reduction goal is significantly higher than the \$2 trillion that he had promised in his State of the Union address last month.

It's a delicate time, with the U.S. economy already in a fragile state because of high inflation. If Biden and Congress fail to increase the statutory debt cap of \$31.4 trillion by this summer, the government could default on payments and shove the U.S. economy into a recession.

Rohit Kumar, a former McConnell aide who is now an executive with the tax consultancy PwC, said Biden's plan does matter "in terms of putting ideas out there." He said that if Biden won a second term, elements of his spending blueprint could be part of negotiations in 2025 over the expiring provisions in the 2017 tax cuts that President Donald Trump signed into law.

Given the scope of the deficit reduction in Biden's proposal, Kumar said, it is unlikely that the president's plan would identify which parts of the expiring tax cuts he plans to keep, as the president has vowed no tax increases on anyone making less than \$400,000. But while the White House has charged that Republican plans would increase deficits by \$3 trillion, about \$2.7 trillion of that total comes from renewing all the Trump-era tax cuts that disproportionately favored the wealthy.

Biden's budget proposal would reverse some of the 2017 law. It would increase the top marginal tax rate to 39.6% on income above \$400,000. For households with \$1 million in income, earnings from capital gains—such as stocks or property sales—would no longer enjoy a discounted tax rate compared to wages.

The president would increase the corporate tax rate to 28% and increase the tax rate on U.S. multinationals' foreign earnings from 10.5% to 21%.

In February, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that the national debt held by the public will grow by more than \$20 trillion over the next decade. The publicly held debt — it reflects the cumulative impact of yearly deficits — would be equal to 118% of U.S. gross domestic product, up from 98% this year. Biden's budget would reduce the debt, though it would still be high relative to historical levels.

Biden has been arguing, first and foremost, that his budget will be fair to workers and middle-class households.

The president contended in a Monday speech that there are around 680 billionaires in the United States and that many of them pay taxes at a lower rate than a typical family.

"No billionaire should be paying a lower tax rate than a firefighter — nobody," Biden said at a gathering of the International Association of Fire Fighters.

## Norfolk Southern CEO bringing apology, aid to Senate hearing

By STEPHEN GROVES and JOSH FUNK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The chief executive of one of the nation's largest railroads is coming to a Senate hearing with an apology and a commitment to send millions of dollars to the village on the Ohio-Pennsylvania border disrupted by a fiery derailment as senators investigate railway safety and the Biden administration's response to the disaster.

"I am deeply sorry for the impact this derailment has had on the people of East Palestine and surrounding communities, and I am determined to make it right," Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw says in prepared remarks released ahead of Thursday's hearing by the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

Shaw says the railroad will do "the right thing" with a \$20 million commitment to help the community recover.

The company has announced several voluntary safety upgrades. Senators, however, have promised a pressing inquiry into the derailment, the company's safety practices and the emergency response to the toppling of 38 railcars, including 11 carrying hazardous materials. Federal regulators have also said Norfolk Southern must do more to improve safety.

No one was injured in the crash, but state and local officials decided to release and burn toxic vinyl chloride from five tanker cars, prompting the evacuation of half of the roughly 5,000 residents of East Palestine. Scenes of billowing smoke above the village, alongside outcry from residents that they are still

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suffering from illnesses, have turned high-level attention to railroad safety and how dangerous materials are transported.

"I want to hear what did they do wrong, what mistakes did they make," said Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., the chair of the committee. "There's been a number of criticisms of what they did, and to have him respond to those criticisms on the record."

Carper joined the top Republican on the committee, Sen. Shelley Capito of West Virginia, in a call with reporters on Wednesday to emphasize they would work in bipartisan fashion "to deliver accountability to the communities and folks who have been impacted."

The East Palestine disaster as well as a spate of other recent train derailments have sparked a show of bipartisanship in the Senate. The committee on Thursday will also hear from Ohio and Pennsylvania senators — one Republican and two Democrats — who are pushing new safety regulations called the Railway Safety Act of 2023.

Train derailments have been getting less common but there were still more than 1,000 of them last year, according to data collected by the Federal Railroad Administration. But even a single train derailment involving hazardous materials can be disastrous.

Noting that a train had derailed in her home state of West Virginia on Wednesday, Capito cast the hearing as the Senate's first step among several on railway safety and emergency response. The new safety regulations would likely need to be considered in the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.

Hazardous materials shipments account for 7% to 8% of the roughly 30 million shipments railroads deliver across the U.S. each year. But railroads often mix shipments and might have one or two cars of hazardous materials on almost any train.

The Association of American Railroads trade group says 99.9% of hazardous materials shipments reach their destinations safely, and railroads are generally regarded as the safest option to transport dangerous chemicals across land.

But Washington lawmakers want to make railroads safer. The Railway Safety Act of 2023, which has gained support from Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., would require more detectors to be installed to check the temperature of wheel bearings more frequently, make sure railroads notify states about the hazardous materials they are transporting, and fund hazmat training for first responders.

Meanwhile, House Republicans have voiced skepticism about passing new regulations on railroads. GOP senators are eyeing the bill and discussed it in their weekly luncheon on Tuesday, but Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., said most of his caucus would prefer the bill be ironed out in a committee.

Norfolk Southern is also under pressure from federal regulators. The National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Railroad Administration both announced investigations this week into the company's safety culture. The NTSB said its investigators will look into five significant accidents involving Norfolk Southern since December 2021.

The company has said it is immediately implementing safety upgrades, including adding "approximately 200 hot bearing detectors" to its network. The NTSB has said a detector warned the crew operating the train that derailed Feb. 3 outside East Palestine, but they couldn't stop the train before more than three dozen cars came off the tracks and caught fire.

Republican Sen. JD Vance of Ohio pointed to those voluntary steps as a sign his bill was "on the right track." But Democratic sponsors of the legislation have said regulations should require the operators to go further.

The Senate bill also touches on a disagreement between railroad worker unions and operators by requiring train crews to continue to have two people. Unions argue that railroads are riskier because of job cuts in the industry over the past six years. Nearly one-third of all rail jobs were eliminated and train crews, they say, deal with fatigue because they are on call night and day.

Republicans, at the same time, are more eager to delve into the emergency response to the East Palestine derailment. Thursday's Senate hearing will also feature environmental protection officials from the federal, state and local levels.



"The people of East Palestine need to know we care," Capito said. "We're going to be investigating the environmental and safety response."

She said President Joe Biden should have visited the community in the aftermath of the derailment. The Democratic president has said he will visit the community at some point, but the White House has not released specific plans. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg went to East Palestine last month and has pressed for increased safety protocols for trains.

Several East Palestine residents were making their way to Washington for Thursday's hearing, including Misti Allison, who has joined a group called Moms Clean Air Force. Officials keep telling the town's residents that air and water tests don't show any dangerous levels of toxins, but Allison and other residents worry about the potential long-term effects.

"Everybody here wants it to be fine. We want that to be true so badly. Everybody loves this community and nobody wants to leave. ... But if it's not, we need to know that," Allison said.

A chemical odor can still be smelled in East Palestine at times, she said, adding: "Congress must hold accountable Norfolk Southern and these polluters and companies that run these train bombs through neighborhoods like ours."

Allison said the railroad appears now to be trying to help the community, but initially Norfolk Southern seemed more worried about getting trains moving again than cleaning up the mess.

"They want to try to make it right now ... however their initial response and how they handled it, you could tell that it was very evident that at the end of the day it's a business and they're going to do whatever they need to do for their profit margins," she said.

## Maine motorists appeal to keep naughty vanity license plates

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Maine (AP) — A Maine vegan whose custom license plate contains the word "tofu" is one of the motorists caught in a state crackdown on vulgar license plates.

Car owners across the United States can pay an extra fee to customize license plates, sparking creativity and personality but causing headaches for state officials who have to decide what's acceptable.

Maine had for several years allowed people to put just about any combination of letters and numbers on their vehicle plates, including words and phrases that other states would ban. But the state decided to change course and this year recalled 274 plates it deemed inappropriate.

Some people are fighting back.

So far the state has rejected all of the appeals, including one brought by the vegan whose license plate referenced tofu.

The state concluded the license plate "LUVTOFU" could've been seen as a reference to sex instead of admiration for bean curd. The motorist insisted there was no mistaking his intent because the back of his car had several tofu-related stickers.

"It's my protest against eating meat and animal products," Peter Starostecki, the disappointed motorist, said after a zoom session with a hearing examiner for the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

Heather Libby and her best friend grudgingly gave up their matching license plates that contained a word for a female dog.

"People are so sensitive nowadays," said Libby, of Jonesport, after a hearing examiner rejected her appeal. "I just think it's foolish."

When the state effectively ended the review process for so-called "vanity" license plates in 2015, some residents obtained their plates with all manner of profanities, including F-bombs, either spelled out or abbreviated.

Residents in a state known for being laconic and even-tempered soon were sporting uncensored plates pairing the F-word with "snow," "haters," and "ALS," — the incurable neurodegenerative disease.

After license plate freedoms spiraled out of control, the Maine Legislature directed the Bureau of Motor Vehicles to reestablish a system for vetting the state's roughly 120,000 vanity license plates.

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The new rules ban derogatory references to age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, religion or disability. Also banned is language that incite violence, or is considered obscene.

Restored as censors, Maine's vehicular officials now walk a similar tightrope as their colleagues in other states.

In 2020, a federal judge ruled California's ban on plates that are "offensive to good taste and decency" was overly broad, and violated constitutional rights to free speech. Earlier this year, Texas officials rejected a license plate similar to Starostecki's — "LVTOFU" — leading to rebuke from an animal rights group.

Maine's rules were narrowly crafted to pass legal muster, officials said.

Secretary of State Shenna Bellows said motorists have the freedom to express themselves, but she said that they should do it on a bumper sticker, not a state-issued license plate.

"We have a public interest in keeping phrases and words that are profane or may incite violence off the roadways," she said.

She said she's happy that most motorists have relinquished their objectionable license plates without a fight. So far, there have been only 13 appeals, but there could be more.

If a motorist loses an appeal to a hearing examiner, then they can sue in Superior Court. So far, no one has taken that step.

As for Starostecki, he was offered another license plate that had become available, V3GAN. But he decided he was done with vanity plates. He's awaiting a new license plate — a boring one randomly selected by the state.

Libby, who lost her B-word plate, got a custom plate celebrating her dog Zeus, named for the mythical god of thunder. "That could be offensive to someone because it's a Greek god," she quipped. "But I hope not."

## Suns' Kevin Durant out after injuring ankle in pregame slip

By DAVID BRANDT AP Sports Writer

PHOENIX (AP) — Kevin Durant's home debut with the Phoenix Suns will have to wait a little longer.

The 13-time All-Star slipped on the floor during pregame warmups and was ruled out Wednesday night against the Oklahoma City Thunder because of left ankle soreness.

The game was supposed to be Durant's home debut with his new team. He has played in three games since being traded to the Suns, but all were on the road.

"We'll get more testing done tomorrow," Suns coach Monty Williams said. "Right now, it's just an ankle sprain and we don't have anything official to report."

Video showed Durant driving to the basket during warmups when he rolled his left ankle as he jumped. He immediately hopped up and continued his pregame work, but several minutes later, the Suns confirmed that Durant would miss the game.

He was not on the bench during the game. Torrey Craig started in Durant's place and the Suns rolled to a 132-101 victory for their fourth straight win. Devin Booker scored 44 points.

Durant averaged 26.7 points and 7.3 rebounds in his three games with Phoenix. He wasn't in the locker room when it was opened for postgame media access.

"I know how much he loves to play and wanted to play," guard Chris Paul said. "But stuff happens."

Phoenix traded for Durant and T.J. Warren in a blockbuster deal in February, sending Mikal Bridges, Cam Johnson, Jae Crowder, four first-round picks and other draft compensation to the Brooklyn Nets.

The Suns have looked like a juggernaut in the three games Durant has played, winning all of them. But the slip was a reminder that the 34-year-old has missed a lot of time with injuries over the past four seasons.

Durant was out the entire 2019-20 campaign because of an Achilles injury. He has missed time this season with a sprained knee ligament. Now, an ankle injury.

"He's out there, working his tail off, getting ready for the game and twists his ankle," Williams said. "You can't get frustrated about that. It's life, you know what I'm saying? I felt bad for him because he feels bad."

## Texas Tech coach Adams resigns after insensitive comments

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By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Texas Tech coach Mark Adams, who had been suspended recently for racially insensitive comments made toward one of his players, resigned shortly after the Red Raiders were eliminated from the Big 12 Tournament on Wednesday night.

Second-year assistant Corey Williams had led the Red Raiders in their 78-62 loss to West Virginia.

The incident involving Adams occurred in a meeting with a player, who wasn't identified, Texas Tech said Sunday in announcing his suspension. The school said Adams "was encouraging the student-athlete to be more receptive to coaching and referenced Bible verses about workers, teachers, parents, and slaves serving their masters."

Red Raiders athletic director Kirby Hocutt learned of the incident last Friday and issued a written reprimand, and Adams coached them in a regular season-ending loss to Oklahoma State the next day. But after Hocutt investigated the situation further, he decided to suspend Adams just three days before the start of the Big 12 Tournament.

In its release Wednesday about Adams stepping down, the school said Hocutt determined after the inquiry that the racially insensitive comment was unintentional and an isolated incident.

Adams waited until his team was eliminated before announcing that he was stepping down.

"My lifelong goal was to help and be a positive influence on my players, and to be a part of the Texas Tech men's basketball team," Adams said in a statement. "However, both the university and I believe this incident has become a distraction for the Texas Tech men's basketball team and the university, which I care about so deeply."

This isn't the first time that high-profile coaches have been in trouble for insensitive comments.

Three years ago, Pat Chambers resigned at Penn State after one of his former players revealed the coach said he wanted to "loosen the noose that's around your neck" when talking to the player about helping him reduce stress; he was hired at Florida Gulf Coast this season. And during the 2020-21 season, Creighton coach Greg McDermott apologized for telling his team after a loss to "stay on the plantation" as a way to reminding them to stick together; he was suspended for one game.

The 66-year-old Adams graduated from Texas Tech in 1979 and had been on the staff there since 2016, beginning as director of basketball operations under Tubby Smith and then spending time on Chris Beard's staff. He was elevated to head coach when Beard departed for Texas, and signed a \$15.5 million, five-year contract extension last spring.

The extension came after Adams led the Red Raiders to the finals of the Big 12 Tournament, where they lost to eventual national champion Kansas. They went to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament in his first season in charge.

Things soured quickly this season, though. Texas Tech lost its first eight conference games, and any hope of making a run to the Big 12 Tournament title and a return to the NCAA tourney ended with a dismal effort against the Mountaineers.

"If I'm being honest, it's a lot of weight on these kids right now. They've been through a lot in the last week or so," Williams said afterward. "And in some ways, I just feel like it caught up with them, and they wanted to win."

"They gave their best. And once the ball stopped falling in a little bit, it got a little bit more tougher," he added. "The hill became a lot steeper, and unfortunate we weren't able to make up the difference."

## Friend warned police Americans feared missing in Mexico

By JAMES POLLARD, JAKE BLEIBERG and JULIE WATSON Associated Press/Report for America

LAKE CITY, S.C. (AP) — The frantic effort to rescue four Americans taken captive in Mexico in a kidnapping that left two dead came after a woman traveling with the group contacted police when they did not return to the U.S. side as expected.

Cheryl Orange, who did not cross into Mexico with the others, told The Associated Press in a text message that her three friends were supposed to return within 15 minutes after dropping off their companion, Latavia McGee, for cosmetic surgery in the Mexican border city of Matamoros on Friday.

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Orange stayed behind at a motel in Brownsville, Texas, and said she grew concerned as the hours passed and she did not hear from the others.

The five friends had driven a rented minivan from South Carolina on Thursday to the southern tip of Texas, according to a police report based on Orange's account. Four of them left Friday morning around 8 a.m. to go to Mexico.

Orange's statements and the report offer the most detailed account so far of what led to the kidnapping that saw McGee and another friend whisked back to a U.S. hospital Tuesday after Mexican authorities rescued them and found the bodies of their two friends at a wooden shack on the outskirts of Matamoros. The attack also left a Mexican woman dead.

Orange told police she didn't cross the border because she didn't have her identification. She said she could not provide additional details because she was awaiting a call from McGee, who was to be released from a hospital in Brownsville. The other wounded American, Eric Williams, was also being treated at the hospital for a gunshot wound to the leg.

Americans Zindell Brown and Shaeed Woodard died in the attack.

Orange confirmed via text that the friends went on the trip to accompany McGee for cosmetic surgery.

"She simply went for a cosmetic surgery, and that's it. That's all, and this happened to them," Orange said.

Mexican authorities have said the group was fired on and crashed their van soon after they crossed into Matamoros Friday, as drug cartel factions tore through the streets.

The Americans were hauled off in a pickup truck, and Mexican authorities frantically searched as the cartel moved them around — even taking them to a medical clinic — "to create confusion and avoid efforts to rescue them," the region's governor, Américo Villarreal, said Tuesday.

Orange told authorities in Brownsville that she had everyone's luggage but had been unable to reach them, according to the police report.

"She tried calling their cell phones but they sound turned off," the report states.

It said Orange was given a phone number to follow up with criminal investigators on Monday if she hadn't heard from her friends.

A Brownsville Police Department spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday. CNN was the first to report on the police report.

It's unclear how the FBI, which is leading the investigation on the U.S. side, was first informed of the kidnapping. A spokeswoman for the agency had no immediate comment Wednesday.

Mexican authorities found the group Tuesday in a wooden shack — guarded by a man who was arrested — in the rural Ejido Tecolote area east of Matamoros on the way to the Gulf area called "Bagdad Beach," according to the state's chief prosecutor, Irving Barrios.

A GoFundMe set up by Brown's family said his relatives hope the "loving son, brother, uncle and friend" gets the "goodbye that he deserves."

Relatives said they grew up as close friends in the South Carolina town of Lake City, a community of less than 6,000 residents in the state's Pee Dee region. Family members said they agonized for days while waiting to learn whether their loved ones had survived.

Lake City leaders called for the community to support the victims' families, with Mayor Yamekia Robinson sending them her "deepest sympathy."

Pastor Herbert Godwin echoed that message during a Wednesday prayer service at Word of God Outreach Ministries that drew about 40 people. Four candles were lit for the victims.

Among the worshippers was Barry Epp, 28, who said he grew up near Woodard and McGee. He played football with Brown, who he remembered as a "quiet guy." He recalled Woodard as a good-spirited, friendly jokester.

After seeing video of his longtime neighbors' violent abduction on Facebook, Epps said he couldn't shake the tragedy. He hopes his city pulls together.

"You never know what tomorrow is going to bring," Epps said. "You gotta love your people while they're here."

## **Tiger Woods' girlfriend seeks to nullify NDA with pro golfer**

STUART, Fla. (AP) — Tiger Woods' girlfriend wants to nullify a nondisclosure agreement following a six-year relationship with the professional golfer.

Attorneys for Erica Herman filed a complaint seeking declaratory judgment on Monday in Martin County, Florida, circuit court, according to online court records. The couple had been living together in the area, according to the complaint. Martin County is located directly north of Palm Beach County.

Woods and Herman have not publicly announced the end of their relationship, which began in 2017. She had been seen regularly with him at major championships, such as the 2019 Masters he won for his 15th major and during his Presidents Cup captaincy in Australia later that year.

But she was not at his Hero World Challenge in the Bahamas the first week in December, or at the Genesis Invitational he hosted at Riviera three weeks ago.

According to the complaint, a trust controlled by Woods is attempting to silence Herman with a nondisclosure agreement that she signed while involved in a personal and professional relationship with Woods. The complaint argues that the NDA should be nullified under a federal law that prohibits an NDA from being enforced when sexual assault or sexual harassment is involved.

Herman previously worked at Woods' Jupiter restaurant.

The complaint doesn't provide details about what information Herman might want to disclose or make specific allegations against Woods.

The complain says because of "aggressive use" of the NDA, Herman is unsure whether she can disclose "facts giving rise to various legal claims she believes she has." It also says she is unsure what other information about her own life she can discuss and with whom.

Woods' manager at Excel Sports Management, Mark Steinberg, didn't immediately respond to a phone call and text from The Associated Press seeking comment.

## **Volunteers in mountain towns dig out snow-stuck Californians**

By MARCIO SANCHEZ and AMY TAXIN Associated Press

LAKE ARROWHEAD, Calif. (AP) — After a blizzard swept through Southern California mountains, 79-year-old Alan Zagorsky found himself shut inside his home with snow blocking the door and stairways leading out.

He and his wife had enough food to get through the 10 days until volunteers finally arrived Wednesday to help clear roughly 10 feet (3 meters) of snow piled up outside their house in Lake Arrowhead. They had been running low on blood pressure medication, but teams had come a day earlier to resupply them in the upscale mountain community where Zagorsky has lived for more than two decades.

"We've been through many a snowstorm but nothing of this amount, that's for sure," he said, while a crew shoveled his driveway in the mountains east of Los Angeles. "Right now, they're trying to find a place they can put this stuff."

In a once-a-generation weather event, staggering amounts of snow fell in the San Bernardino and San Gabriel mountain ranges in late February, where thousands of people live in wooded enclaves. The areas are popular destinations for hikers and skiers who arrive by twisting, steep highways that have been frequently closed because of icy conditions.

Snow piled high above many homes' first-floor windows and residents who could get out trekked on foot to buy groceries from stores with near-empty shelves or picked up boxes of donated food at a distribution center.

Roofs collapsed, cars were buried and roads were blocked. The power went out in many communities and authorities reported possible gas leaks and storm-related fires. Gov. Gavin Newsom declared emergencies in 13 of California's 58 counties beginning March 1, including in San Bernardino County.

On Wednesday, dozens of volunteers with the Los Angeles-based nonprofit Team Rubicon fanned out across the mountain communities to clear buried properties. A team of 10 used shovels and snow blowers to clean walkways and driveways belonging to Zagorsky and his neighbors, who had been confined

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to their homes for more than a week.

In Lake Arrowhead, home to 9,700 people and at an elevation of 5,175 feet (1,575 meters), many roads were plowed Tuesday for the first time in 10 days, and some residents grumbled about the slow response. San Bernardino County officials estimated more than 90% of county roads were plowed as of Tuesday night.

About 8 miles (13 kilometers) to the west, along a winding two-lane road, volunteers were also digging out homes in Crestline, a working class mountain community of 9,300 residents.

Don Black watched as a team wielding shovels cleared his neighbor's property. He marveled at the massive 12-foot (3.6-meter) snow berms left behind by plows along the roads.

"This is the worst storm I've seen in 34 winters," Black said, standing near a mound of snow that completely covered his pickup truck.

A team of state firefighters shoveled off the roof of the town library. A line of residents walked along freshly plowed roads to pick up boxes of food at a distribution center.

Nearby, Big Bear City received more than 6.6 feet (2 meters) of snow in a seven-day period, the most since those records have been tracked, said meteorologist Alex Tardy, with the National Weather Service in San Diego.

As the state continued to dig out from the previous storms, another one was on the way. Forecasters said an atmospheric river taking aim at northern and central California was expected to arrive as early as Thursday morning. The San Bernardino Mountain communities were likely to be spared another major snowfall.

The warm storm was raising concern about a rapid snowmelt of portions of the state's substantial snowpack. Authorities said creeks, streams and rivers could rise quickly, raising the threat of flooding.

## Will China's next premier be a moderating influence on Xi?

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — The pro-business track record of the man poised to become China's top economic official will make his term a test of whether he might moderate President Xi Jinping's tendency to intervene.

Li Qiang, 63, who is expected to be chosen China's premier on Saturday, will have to grapple with a slowdown in the world's second-largest economy, which is dealing with emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, weak global demand for exports, lingering U.S. tariff hikes, a shrinking workforce and an aging population.

Xi, who has bolstered the state sector, has said that he wants the ruling party to return to its "original mission" as China's economic, social and cultural leader. That has been accompanied by tighter control over some industries, more aggressive censorship of TV and pop culture and the spread of a "social credit" system that penalizes the public for offenses ranging from fraud to littering. Xi took China's most powerful role in 2012.

Now, observers are watching whether Li can roll out pragmatic policies during his five-year term. But the process of political decision-making in China is opaque, making analyzing the country's direction a difficult matter for outsiders.

Expectations are based on Li's performance as the party chief of the country's largest city — Shanghai — and as the governor of neighboring Zhejiang province, a hub of small and mid-sized business. And, perhaps more importantly, his close ties with Xi.

Li was quoted as saying in a 2013 interview with respected business magazine Caixin that officials should "put the government's hands back in place, put away the restless hands, retract the overstretched hands."

Li hailed Zhejiang's businessmen as the most valuable resource in the province, pointing to e-commerce billionaire Jack Ma, and he highlighted his government's cutting red tape.

In contrast, Li has also strictly enforced some state controls, including rules meant to prevent the spread of COVID-19. When his local rule has been out of tune with national policies set by the president and his team, he has eventually fallen into step, seen as key to his rise.

Under President Xi, entrepreneurs have been rattled not just by tighter political controls and anti-COVID curbs but more control over e-commerce and other tech companies. Anti-monopoly and data security

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crackdowns have wiped billions of dollars off companies' stock-market value. Beijing is also pressing them to pay for social programs and official initiatives to develop processor chips and other technology.

A native of Zhejiang, Li studied agricultural mechanization and worked his way up the provincial party ranks. In 2003, he started an executive MBA program at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, common among ambitious party cadres.

Priscilla Lau, a former professor of the university and former Hong Kong delegate to China's legislature, said Li attended her class on Hong Kong's free-market economy for a chamber in the city and said he recalled her class when they met in Shanghai more than a decade later.

"It shows he's very diligent," Lau said.

Li's working relationship with Xi began in the 2000s when the latter was appointed party chief in Zhejiang. Following Xi's eventual move to Beijing and appointment as party general secretary, Li was promoted to Zhejiang governor in 2013, the No. 2 role in the provincial government.

Three years later, Li was appointed party chief of Jiangsu province, an economic powerhouse on the east coast of China, marking the first time he held a position outside his home province. In 2017, he was named party boss of Shanghai, a role held by Xi before the president stepped into China's core leadership roles.

In the commercial hub of Shanghai, Li continued to pursue pro-business policies. In 2018, electric car producer Tesla announced it would build its first factory outside the United States. It broke ground half a year later as the first wholly foreign-owned automaker in China. Even during the strict COVID lockdown in Shanghai last year, the factory managed to resume production after a roughly 20-day suspension, official news agency Xinhua reported.

Tesla vice-president Tao Lin was quoted saying that several government departments had worked almost round-the-clock to help businesses resume work.

"The Shanghai government bent over backwards," said Tu Le, managing director of Sino Auto Insights, a Beijing-based advisory firm.

On more complicated issues, not everything has been smooth sailing.

Though Li helped shepherd an agreement between Chinese and European companies to produce mRNA vaccines, Beijing was not in favor and the deal was put on hold, said Joerg Wuttke, the president of the EU Chamber of Commerce in China.

Before the citywide lockdown, Li appeared to have more leeway to manage the financial hub's smaller previous outbreaks than most other cities' leaders did. Rather than sealing districts off, the government implemented limited lockdowns of housing compounds and workplaces.

When the highly contagious Omicron variant hit Shanghai, Li took a moderate approach until the central government stepped in and sealed off the city. The brutal two-month lockdown last spring confined 25 million people to their homes and severely disrupted the economy.

Li was named No. 2 in the ruling Communist Party in October when China's president broke with past norms and awarded himself a third five-year term as general secretary.

Unlike most of his predecessors, Li has no government experience at the national level, and his reputation was dented by ruthless enforcement of the lengthy COVID-19 lockdown in the financial hub that was criticized as excessive.

His expected appointment appears to indicate that an ability to win the trust of Xi, China's most powerful figure in decades, is the key determinant when it comes to political advancement.

As premier, Li faces a diminishing role for the State Council, China's Cabinet, as Xi moves to absorb government powers into party bodies, believing the party should play a greater role in Chinese society. Still, some commentators believe he will be more trusted, and therefore more influential, than his predecessor, who was seen as a rival to Xi, not a protege.

"Xi Jinping does not have to worry about Li Qiang being a separate locus of power," said Ho Pin, a veteran journalist and Chinese political observer. "Trust between them also allows Li Qiang to work more proactively and share his worries, and he will directly give Xi a lot of information and suggestions."

Iris Pang, ING's chief China economist, sees Li mainly as a loyal enforcer of Xi's will rather than a mod-

erating influence.

Li was pro-business because he was required to be so in his previous government roles, Pang said. His key trait, she said, is his "strong execution."

## US probes Tesla Autopilot, steering wheels that can come off

By TOM KRISHER and MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writers

DETROIT (AP) — U.S. safety regulators are turning up the heat on Tesla, announcing investigations into steering wheels coming off some SUVs and a fatal crash involving a Tesla suspected of using an automated driving system when it ran into a parked firetruck in California.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said Wednesday it is launching a special crash-investigation team to probe the Feb. 18 crash involving a Tesla Model S and a ladder truck from the Contra Costa County fire department.

The firetruck probe is part of a larger investigation by the agency into multiple instances of Teslas using the automaker's Autopilot system crashing into parked emergency vehicles that are tending to other crashes. NHTSA has become more aggressive in pursuing safety problems with Teslas in the past year, announcing multiple recalls and investigations.

The driver of the 2014 Tesla Model S was killed in the crash and a passenger critically injured. Four firefighters were treated for minor injuries, and the \$1.4 million ladder truck was damaged.

NHTSA is investigating how the Autopilot system detects and responds to emergency vehicles parked on highways. At least 14 Teslas have crashed into emergency vehicles nationwide while using the system.

Automated driving systems aren't always involved in the crashes that NHTSA sends investigators to. For instance, the Ohio State Highway Patrol determined that a Tesla that hit one of its patrol cars in November was not operating on "any type of autonomous mode."

Authorities said the California firetruck had its lights on and was parked diagonally on a highway to protect responders to an earlier accident that did not result in injuries.

Lewis Broschard III, chief of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, said his department is concerned about the risks that inattentive drivers pose to themselves, passengers and first responders.

"These unnecessary deaths, injuries, risks to firefighters, and loss of valuable equipment are all preventable," he said, urging drivers to slow down and move over for emergency vehicles.

"Recent reports of automobiles that may have been operating automated driving systems crashing into parked emergency vehicles at the scene of an emergency is a serious concern for the safety of our firefighters and paramedics and the public we are serving," Rob Brown Jr., CEO of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, said in an email.

A NHTSA spokeswoman said she couldn't comment on an open investigation when asked if the Teslas are posing a danger to emergency workers.

NHTSA has been scrutinizing Teslas more intensely in the past year, seeking several recalls and opening investigations.

Earlier Wednesday, the agency posted documents revealing an investigation of steering wheels that can detach from the steering column on as many as 120,000 Model Y SUVs.

The agency said it received two complaints in which 2023 Model Ys were delivered to customers with a missing bolt holding the wheel to the steering column. A friction fit held the steering wheels on, but they separated when force was exerted as the SUVs were driven.

The agency says in documents posted on its website Wednesday that both incidents happened while the SUVs had low mileage on them.

In one complaint filed with NHTSA, an owner said he was driving with his family in Woodbridge, New Jersey, when the steering wheel suddenly came off on Jan. 29, five days after the vehicle was purchased. The owner wrote that he was able to pull toward the road divider. There were no injuries.

It was a "horrible experience," the car's owner, Prerak Patel, told The Associated Press. He said he was in the freeway's left lane when the steering wheel came off and was lucky the road was straight and he



was able to stop the car at the divider.

Messages were left seeking comment from Tesla, which is based in Austin, Texas.

At first a Tesla service center gave Patel a cost estimate of \$103.96 to repair the problem. The service center apologized in what appear to be text messages posted on Twitter.

When Patel wrote that he had lost faith in Tesla and asked for a refund, the service center removed the charge.

Patel was later given the option of keeping the car or getting it replaced with a new one. Patel said he chose a replacement.

Patel said he's a fan of Tesla CEO Elon Musk and has invested a large chunk of his savings in Tesla stock, which closed Wednesday down 3%.

"My kids were a little scared to ride in a loaner Tesla and, as a parent, we are able to restore their confidence," Patel said. He said he hopes Tesla will investigate and improve its quality control.

Detached steering wheels are rare in the industry, but not unprecedented. In February, Nissan recalled about 1,000 Ariya electric vehicles for a similar problem.

NHTSA also has opened investigations during the past three years into Teslas braking suddenly for no reason, suspension problems and other issues.

In February, NHTSA pressured Tesla into recalling nearly 363,000 vehicles with "Full Self-Driving" software because the system can break traffic laws. The system is being tested on public roads by as many as 400,000 Tesla owners. But NHTSA said in documents that it can make unsafe actions such as traveling straight through an intersection from a turn-only lane, going through a yellow traffic light without proper caution or failing to respond to speed limit changes.

The U.S. Justice Department also has asked Tesla for documents from Tesla about "Full Self-Driving" and Autopilot.

Tesla says in its owners manual that neither Autopilot nor "Full Self-Driving" can drive themselves, and that owners must be ready to intervene at all times.

NHTSA has sent investigators to 35 Tesla crashes in which automated systems are suspected of being used. Nineteen people have died in those crashes, including two motorcyclists.

## Slap fighting: The next big thing, or unsporting stupidity?

By MARK ANDERSON AP Sports Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The competitors stand rigidly upright with their hands behind their backs, waiting to absorb a brutal slap to the face.

When the open-handed blow is delivered, there's a sharp report and the reaction can be dramatic. Some fighters barely move, while others stumble backward or fall to the floor. Some are knocked out.

UFC President Dana White is selling slap fighting as the next big thing in combat sports, putting his money and the resources of one of the world's foremost mixed martial arts organizations behind the Power Slap League. The Nevada Athletic Commission has sanctioned the league for competitions in Las Vegas.

"It's a home run," said White, who is among several UFC officials involved in the league.

Some slap-fighting beatdowns have gone viral, including a video from eastern Europe showing a man who continues to compete even as half of his face swells to seemingly twice its size. Such exposure has led to questions about the safety of slap fighting, particularly the risk of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a degenerative brain disease believed to be caused by repeated blows to the head. A former chairman of the commission, which regulates combat sports in Nevada, says approving the league was a mistake.

Chris Nowinski, cofounder and CEO of the Concussion Legacy Foundation, agrees, calling slap fighting "one of the stupidest things you can do."

"There's nothing fun, there's nothing interesting and there's nothing sporting," Nowinski said. "They're trying to dress up a really stupid activity to try to make money."

White and the competitors remain unfazed, comparing commentary on slapping to the negative reaction the UFC faced in its infancy more than 20 years ago.

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"I think it's definitely overblown with the topics of CTE and the damage that we're taking," said Ryan Phillips, a Power Slap League fighter. "I think a lot of people still just don't understand that it's still a slap."

Concerns about concussions leading to CTE, which can cause violent mood swings, depression and memory loss, aren't confined to combat sports. The disease has shown up in the brains of former rugby players, and the NFL and college football have taken steps to cut down on blows to the head by changing rules regarding tackling and other hits. CTE can only be detected during an autopsy.

Despite the naysayers, White said he believes slap fighting will follow a similar trajectory to mixed martial arts, which the late Sen. John McCain referred to as "human cockfighting" in 1996, when the UFC didn't have weight classes or many rules. McCain's criticism helped force the organization to become more structured, leading to its widespread acceptance.

White said the ratings of the TBS reality show "Power Slap: Road to the Title" bear out the early popularity of what to many is still a curiosity.

White said he realized there could be a market for the sport in the U.S. when he clocked the millions of YouTube views of slap fighting videos from eastern Europe in 2017 and 2018. The videos were often poorly produced, the slap matches unregulated. White became convinced that fights with written rules and shot with professional video equipment could convert many internet viewers into dedicated, paying fans.

The Nevada commission gave slap fighting some much needed legitimacy when it unanimously sanctioned the sport in October and a month later awarded White a license to promote it.

But White's enterprise was hampered when he was captured on video slapping his wife on New Year's Eve. White apologized, but has acknowledged it damaged efforts to get the league off the ground. White is no newcomer to controversy: Former UFC fighters Kajan Johnson and Clarence Dollaway filed a lawsuit in 2021 against Endeavor, the organization's parent company, alleging that UFC takes an inordinate share of the profits.

But White is charging ahead.

Three qualifying events have taken place at the UFC Apex in Las Vegas, ahead of the March 11 telecast on the streaming platform Rumble in which champions will be crowned in four weight classes.

Power Slap fights are typically three to five rounds. The fighters take turns hitting each other in the face with an open hand, and those on the receiving end stand with their hands behind their backs. A fighter has up to 60 seconds to recover and respond after receiving a blow. Fighters can earn up to 10 points based on the effectiveness of the slap and the defender's reaction.

Fights can end in a decision, knockout, technical knockout or disqualification, such as for an illegal slap. All slaps are subject to video review. Each event has two referees and three judges.

Also present are a supervising doctor and a physician or physician's assistant, plus three EMTs and three ambulances. White has touted the safety record of the UFC, but has not talked specifically about injuries in the Power Slap League.

White says slap fighting is safer than boxing or mixed martial arts because each contestant usually takes only three blows per bout. In boxing, White said, that number could be 400 or more, and that doesn't include the shots taken during sparring. There is no sparring in slap fighting, he noted.

Nowinski of the concussion foundation said while there may be no sparring in practice sessions, that doesn't mean it doesn't happen elsewhere. He said comparing boxing to power slapping is misleading because slap fighters take a full blow each time.

"You can slip (boxing) punches," Nowinski said. But in slap fighting "you're taking out everything that's interesting to watch and everything sporting (from boxing) and just doing the brain damage part."

Nowinski said slap fighters don't make enough money to justify the risk. The Power Slap League wouldn't disclose how much it pays fighters, but said in a statement that participants are compensated for every match and can also earn "appearance fees" and "additional discretionary bonuses."

Stephen J. Cloobek, who was chairman of the state commission when it sanctioned slap fighting, said White and former UFC CEO Lorenzo Fertitta sold him on the legitimacy of the sport.

"I made a mistake," Cloobek said. "I'm not happy about it."

The commission recently approved amended rules to better define what constitutes a legal slap in an effort to minimize serious injuries.

"The No. 1 thing is the health and safety of the fighter," commission Chairman Anthony Marnell III said at a Feb 15 meeting. "Always has been, always will be."

But he went on to say: "It seems like there is a market for this, whether you like it or not."

Phillips, the slap fighter, said participants can defend themselves without losing points, such as rolling away before the hand makes impact.

And the fighters know if they lose the coin toss and get slapped first, it will hurt.

"I know what's coming," fighter Vernon Cathey said. "I'm tensing up. There's a lot of stuff I can do to protect myself."

## Veterans testify of 'catastrophic' impact of Afghan collapse

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Active-service members and veterans provided firsthand testimony Wednesday about the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, describing in harrowing detail the carnage and death they witnessed on the ground while imploring Congress to help the allies left behind.

Former Marine Sgt. Tyler Vargas-Andrews testified to Congress about the stench of human flesh under a large plume of smoke as the screams of children, women and men filled the space around Kabul's airport after two suicide bombers attacked crowds of Afghans.

"The withdrawal was a catastrophe in my opinion. And there was an inexcusable lack of accountability," said Vargas-Andrews, who wore a prosthetic arm and scars of his own grave wounds from the bombing.

"I see the faces of all of those we could not save, those we left behind," Aidan Gunderson, an Army medic who was stationed at Abbey Gate, testified. "I wonder if our Afghan allies fled to safety or they were killed by the Taliban."

The initial hearing of a long-promised investigation by House Republicans displayed the open wounds from the end of America's longest war in August 2021, with witnesses recalling how they saw mothers carrying dead babies and the Taliban shooting and brutally beating people.

It was the first of what is expected to be a series of Republican-led hearings examining the Biden administration's handling of the withdrawal. Taliban forces seized the Afghan capital, Kabul, far more rapidly than U.S. intelligence had foreseen as American forces pulled out. Kabul's fall turned the West's withdrawal into a rout, with Kabul's airport the center of a desperate air evacuation guarded by U.S. forces temporarily deployed for the task.

The majority of witnesses argued to Congress that the fall of Kabul was an American failure with blame touching every presidential administration from George W. Bush to Joe Biden. Testimony focused not on the decision to withdraw, but on what witnesses depicted as a desperate attempt to rescue American citizens and Afghan allies with little U.S. planning and inadequate U.S. support.

"America is building a nasty reputation for multi-generational systemic abandonment of our allies where we leave a smoldering human refuse from the Montagnards of Vietnam to the Kurds in Syria," retired Lt. Col. Scott Mann testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

He added, "Our veterans know something else that this committee might do well to consider: We might be done with Afghanistan, but it's not done with us."

Vargas-Andrews sobbed as he told lawmakers of being thwarted in an attempt to stop the single deadliest moment in the U.S. evacuation — a suicide bombing that killed 170 Afghans and 13 U.S. servicemen and women.

Vargas-Andrews said Marines and others aiding in the evacuation operation were given descriptions of men believed to be plotting an attack before it occurred. He said he and others spotted two men matching the descriptions and behaving suspiciously, and eventually had them in their rifle scopes, but never received a response about whether to take action.

"No one was held accountable," Vargas-Andrews told Rep. Mike McCaul, R-Texas, the chairman of the

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committee. "No one was, and no one is, to this day."

U.S. Central Command's investigation concluded in October 2021 that given the worsening security situation at Abbey Gate as Afghans became increasingly desperate to flee, "the attack was not preventable at the tactical level without degrading the mission to maximize the number of evacuees." However, that investigation did not look into whether the bomber could have been stopped or whether Marines on the ground had the appropriate authorities to engage.

Defense Department spokesman Lt. Col. Rob Lodewick said Wednesday that the Pentagon's earlier review of the suicide attack had turned up neither any advance identification of a possible attacker nor any requests for "an escalation to existing rules of engagement" governing use of force by U.S. troops.

McCaul has been deeply critical of the Biden administration's handling of the withdrawal. "What happened in Afghanistan was a systemic breakdown of the federal government at every level, and a stunning failure of leadership by the Biden administration," he said.

Last month, U.S. Inspector-General for Afghanistan John Sopko concluded again that actions taken by both the Trump and Biden administrations were key to the sudden collapse of the Afghan government and military, even before U.S. forces completed their withdrawal in August 2021.

That includes President Donald Trump's one-sided withdrawal deal with the Taliban, and the abruptness of Biden's withdrawal of both U.S. contractors and troops from Afghanistan, stranding an Afghan air force that previous administrations had failed to make self-supporting.

The report blamed each U.S. administration since American forces invaded in 2001 for constantly changing, inconsistent policies that strived for quick fixes and withdrawal from Afghanistan rather than a steady effort to build a capable, sustainable Afghan military.

The witnesses testifying Wednesday urged action to help the hundreds of thousands of Afghan allies who worked alongside U.S. soldiers and who are now in limbo in the U.S. and back in Afghanistan.

"If I leave this committee with only one thought it's this: It's not too late," said Peter Lucier, a Marine veteran who now works at Team America Relief, which has assisted thousands of Afghans in relocating. "We're going to talk a lot today about all the mistakes that were made, leading up to that day, but urgent action right now will save so many lives."

One of those solutions discussed Wednesday would be creating a pathway to citizenship for the nearly 76,000 Afghans who worked with American soldiers since 2001 as translators, interpreters and partners. Those people arrived in the U.S. on military planes after the withdrawal and the government admitted the refugees on a temporary parole status as part of Operation Allies Welcome, the largest resettlement effort in the country in decades, with the promise of a path to a life in the U.S. for their service.

Congress began a bipartisan effort to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would have prevented Afghans from becoming stranded without legal residency status when their two years of humanitarian parole expire in August. The proposal would have enabled qualified Afghans to apply for U.S. citizenship, as was done for refugees in the past, including those from Cuba, Vietnam and Iraq.

But that effort stalled in the Senate late last year due to opposition from Republicans.

"If we don't set politics aside and pursue accountability and lessons learned to address this grievous moral injury on our military community and right the wrongs that have been inflicted on our most at-risk Afghan allies, this colossal foreign policy will follow us home and ultimately draw us right back into the graveyard of empires where it all started," Mann, the retired green beret, said to lawmakers.

## Lawsuit against Fox shows the news behind the Trump news

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Fresh revelations flowing from a major defamation lawsuit are shedding light on what was happening inside Fox News following the 2020 presidential election. Here are some things to know about the case.

### THE CASE

Dominion Voting Systems is suing Fox for \$1.6 billion, claiming the news outlet repeatedly aired allegations

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that the company engaged in fraud that doomed President Donald Trump's re-election campaign while knowing they were untrue. Fox contends that it was reporting newsworthy charges made by supporters of the president and is supported legally by libel standards. The case is scheduled for trial next month.

## ELECTION DISCONNECT

Dominion has produced evidence that prominent people at Fox knew the fraud allegations were untrue, even as they and the president's allies were given airtime to repeat them. Fox's Sean Hannity said in a deposition that he did not believe the fraud claims "for one second," but he wanted to give accusers the chance to produce evidence. Fox founder Rupert Murdoch, questioned under oath, agreed the 2020 presidential election was free and fair: "The election was not stolen," he said. Murdoch also said he was aware some Fox commentators — Lou Dobbs, Maria Bartiromo, Jeanine Pirro and Hannity — at times endorsed false claims, but he did nothing to stop them.

## FOX'S FEAR

The court papers have laid out a profound concern at Fox over the impact of its election night call that Democrat Joe Biden had beaten Trump in the battleground state of Arizona — a call that was accurate. Fox scooped its rivals on the call, but it infuriated Trump and many Fox viewers, who expressed their anger and began tuning in to rival conservative media outlets such as Newsmax. The call was making so many people uncomfortable at Fox that news anchor Bret Baier even suggested it be overturned and Arizona counted in Trump's column. The Washington executive responsible for the declaration held firm and was proven right — then paid for it with his job two months later.

## LIBEL LAW

In its defense, Fox has relied on a doctrine of libel law in place since a 1964 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that has made it difficult for plaintiffs to prove defamation. Public figures, and Dominion fits that standard in this case, have to prove not only that the information reported was incorrect, but that the news organization acted with "reckless disregard" about whether it was true or not. Fox says Dominion can't prove its case, but some First Amendment advocates suggest the company has a strong argument. Their worry is that a prolonged legal battle would give the Supreme Court a chance to change libel laws that would weaken protection for all the media.

## TRUMP'S INTEREST

Trump has taken a keen interest in the case, judging by his social media posts. Always concerned about loyalty, and nursing a long grudge about the Arizona call, he has expressed anger at revelations in the case that many people at Fox not only did not support his fraud allegations but privately disdained them. Court exhibits released this week contained blunt, dismissive assessments of Trump by some people who thought they were involved in private conversations — including host Tucker Carlson, who said in a text message in January 2021 about the president, "I hate him passionately."

## THE ELECTION

Federal and state election officials, exhaustive reviews in multiple battleground states where Trump challenged his loss and Trump's attorney general found no widespread fraud that could have changed the outcome of the 2020 election. Nor did they uncover any credible evidence that the vote was tainted. Trump's allegations of fraud also have been roundly rejected by dozens of courts, including by judges he had appointed.

## **JPMorgan sues former exec over ties to Epstein sex abuse**

By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — JPMorgan Chase sued its former executive Jes Staley on Wednesday, alleging that he aided in hiding Jeffrey Epstein's yearslong sex abuse and trafficking in order to keep the financier as a client.

The New York bank seeks to hold Staley personally liable for any financial penalties that JPMorgan may have to pay in two related cases. It is also seeking to force Staley to pay back wages he earned during the time he allegedly was aware of the abuse and "personally observed" Epstein's behavior on multiple

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occasions.

"In light of Staley's intentional and outrageous conduct in failing to disclose pertinent information and abandoning (JPMorgan's) interests in favor of his own and Epstein's personal interests, (the bank) is entitled to punitive damages," the bank said in its lawsuit.

A lawyer for Staley had no comment on the lawsuit.

JPMorgan's lawsuit was filed after the bank was sued by the government of the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as by a woman identified as Jane Doe, who was allegedly abused by Epstein. Those lawsuits claim JPMorgan should have seen evidence of Epstein's sex trafficking and knowingly benefited from it.

Previous lawsuits have shown Staley and Epstein exchanged hundreds of emails and text messages over the years, and they were seen to have a close relationship that went beyond the professional relationship a banker would have with a wealthy client.

The bank continues to deny the allegations in its lawsuit, however it appears to allege that Staley may have committed sexual assault. It notes in its lawsuit that the anonymous Doe described a "powerful financial executive" could "use his clout within JP Morgan to make Epstein untouchable." The bank says that the financial executive was Staley.

Epstein was arrested in 2019 on federal charges accusing him of paying underage girls hundreds of dollars in cash for massages and then molesting them at his homes in Florida and New York. He was found dead in jail on Aug. 10 of that year, at age 66. A medical examiner ruled his death a suicide.

Staley left JPMorgan in 2013 to become CEO of London-based bank Barclays. He resigned last year following a report by British regulators into his past links with Epstein.

## Senate votes to block DC crime laws, Biden supportive

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate voted Wednesday to block new District of Columbia crime laws and overrule the city government as lawmakers in both parties have expressed concern about rising violent crime rates in cities nationwide.

President Joe Biden said last week that he will sign the Republican resolution, which passed the Senate 81-14 after passing the House last month. It marked the first time in more than three decades that Congress has nullified the capital city's laws through the disapproval process — and a shift in the long-held Democratic position that the federal government should let D.C. govern itself.

Biden, who is set to announce a reelection campaign in the coming months, has been under increasing pressure on the issue from Republicans who have made reducing crime a political priority. In D.C., homicides in the city had risen for four years straight before they dropped around 10% in 2022. The 2021 murder count of 227 was the highest since 2003.

"We are the greatest superpower nation in history," Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said on the Senate floor Wednesday morning. "This is our capital city. But local politicians have let its streets become a danger and an embarrassment."

Eleanor Holmes Norton, the district's nonvoting delegate in the House, pushed back on the effort, speaking at a "Hands off D.C." rally ahead of the vote.

"There are no exceptions and there is no middle ground on D.C.'s right to self-government," Norton said.

In a statement released after Wednesday night's vote, D.C. Attorney General Brian Schwalb said, "Any attempt to replace District residents' will with that of federal politicians elected hundreds of miles away violates the basic freedoms and principles on which this country was founded.

"To overturn our local, democratically enacted laws — the product of 10+ years of collaboration between law enforcement, judges, and policy experts — without any independent analysis, review, or alternative proposal, is not only undemocratic, but also careless."

The overhaul of D.C.'s criminal code was approved late last year by the city council after years of failed attempts. It would redefine crimes, change criminal justice policies and rework how sentences should be handed down after convictions. It would also do away with mandatory minimum sentences for many

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crimes and reduce the maximum penalties for burglary, carjacking and robbery.

Mayor Muriel Bowser vetoed the overhaul in January, writing in a letter that she had "very significant concerns" about some of the bill's proposals. She later suggested changes after the council overrode her veto.

Senate Democrats supporting the measure have cited Bowser's veto, arguing that it needs another look. "What we've heard from the mayor of D.C. is there's more work to be done," said Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow.

Virginia Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, both Democrats, said they would vote for the resolution "and urge the mayor and council to work together to create a safer city for all, including the many Virginians who commute to DC for work every day."

Washington, D.C.'s criminal code was originally written in 1901 and received a handful of piecemeal updates since then. It contains multiple anachronistic details, such as a reference to steamboats and regulations for the care and feeding of livestock being transported through the city.

The changes were set to effect in October 2025. But to become law, it had to survive a 60-day review period during which Congress and the president could override it, thanks to a 1970s-era law called the Home Rule Act. Though Congress has imposed various limits on D.C. through spending bills over the years, the formal disapproval process hasn't been used since 1991.

As it stands now, criminal justice experts say that the D.C. criminal code has disproportionately affected Black people, similar to many other cities.

Defending the revisions, D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson and other councilmembers maintain that the reduced sentences for offenses such as carjacking would still place the maximum sentences well above the penalties chosen by the vast majority of judges. They argue that the current high sentence maximums have done little to deter rising crime in the District in recent years.

Biden's surprise decision to support the Republican measure angered many House Democrats, like Norton, who had voted against the measure in the House after the White House signaled opposition.

The White House did not explicitly say then that Biden would veto the measure. But the statement issued ahead of the House vote said the White House opposed the resolution and called it an example "of how the District of Columbia continues to be denied true self-governance and why it deserves statehood."

"While we work towards making Washington, D.C., the 51st state of our Union, Congress should respect the District of Columbia's autonomy to govern its own local affairs," the White House statement said.

After announcing in a Senate Democratic caucus luncheon last week that he would instead support the resolution and sign it, Biden tweeted that he supports D.C. statehood. But he added, "I don't support some of the changes D.C. Council put forward over the mayor's objections — such as lowering penalties for carjackings."

McConnell called Biden's move a "flip-flop."

"The public pressure was so great that the president now says he wants to sign the same Republican bill that he'd previously announced he opposed," McConnell said.

While many Democrats supported the bill, some were less than enthusiastic.

"I'm going to vote yes," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., told reporters Tuesday. "It was a tough question, but on balance I am voting yes."

## Report: 6-year-old won't be charged after shooting teacher

By DENISE LAVOIE and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Authorities in the Virginia city where a 6-year-old shot and wounded his teacher will not seek criminal charges against the child, the local prosecutor told NBC News Wednesday, in a decision that was anticipated by legal experts.

But Newport News Commonwealth's Attorney Howard Gwynn said his office has yet to decide if any adults will be held criminally accountable.

Newport News police have said that the boy used his mother's 9mm handgun in the Jan. 6 shooting at

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Richneck Elementary School. A lawyer for the child's mother has previously stated that the weapon, which was legally purchased, was secured on a high closet shelf and had a lock on it.

Gwynn did not immediately respond to two phone messages and two emails from The Associated Press seeking comment.

He told NBC that the "prospect that a 6-year-old can stand trial is problematic" because he wouldn't have the competency to understand the legal system and what a charge means.

Gwynn told the news outlet that his office is still focusing on others besides the child.

"Once we analyze all the facts, we will charge any person or persons that we believe we can prove beyond a reasonable doubt committed a crime," he said.

The decision did not come as a surprise. Even though it is possible under Virginia law to criminally charge a 6-year-old child, legal experts said it would be highly unlikely that a prosecutor would even try.

A common-law doctrine known as the "infancy defense" holds that children under 7 cannot be prosecuted for a crime because they are too young to be capable of forming criminal intent. A judge also would have to find that the child was competent to stand trial, meaning that he could understand the legal proceedings and assist attorneys defending him.

"You have to be able to show that they understand the seriousness of it, planned it, and executed it," Julie McConnell, a law professor at the University of Richmond, told the AP. "It would be very hard to prove that a 6-year-old could understand that what he did could have permanent consequences," McConnell said.

She added: "The question is not how do we hold the child accountable? The question is how do we hold ourselves accountable as a society? How do we address the fact that it is so easy for children to get guns in the first place?"

Newport News police turned over their investigation to Gwynn's office last month. Police Chief Steve Drew said in February that he understands that "people would like to have a case open and shut — that's just not what we have here."

Drew described a complicated investigation that involved coordinating interviews with first-graders, which required permission from their parents as well as the expertise of a child psychologist.

Gwynn told the AP last month that the city's detectives handed over three binders of information to his office.

"It's a lot of information, and we're going to carefully review it as we do in every case," Gwynn said in February.

The decision to not charge the child is the latest development from the shooting, which sent shockwaves through the shipbuilding city of about 185,000 people near the Chesapeake Bay.

The 6-year-old boy, who has not been identified, shot first-grade teacher Abby Zwerner while she was teaching inside her classroom.

The police chief has repeatedly characterized the shooting as "intentional." Drew said there was no warning and no struggle before the child pointed the gun at Zwerner and fired one round, striking her in the hand and chest.

Zwerner, 25, hustled her students out of the classroom before being rushed to the hospital, where she stayed for nearly two weeks before she was released to continue recovering at home.

An attorney for the 6-year-old's family, James Ellenson, told the AP in January that the gun the boy used was secured in his mother's closet on a shelf well over 6 feet (1.8 meters) high and had a trigger lock that required a key.

The family's statement in the wake of the shooting also said that the boy has an "acute disability" and was under a care plan "that included his mother or father attending school with him and accompanying him to class every day." The week of the shooting was the first when a parent was not in class with him, the family said.

The family said in the days after the shooting that the child was placed under hospital care and was receiving "the treatment he needs."

Zwerner's attorney, Diane Toscano, told reporters in January that concerned staff at Richneck Elementary School had warned administrators three times that the 6-year-old had a gun and was threatening other students in the hours before Zwerner was shot. Toscano said the administration "was paralyzed by



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apathy" and didn't call police, remove the boy from class or lock down the school.

In early February, Toscano filed a legal notice informing Newport News Public Schools of Zwerner's intent to sue, laying out even more allegations. They included claims that the same boy who shot Zwerner had constantly cursed at staff and teachers, tried to whip students with his belt and once choked another teacher "until she couldn't breathe."

Two days before the shooting, the boy allegedly "slammed" Zwerner's cellphone and broke it, according to the claim notice. He was given a one-day suspension, the notice says. But when he returned to Zwerner's class the following day, he pulled a 9mm handgun out of his pocket and shot her while she sat at a reading table, the notice says.

## Jill Biden calls on men to support women fighting for rights

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Jill Biden on Wednesday praised a group of women from around the world, including those who have been protesting against Iran's leaders, for showing courage while fighting for their rights and called on men to "be partners" with women and support them in their cause.

"As much as we need women who are willing to speak up, we need more men who are willing to listen and act," the first lady said.

"We need more men to hold each other accountable when their sisters are being hurt or left behind," she said at a White House ceremony for the 2023 recipients of the International Women of Courage Awards. "We need more men who nurture families, who feed and teach and mentor, who build safer communities. We need more men who know that caring, collaboration and kindness are signs of strength, not weakness.

"Men, we need you to support the women who are fighting for their rights and to lift up those who have been silenced," she continued. "Be partners, be partners with women. Become the 'men of courage' we need. Only then will we be able to build a world where men and women are equal and all people are free."

At the ceremony, held on International Women's Day, Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken presented awards to 11 recipients from Afghanistan, Argentina, Central African Republic, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Poland and Ukraine.

The group includes the first female general to serve in the Mongolian armed forces, along with advocates for protecting indigenous lands in Costa Rica and ending discrimination against people with disabilities in Malaysia and against LGBTQ people in Argentina.

Among them was Yuliia Paievaska, a Ukrainian medic who last year recorded reams of harrowing bodycam footage showing her team's efforts to save those who were wounded during Russia's bombardment of the city of Mariupol. Paievaska gave the footage to Associated Press journalists, who were the last international team in the city, on a tiny data card.

The journalists fled Mariupol with the data card and shared the images with the world. Paievaska was detained soon after by pro-Russia forces and held for three months.

A new group award, named for Madeleine Albright, who died last March after making history in 1997 by becoming the first female U.S. secretary of state, was given to the women and girls of Iran, who have been protesting against their government since last September.

Nationwide protests erupted in Iran after the Sept. 16 death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini while in the custody of Iran's morality police. Amini was accused of violating Iran's strict dress code for women by wearing her headscarf improperly.

The International Women of Courage Award, created in 2007 by then-U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, recognizes women who show exceptional courage, strength and leadership while advocating for peace, justice, human rights, gender equity and equality, and the empowerment of women and girls. More than 180 women from 80-plus countries have received the award since its inception.

Biden moved Wednesday's ceremony from its traditional home at the State Department because she "wanted to bring the stories of these incredible women to the biggest stage we could, and that is, of course, the White House," said Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, who also spoke at

the ceremony.

## Kennesaw State brings rags-to-riches story to 1st NCAA party

By CHARLES ODUM AP Sports Writer

KENNESAW, Ga. (AP) — Kennesaw State is officially accepting bandwagon fans as the latest NCAA Tournament Cinderella team.

"I support it," junior guard Brandon Stroud said Wednesday. "Let's go. Jump on now!"

Few teams have landed in March Madness with more compelling rags-to-riches credentials.

The Owls finished 1-28 overall and 0-16 in the ASUN Conference in coach Amir Abdur-Rahim's first season in 2019-20. Having left Division II in 2005, Kennesaw State never had a winning Division I record before this season, when they improved to 26-8 by beating Liberty 67-66 in Sunday's conference tournament championship.

The Owls are suddenly drawing a media crowd — including three Atlanta TV crews before their practice Wednesday — and the spotlight will grow brighter Sunday, when the public will be invited to an selection show viewing party at the KSU Convocation Center.

"This is really cool from when we started four years ago and maybe had only one student reporter here," Abdur-Rahim said.

Junior Chris Youngblood was part of Abdur-Rahim's first full recruiting class following the one-win season. Youngblood said Abdur-Rahim "most definitely" talked about the team's potential to reach March Madness as part of his recruiting pitch.

"I probably wouldn't have come here if he didn't believe in that," said Youngblood, who leads the Owls averaging 14.7 points per game.

Abdur-Rahim said he began to believe the dream could be realized this season by the way his players, especially point guard Terrell Burden, responded to an ugly 88-54 loss at San Diego State on Dec. 12.

"Normally, you get beat like that, it can shake you a little bit, make you question what you're doing," Abdur-Rahim said.

Burden, who had been mostly quiet early in his career, set the pace for the team at the next practice after a teammate failed to dive for a loose ball.

"Terrell jumps him," Abdur-Rahim said. "I was like OK. That was the moment for me."

The 5-foot-10 Burden, second on the team with 13.5 points per game, is one of four guards in the starting lineup. The Owls are likely to face a size disadvantage in their first NCAA Tournament game — no matter the matchup.

That only adds to the underdog outlook that Burden and his teammates are eager to embrace.

"No matter who we play, we're going to give them a fight," Burden said. "... I love being the underdog. I've been the underdog my whole life."

Abdur-Rahim is the younger brother of Shareef Abdur-Rahim, who played 13 years in the NBA and now is the NBA G League president. Shareef's son, Jabri, is a guard at Georgia, where Amir was an assistant on Tom Crean's staff before taking the Kennesaw State job.

At Georgia, Amir Abdur-Rahim landed star recruit Anthony Edwards, the No. 1 overall pick by Minnesota in the 2020 NBA draft.

The Owls' roster doesn't have top-rated NBA prospects, but Abdur-Rahim believes his team deserves to be respected as more than a 16 seed.

"I'm hoping for a 14. If they love us enough, maybe a 13," Abdur-Rahim said, adding that the Owls are "going to play a great team next week. ... It's all about draw in the tournament. I'm not here to politic for a seed."

He has told his players to "put the headphones on, and put that noise cancellation up to 10" when preparing for the NCAA Tournament.

But with a compelling story like theirs, Youngblood said: "It's tough to keep the headphones on in times like this."

## At the Oscars a year later, The Slap stays in the picture

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

The Academy Awards are Sunday, but did last year's Oscars ever really end?

When Hollywood reconvenes at the Dolby Theatre for the 95th Academy Awards, the ceremony will signal many things. The probable triumph of "Everything Everywhere All at Once." A potentially historic night for Asians and Asian Americans in the film industry. Possibly a record number of jokes about "Cocaine Bear."

But for many, nothing will register more than returning to the site of The Slap. In a way, we're all still living in that frozen-in-time moment. Chris Rock's face twisted to the side. Will Smith's arm dramatically extended. A deathly hush over the Dolby Theatre.

A new low for the Oscars but a high point of public fascination, The Slap was immediately etched into collective memory, and its shock has kept reverberating. Rock, in a live stand-up special on Sunday, only just offered his fiery rebuttal, adding a fresh new volley in the still ongoing discourse around the incident.

For the first time, two sequels ("Top Gun: Maverick," "Avatar: The Way of Water") are nominated this year for best picture. But this year's Oscars – whether they like it or not – will be a sequel, too, just one without the main stars in attendance. Smith has been banned by the motion picture academy for 10 years. Rock has been sticking with stand-up.

Host Jimmy Kimmel — who had been on the Dolby stage in 2017 for The Flub, a moment of Oscar infamy now practically forgotten — has said he will address The Slap. It would be "ridiculous" not to, he told The Hollywood Reporter.

The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, too, is making preparations. After a sluggish response to Smith's actions that academy president Janet Yang has called "inadequate," the Oscars will have their first ever "crisis team" to react to surprises. Kimmel, who has hosted twice before, was brought in partly to have a steady hand on the telecast, which will restore all categories to the live show. Kimmel is the first solo host for the show since the last time he hosted, five years ago.

"We learned from this that the academy must be fully transparent and accountable in our actions," Yang said at the luncheon last month, "and particularly in times of crisis you must act swiftly, compassionately and decisively for ourselves and for our industry."

Kimmel's challenge will be to reference The Slap without allowing another Oscars to become defined by it. Last year, after Smith's blow and his subsequent yelling from his seat, the Academy Awards stumbled hazily through the rest of an airless ceremony, taking the spotlight away from the landmark win for the deaf drama "CODA" and documentary winner "Summer of Soul," the award Rock presented to Questlove. Smith also won his first Oscar, for "King Richard." He didn't apologize in that moment but did in a statement the following day. Smith soon thereafter resigned his academy membership.

This year, "Everything Everywhere All at Once" comes in with a commanding 11 nominations. Though an unlikely Oscar frontrunner, Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's multiverse mash-up is expected to win best picture after sweeping the top guild awards. The Daniels, as they are known, are favored to best Steven Spielberg for best director. Former child star Ke Huy Quan is seen as a lock for best supporting actor. Michelle Yeoh could become the first Asian best actress winner.

CAN ANYTHING STOP 'EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE'?

The A24 indie hit has had an enviable run leading up the Oscars, winning with the Screen Actors Guild, the Producers Guild, the Directors Guild and the Writers Guild. History says nothing can beat it. Yet some doubts persist that the madcap action comedy just isn't Oscar material enough to win, and that the WWI film "All Quiet on the Western Front" — which won at the BAFTAs and comes in with nine nominations — could sneak in for the upset. The harrowingly antiwar Netflix film, from Germany, has especially resonated in Europe where Russia's war in Ukraine continues to rage. The documentary nominee "Navalny," about the imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, is more directly connected to the current events in Eastern Europe.

WHAT'S THE LATEST IN BEST ACTRESS?

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Easily the fiercest and most controversy-generating category this year is best actress. It's seen as a clash of heavyweight contenders in first-time nominee Yeoh and two-time winner Cate Blanchett, for "Tár." Either could go home with the trophy. But much of the drama came in nominations, where Andrea Riseborough scored a nod for the little-seen drama "To Leslie" after a host of celebrities led an A-list grassroots campaign for the British actress. At the same time, two acclaimed Black actresses — Danielle Deadwyler ("Till") and Viola Davis ("The Woman King") — were left out, prompting a debate about the influence of connections, money and race on awards campaigns. Just as the whole affair seemed to be fading, Yeoh on Tuesday, with hours to go in Oscar voting, posted screenshots to Instagram of a Vogue article advocating for Yeoh to win over Blanchett. Academy rules prohibit "any tactic that singles out 'the competition' by name or titles." Yeoh deleted the post. Throughout the race, though, she and Blanchett have each warmly celebrated the other.

## WHERE ARE THE STREAMERS?

Last year's best-picture winner, "CODA," marked the first time a streamer won Hollywood's top prize. Many of the pandemic-era nominees were released quickly, if not immediately, into homes. This year, it's a very different story. Only one of the 10 films up for best picture came from a streaming service: Netflix's "All Quiet on the Western Front." That film should take a number of awards on Sunday, including best international film and cinematography. Netflix's "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio" is also heavily favored to win best animated feature. But after years of Oscar advancement, Netflix and company may experience a setback in the top categories. That happens to coincide with retrenchment throughout the industry in streaming after years of torrid growth.

## WILL THE BLOCKBUSTERS BOOST RATINGS?

It's been years since the best-picture candidates were this rich in box office. "Top Gun: Maverick" grossed nearly \$1.5 billion worldwide. (Spielberg was overheard telling Tom Cruise he "saved Hollywood" at the Oscar luncheon.) "Avatar: The Way of Water" is the third highest grossing film of all time with nearly \$2.3 billion in ticket sales. "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" (\$858.8 million) could land Angela Bassett the first acting Oscar for a Marvel movie, though the supporting actress category remains one of the hardest to call. But historically, ratings have often risen with the popularity of the nominees. Last year's ceremony, perhaps boosted by those who rushed to follow the aftermath of The Slap, drew 16.6 million viewers. That was up 58% from the pandemic-marred 2021 edition (watched by a record low 10.5 million), but still a ways off the viewership of several years ago. Last year's telecast had been billed as a return to normal for the Oscars — at least before, well, you know what. This year will go a long way to determine what's the new normal for the Academy Awards telecast.

## WHAT'S THE OVER/UNDER ON SLAPS?

As Kimmel has noted, you can bet on anything at the Academy Awards, including whether anyone slaps the host.

"If you bet \$100 on yes – you win \$1200," Kimmel said earlier this winter on his late-night show. "Which I have to say, seems like they're encouraging someone with a gambling problem to slap me. Right?"

## DeSantis' new Disney World board hints at future controversy

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. (AP) — The first meeting of the new board of Walt Disney World's government — overhauled by sweeping legislation signed by Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis as punishment for Disney publicly challenging Florida's so-called "Don't Say Gay" bill — dealt with the rote affairs any other municipal government would handle: calls for better firefighter equipment, lessons on public records requests and bond ratings.

But the five board members appointed by DeSantis hinted Wednesday at future controversial actions they may take, including prohibiting COVID-19 restrictions at Disney World and recommending the elimination of two cities that were created after the Florida Legislature in 1967 approved the theme park resort's self-governance.

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The board also approved hiring the same law firm that advised the governor's office in making changes to the governing district to help interpret the new legislation.

For the most part, the new board members listened in a hotel ballroom outside Disney World as members of the public and workers from the district's departments explained what they do.

Martin Garcia, the board's new chair, said the major distinction between the old board controlled by Disney and the new one appointed by DeSantis will be a broader constituency encompassing more than just a single company, instead also representing workers and residents of surrounding communities.

"You didn't elect us, but the people of Florida elected a governor who appointed us," Garcia said. "I see there will be much broader representation."

The other new board members for what has been rechristened the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District included Bridget Ziegler, a conservative school board member and wife of the Florida Republican party chairman Christian Ziegler; Brian Aungst Jr., an attorney and son of a former two-term Republican mayor of Clearwater; Mike Sasso, an attorney; and Ron Peri, head of The Gathering USA ministry.

They replaced a board that had been controlled by Disney during the previous 55 years that the government operated as the Reedy Creek Improvement District.

The new name will require a new logo to replace the old one that's on 123 vehicles, 300 trash cans and 1,000 manhole covers, district administrator John Classe told board members.

The takeover of the Disney district by DeSantis and the Florida Legislature began last year when the entertainment giant, facing intense pressure, publicly opposed "Don't Say Gay," which bars instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade, as well as lessons deemed not age-appropriate.

DeSantis moved quickly to penalize the company, directing lawmakers in the GOP-dominated Legislature to dissolve Disney's self-governing district during a special legislative session, beginning a closely watched restructuring process.

In taking on Disney, DeSantis furthered his reputation as a culture warrior willing to battle perceived political enemies and wield the power of state government to accomplish political goals, a strategy that is expected to continue ahead of his potential White House run.

After the meeting, Josh D'Amaro, chairman of Disney Parks, Experiences & Products, said in a statement that he was hopeful the new board would continue to maintain "the highest standards" for the resort's infrastructure, set by its predecessor, and support ongoing growth at the resort.

During public comments at Wednesday's meeting, the leader of the union for the district's firefighters, which had clashed with the previous board, welcomed the new members, calling the new board "a fresh start." Jon Shirey urged the new board to devote resources to purchasing new fire trucks, improving pay and increasing staff, saying the 32 firefighters who are on duty each day is just two more than it was in 1989.

"It's safe to say that Disney has grown exponentially," Shirey said.

## Chile: Attempted \$32 million airport heist leaves two dead

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — An airport shootout in Chile's capital killed a security officer and an alleged robber Wednesday in what authorities said was an attempted heist of more than \$32 million in cash aboard a plane from Miami.

Around 10 heavily armed robbers were able to skirt security measures to reach the runway at the Arturo Merino Benítez International Airport, where a Latam airlines aircraft had \$32.5 million in cash that was being transferred to an armored truck, Interior Subsecretary Manuel Monsalve said.

There was a shootout between the would-be robbers and security officials that killed an employee of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, or DGAC, as well as an alleged assailant.

The other robbers fled. Two burned vehicles were later found nearby.

"The brave action by the DGAC officials frustrated the robbery," Monsalve said, noting that the would-be robbers were "highly organized" and "very armed."

Video posted on social media appeared to show bullet holes in a Delta plane that was parked next to

the Latam aircraft that was targeted. Another video appears to show a moment in the shootout during which a lot of gunshots can be heard.

"There was no risk to passengers," DGAC chief Raúl Jorquera said.

The attempted heist targeted the \$32.5 million that were set to be transferred to an armored truck to then be distributed to several banks in the South American country.

The attempted robbery "will undoubtedly lead us to revise processes, protocols that must be improved ... it forces us to rethink many things," Jorquera said.

This was not the first time the airport in Chile's capital was targeted. In 2020, thieves stole some \$15 million from a warehouse in the airport, six years after a similar \$10 million heist.

President Gabriel Boric bemoaned the latest heist during a speech Wednesday in which he said that "when there's insecurity, everything else wobbles."

An increase in violent crime has contributed to a recent decline in Boric's approval ratings, according to polls.

## 3D-printed rocket's debut launch aborted at last minute

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A rocket made almost entirely of 3D-printed parts remained on the pad Wednesday after its debut launch attempt was aborted at the last minute.

California-based Relativity Space was attempting to launch the rocket to orbit from a former missile site at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station. There was no immediate word on when the company might try again.

On-board flight computers halted the countdown with just over a minute remaining because of a temperature issue with the rocket's upper stage. Mission Control decided to fix the problem and try again before the launch window closed, but in the end called it quits for the day.

It's a relatively small rocket, just 110 feet (33 meters), and won't be carrying anything for this test flight except for a memento: the first metal 3D print from the company's printers.

About 85% of the rocket, named Terran, is made of 3D parts printed at the company's factory in Long Beach, California, including its engines. Relativity Space aims to increase that percentage on its future versions.

SpaceX's Falcon rockets have been flying with 3D-printed parts for years, but not nearly to the extent of Relativity Space's new rocket.

Relativity Space said its rocket is the largest 3D-printed object to attempt a launch.

Businessman Mark Cuban of TV's "Shark Tank" was among the early investors in the company.

## Tucker Carlson's scorn for Trump revealed in court papers

By DAVID BAUDER and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — A defamation lawsuit is revealing scornful behind-the-scenes opinions by Fox News figures about Donald Trump, including a Tucker Carlson text message declaring, "I hate him passionately."

Carlson's private text comments were revealed in court papers at virtually the same time the former president was hailing the Fox News host on social media. Trump said he was doing a "great job" in presenting excerpts of U.S. Capitol security video of the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection — though Carlson used the video to produce a false narrative of the attack.

The documents are coming to light at a time of increased tension between Trump and Fox, the dominant media force appealing to conservatives, as he campaigns to regain the presidency.

Voting machine manufacturer Dominion Voting Systems is suing Fox News for \$1.6 billion, claiming the network broadcast false claims that the company was responsible for fraud in the 2020 presidential election. The case is to go to trial this spring, and a trove of documents related to Fox's actions after the election are being publicly released in advance.

A common theme emerging from the internal documents and depositions is that Fox executives and

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hosts doubted the election claims being peddled by Trump and his allies, but aired and emphasized them anyway. Fox was growing concerned about a decline in viewership as Trump supporters turned away from the network after it — correctly — called Joe Biden the presidential winner in Arizona on election night.

The exchanges include Carlson's text conversation on Jan. 4, 2021, with an unknown person, in which the prime-time host expressed anger toward Trump.

Carlson said that "we are very, very close to being able to ignore Trump most nights" and that "I truly can't wait."

Carlson said he had no doubt there was fraud in the 2020 election, but that Trump and his lawyers had so discredited their case — and media figures like himself — "that it's infuriating. Absolutely enrages me."

Federal and state officials, courts, exhaustive reviews in battleground states and Trump's attorney general found no widespread fraud that could have changed the outcome of the 2020 election, although Trump continues to falsely state that the presidency was stolen from him.

Addressing Trump's four years as president, Carlson said, "We're all pretending we've got a lot to show for it, because admitting what a disaster it's been is too tough to digest. But come on. There really isn't an upside to Trump."

In another text exchange more than a month earlier, Carlson denigrated Trump's business abilities: Trump's talent, he said, is to "destroy things. He could easily destroy us if we play it wrong."

Publicly, Fox viewers heard very different views, such as a 2017 exchange with colleague Greg Gutfeld in which Carlson agreed that Trump was "the greatest president that ever will be." On his show in 2019, Carlson said Trump had fought as hard as he could to make sure everyone in America was treated equally under the law.

"You can say what you really believe in public," Carlson said then. "You're an American citizen. That is your right." Trump could lose in 2020, he added, "but he'll be a genuinely great president."

Fox, in response to the court exhibits quoting Carlson that were released late Tuesday, said that "Dominion has been caught red handed using more distortions and misinformation in their PR campaign to smear Fox News and trample on free speech and freedom of the press. We already know they will say and do anything to try to win this case, but to twist and even misattribute quotes to the highest levels of our company is truly beyond the pale."

Carlson has continued rolling out security video from the Capitol attack, footage handed to him by House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. For that, Trump said on his social media platform, "congratulations to Tucker Carlson on one of the biggest 'scoops' as a reporter in U.S. history."

The selective release of the footage to sway the historical account has drawn criticism, including from Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Wednesday called on Fox to stop spreading election lies, which he said was eroding trust in American democracy.

Fox's founder, Rupert Murdoch, has a complex relationship with Trump: "I was not close to him," Murdoch said in a deposition in the libel lawsuit.

Indeed, though Murdoch acknowledged talking to Trump occasionally, he said he also sought inside information from Sean Hannity, one of his network's primetime hosts, because Hannity was the closest person at Fox to Trump.

Following Trump's loss in November 2020, Murdoch despaired of the president's behavior.

"The real danger is what he might do as president," Murdoch wrote in an email to a friend that month. "Apparently not sleeping and bouncing off walls! Don't know about Melania, but kids no help."

But Murdoch told his network's officials that he also didn't want to "antagonize" Trump: "He had a very large following, and they were probably mostly viewers of Fox, so it would have been stupid," Murdoch said in a deposition in the Dominion case.

In separate questioning in the case, Murdoch acknowledged that he believed the 2020 presidential election "was not stolen."

On social media recently, Trump was critical of Fox when other court papers released in the Dominion case made clear that a number of the network's executives and personalities privately believed the election fraud claims were bunk.

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Trump and his team also have accused Fox of giving his latest campaign for the presidency little attention and favoring a potential challenger for the GOP nomination, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. Fox and Trump have long had a complicated relationship. While he frequently has used the network to reach its audience, he also has been furious at a perceived lack of loyalty, most prominently after the 2020 election.

In a fiery speech at the Conservative Political Action Committee last week, Trump ally Steve Bannon complained that Fox had disrespected the former president.

"You've deemed Trump's not going to be president," Bannon said. "Well, we deem you're not going to have a network."

On Saturday afternoon, Fox News aired Trump's speech to CPAC in its entirety.

## A global mystery: What's known about Nord Stream explosions

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's a major international mystery with global consequences: Who was behind the explosions that damaged the Nord Stream gas pipelines last year in the Baltic Sea?

The answer has broad implications for European energy security but could also threaten Western unity over backing Ukraine in defending itself from Russia's invasion. Or, it might shatter Russian and Chinese attempts to fix the blame on a hypocritical West.

Yet, nearly six months after the sabotage on the Russia-to-Germany pipelines, there is no accepted explanation. And a series of unconfirmed reports variously accusing Russia, the United States and Ukraine are filling an information vacuum as investigations into the blasts continue.

A look at the pipelines and what's known about the explosions.

### WHAT ARE THE NORD STREAM PIPELINES?

The pipelines, known as Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2, are majority-owned by Russia's state-run energy giant Gazprom and used to transport natural gas from Russia to Europe under the Baltic to their termini in Germany.

Nord Stream 1 was completed and came online in 2011. Nord Stream 2 was not finished until the fall of 2021 but never became operational due to the launch of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022.

### WHY ARE THEY CONTROVERSIAL?

Both pipelines bypass existing routes that go through Ukraine, meaning not only that Ukraine loses income from transit fees but is unable to directly use the gas they carry.

Of perhaps greater concern to the West, the pipelines were seen as a move by Russia to gain further, if not almost complete, control over Europe's energy supplies. Many in the West fear that Russia will use energy as a political weapon against European countries as it has done in the past with former Soviet states.

Despite those concerns and over the objections of the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations, the German government under former Chancellor Angela Merkel moved ahead with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 project. The Biden administration waived sanctions against German entities involved in Nord Stream 2 after securing a pledge from Germany that it would allow backflows of gas into Ukraine and would act to shut the pipeline down should Russia try to use it to force political concessions.

After Russia's Feb. 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine, Germany withdrew permission for Nord Stream 2, which had not yet come online.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PIPELINES?

First, Gazprom halted gas flows through Nord Stream 1 on Sept. 2, 2022, citing issues related to European sanctions imposed against Russia over the war in Ukraine.

Three weeks later, both Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 were hit by explosions that rendered them inoperable and caused significant leaks of gas that was idle in the pipelines. Some have said the blasts caused the worst release of methane in history, although the full extent of the environmental damage remains unclear.

The depth of the pipeline and the complexity of using underwater explosives lent credence to the idea that only a state actor with the expertise to handle such an operation could be responsible. But no one claimed responsibility.



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In the immediate aftermath of the explosions, U.S. officials suggested Russia may have been to blame while Russia accused the United States and Britain of being behind them. Investigations by European nations, including Denmark, through whose waters the pipeline travels, and Germany have yet to yield conclusive results.

## WHAT THEORIES HAVE BEEN REPORTED?

After months of few developments in the probes, American investigative journalist Seymour Hersch, known for past exposes of U.S. government malfeasance, self-published a lengthy report in February alleging that President Joe Biden had ordered the sabotage, which Hersch said was carried out by the CIA with Norwegian assistance.

That report, based on a single, unidentified source, has been flatly denied by the White House, the CIA and the State Department, and no other news organization has been able to corroborate it. Russia, followed by China, however, leaped on Hersch's reporting, saying it was grounds for a new and impartial investigation conducted by the United Nations.

On Tuesday, though, The New York Times, The Washington Post and German media published stories citing U.S. and other officials as saying there was evidence Ukraine, or at least Ukrainians, may have been responsible. The Ukrainian government has denied involvement.

Germany's Die Zeit newspaper and German public broadcasters ARD and SWR reported that investigators believed that five men and a woman used a yacht hired by a Ukrainian-owned company in Poland to carry out the attack. German federal prosecutors confirmed that a boat was searched in January but have not confirmed the reported findings.

## WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THOSE FOUND RESPONSIBLE?

The implications of a determination that Ukraine was behind the explosions are not entirely clear. It's unlikely it would result in an immediate loss of Western support for Ukraine in the war with Russia, but it might dampen enthusiasm for future assistance if it was found that Ukraine or its agents carried out such an operation in European waters.

A determination that the United States or a proxy was responsible would give Russia and China additional leverage to go after the U.S. and its allies as hypocrites in their demands for the rule of the law, sovereignty and territorial integrity to be respected.

A finding that Russia was behind the explosions would lend weight to Western claims that Moscow is in flagrant breach of international law and willing to use energy as a weapon against Europe.

There is no indication of when the European investigations will be complete — and it seems improbable, given the animosity and mistrust surrounding the Ukraine conflict, that its findings will be universally accepted.

## **3 injured in fiery train derailment caused by rockslide**

SANDSTONE, W.Va. (AP) — An empty coal train hit a rockslide along tracks in West Virginia on Wednesday morning, causing a fiery derailment that injured three crewmembers, CSX Transportation said in a statement.

Four locomotives and 22 empty cars derailed in Summers County near the New River, CSX said. The lead locomotive, which carried a conductor, an engineer and an engineer trainee, caught fire and the crewmembers were being evaluated and treated for non-life threatening injuries, the company said.

CSX said an unoccupied locomotive was partially in the waterway where an unknown amount of diesel fuel and oil spilled, officials said. Environmental teams were deploying containment measures.

The derailment occurred in a remote area just south of Sandstone inside the New River National Park and Preserve, according to a statement from the West Virginia Emergency Management Division. Several state agencies are monitoring the situation and said public water systems downstream have been notified and are monitoring for any potential public health impacts.

No hazardous materials were being transported and there was no danger to the public, CSX said.

The company said employee and community safety was a top priority as it sends teams to assess the

situation and develop a recovery plan.

## As bourbon booms, thirst for rare brands breeds skullduggery

By ANDREW SELSKY and DAMIAN DOVARGANES Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — Buttery, smooth, oaky. These are characteristics of the best bourbons, and a growing cult of aficionados is willing to pay hundreds or even thousands of dollars to get their hands on scarce American spirits — and even bend or break laws.

The first challenge is figuring out which liquor stores have these premium bottles on their shelves — and that's where inside knowledge can give bourbon hunters a leg up, and potentially get them into legal trouble.

In Oregon, several high-ranking officials at the state's liquor regulating agency are under criminal investigation after an internal probe found they used their influence to obtain scarce bourbons.

That included the holy grail for bourbon fanatics: Pappy Van Winkle 23-year-old, which can sell for tens of thousands of dollars on resale markets. Top-end bourbons have found themselves at the center of criminal investigations in at least three other states, from Virginia to Pennsylvania to Kentucky.

Premium spirits were always expensive and sought-after, but interest is surging. Distillers have upped production to try to meet increased demand, but before the whiskey reaches stores and bars, it must age for years and even decades.

Each state gets a limited amount of Pappy Van Winkle 23-year-old, produced by Old Rip Van Winkle Distillery of Frankfort, Kentucky.

In 2022, Oregon received just 33 bottles.

"The average person cannot get good bottles," said Cody Walding, a bourbon fan from Houston. He believes he's years away from finding Buffalo Trace Distillery's five-bottle Antique Collection, despite making connections with liquor store managers.

"Like, to be able to get Pappy Van Winkle or Buffalo Trace Antique Collection, unless you're basically best friends with a store manager, I don't even think it's possible to get those," he said. In a Los Angeles bar that Walding visited last week, one shot of Pappy 23-year cost \$200.

Six officials from the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission — including then-Executive Director Steve Marks — have acknowledged they had Pappy or another hard-to-get bourbon, Elmer T. Lee Single Barrel, routed to liquor stores for their own purchase. All six denied they resold the bourbons.

Old Rip Van Winkle Distillery's suggested retail price of Pappy 23-year is \$299.99. Because of its extreme scarcity, it can go for a lot more on the resale market.

In December, a single bottle sold at Sotheby's for a record \$52,500. Two other bottles were auctioned for \$47,500 apiece. All three were originally released in 2008.

The Oregon agency's internal investigation determined the employees violated a statute that says public officials cannot use confidential information for personal gain. Gov. Tina Kotek sought Marks' resignation in February, and he quit. The other five are on paid temporary leave. An investigation by the state Department of Justice's Criminal Division is ongoing.

Marks did not immediately respond to messages Wednesday seeking comment. In his replies to the commission investigator, Marks denied he had violated ethics laws and state policy. However, he acknowledged that he had received preferential treatment "to some extent" in obtaining the whiskey as a commission employee.

The practice was allegedly going on for many years and involved not only state employees but also members of the Oregon Legislature, the investigator was told.

Five bottles of Oregon's allotment of Pappy 23-year-old went to "chance to purchase," a lottery started in 2018. The odds of winning Pappy 23-year were 1 in 4,150.

Utah, Virginia and Pennsylvania are among other states with lotteries for coveted liquor. Two men in Pennsylvania each bought a bottle of Pappy Van Winkle after winning the liquor lottery in different years. They tried to sell their bottles on Craigslist, but undercover officers posing as buyers nailed them for selling liquor without a license.

In Virginia, an employee of the state's Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority downloaded confidential

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information about which state-run liquor shops would be receiving rare bourbons. An accomplice then sold the intel to Facebook groups of bourbon fans. The now-former employee pleaded guilty to felony computer trespass in September, received a suspended prison sentence and a fine, and was banned from all Virginia liquor stores.

In Kentucky, an employee of Buffalo Trace Distillery was arrested in 2015 for stealing bourbon, including Pappy, over several years and selling it. The caper became part of "Heist," a Netflix miniseries, in 2021.

Whiskey is a booming industry, especially the high-end products.

Supplier sales for American whiskey — which includes bourbon, Tennessee whiskey and rye — rose 10.5% last year, reaching \$5.1 billion, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. Revenue for makers of super-premium American whiskey grew 141% over the past five years.

Bourbon, in particular, has a rich American heritage. It's been around since before Kentucky became a state in 1792 and is where the vast majority of bourbon comes from. In 1964, Congress declared bourbon "a distinctive product of the United States," barring whiskey produced in other countries from being labeled as bourbon. Today, some of the best-known Kentucky bourbon distilleries are foreign-owned.

In the 1960s and '70s, bourbon had a reputation as a cheap drink. Then came a change: Targeting Japan, Kentucky distillers developed single-barrel and small batch versions in the 1980s and 1990s, which later blossomed in the United States, said Fred Minnick, who has written books on bourbon and judges world whiskey competitions.

"The distillers were starting to wake up — there was an interest in the whiskey, because the culture itself was beginning to change," Minnick said. "We were going from a steak-and-potatoes nation to foie gras and wagyu."

Minnick lovingly describes what it's like to sip a great bourbon, which obtains sweetness by absorbing natural wood sugars from charred oak barrels.

"It begins at the front of your tongue, walks itself back, will drip a little bit down your jawline, a little bit like butter, very velvety," Minnick said. "Caramel is one of the quintessential notes, followed by a little touch of vanilla."

Some of the world's top beverage companies that own major brands include Kirin (which owns Four Roses), Beam Suntory (Maker's Mark, Jim Beam, Knob Creek, Basil Hayden), Diageo (Bulleit, I.W. Harper), Sazerac (Buffalo Trace, Van Winkle, Blanton's) and Campari Group (Wild Turkey).

They boosted bourbon production with multimillion-dollar expansions and renovations, but there's still not enough of the best stuff to go around.

Despite Pappy 23-year-old's red-hot popularity, Minnick is not a big fan.

"Right or wrong, the Pappy Van Winkle 23-year-old is absolutely the most sought-after modern whiskey, year in, year out," Minnick said. "I personally think that the 23-year is hit-and-miss. It's typically over-oaked for me."

## March Madness 2023: Rutgers, Utah St need resume-boosting Ws

By The Associated Press undefined

March Madness is coming up fast. Here is what to know along with some key games to watch and who's on the bubble ahead of Selection Sunday for the NCAA Tournament:

### KEY DATES

All eyes will be on the conference tournaments this week:

- The ACC Tournament is rolling March 7-11 in Greensboro, North Carolina.
- The Big 12 Tournament will be March 8-11 in Kansas City, Missouri.
- The Big Ten Tournament will be March 8-12 in Chicago.
- The Big East Tournament will be March 8-11 in New York.
- The Pac-12 Tournament will be March 8-11 in Las Vegas.
- The SEC Tournament will be March 8-12 in Nashville, Tennessee.

### MARCH MADNESS

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Selection Sunday is March 12, when bracket matchups will be set for the First Four and first- and second-round games that stretch from Florida to California.

Sweet 16 weekend will see games in New York City (East Region), Las Vegas (West), Kansas City, Missouri (Midwest), and Louisville, Kentucky (South).

Where is the Final Four? In Houston, on April 1, with the championship game on April 3.

Basketball aficionados, take note: The women's NCAA Tournament will hold its Final Four in Dallas, a four-hour drive up the road from Houston.

## BETTING GUIDE

Who's going to win the national championship? With the regular season over, the betting favorites as of this week to reach the Final Four are Houston, Alabama, Kansas and UCLA, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. That differs from the top teams in the NCAA's initial seed watch, which had Purdue in the top four, not UCLA. All of this matches many of the teams in the AP Top 25, too.

## WHO'S IN

These teams are already going dancing after landing their league's automatic bid: Kennesaw State (26-8, Atlantic Sun), UNC Asheville (27-7, Big South), Fairleigh Dickinson (19-14, Northeast), Drake (27-7, Missouri Valley), Furman (27-7, Southern), Louisiana-Lafayette (26-7, Sun Belt), Southeast Missouri State (19-16, Ohio Valley), Gonzaga (28-5, West Coast), College of Charleston (31-3, Colonial Athletic Association) and Oral Roberts (30-4, Summit League).

## BUBBLE WATCH

Mississippi State (20-11). The Bulldogs closed the regular season by losing half of their final six games, including games at NCAA Tournament-bound Missouri and red-hot Vanderbilt that would have bolstered their resume. Now, sitting 46th in the NET rankings, they surely need to beat Florida in the second round of the Southeastern Conference Tournament on Thursday to at least avoid several restless nights before the Selection Show.

Utah State (24-7). The Aggies won five straight in lopsided fashion to close out the regular season and put themselves in position to land an at-large bid in the NCAA field. They rank 21st in the NET but have just one Quad 1 victory, so they probably can't afford an early exit in the Mountain West Conference Tournament in Las Vegas.

Rutgers (18-13). The Scarlet Knights have dropped five of seven heading into the Big Ten Tournament, a shaky stretch that has them squarely on the bubble and in need of a win against even more desperate Michigan on Thursday.

## GAME(S) TO WATCH

Providence (21-10) vs. No. 11 UConn (24-7), Big East Tournament quarterfinals, Thursday, 2:30 p.m. Eastern (FS1). The Friars had been in solid NCAA Tournament shape before closing the regular season with home losses to No. 15 Xavier and Seton Hall. Beating the Huskies would give Providence a huge boost. The teams split their matchups this season, each winning at home by 12.

Auburn (20-11) vs. Arkansas (19-12), SEC Tournament quarterfinals, Thursday, 7 p.m. Eastern (SECN). As statement wins go, the Tigers' 79-70 takedown of No. 17 Tennessee in the regular-season finale was massive. Auburn faces another tough challenge in its SEC Tournament opener against Arkansas. The Razorbacks closed the regular season with three straight losses, so winning at least one game in Nashville would make them feel a whole lot better on Selection Sunday.

## Harry & Meghan's daughter christened, will use royal title

BY DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry and his wife Meghan announced Wednesday that their daughter had been christened in a private ceremony in California, publicly calling her a princess and revealing for the first time that they will use royal titles for their children.

Princess Lilibet Diana, who turns two in June, was baptized on Friday by the Archbishop of Los Angeles, the Rev John Taylor, Harry and Meghan said in a statement. Lilibet's title and that of her brother, Archie,

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who will be four in May, will be updated on the Buckingham Palace website later.

The announcement marked the first time that the children's titles had been used in public.

The question of the children's titles took center stage two years ago during Harry and Meghan's television interview with Oprah Winfrey. Meghan, who is biracial, said that when she was pregnant with Archie "they" — presumably the palace — "were saying they didn't want him to be a prince ... which would be different from protocol."

Meghan suggested that this was because Archie was the royal family's "first member of color" and would have marked the first time a royal grandchild wasn't given the same title as the other grandchildren.

At the time, royal experts said Meghan's comments appeared to be based on a misunderstanding of the way royal titles are conferred.

Titles are conferred in line with a decree issued by King George V in 1917 that limits the titles of prince and princess to the male-line grandchildren of the sovereign.

As long as the late Queen Elizabeth II was alive, Harry and his older brother, Prince William, were the sovereign's grandchildren. Harry and William's children, as great grandchildren, didn't receive the titles automatically.

But Elizabeth had the power to amend the rules, and in 2012 she decreed that the children of Prince William and his wife, Catherine, would be princes and princesses. This decree didn't apply to Harry and Meghan.

However, the situation changed when King Charles III ascended the throne on the death of his mother last September. William and Harry are the king's sons, meaning their offspring are now royal grandchildren and so entitled to be known as prince and princess.

Nonetheless, they have remained a plain "master" and "miss" on the Buckingham Palace website for the past six months.

## What to know about prescription drugs promising weight loss

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

WeightWatchers, the 60-year-old diet firm, announced this week it would acquire a telehealth company whose providers prescribe anti-obesity drugs for growing numbers of eager online subscribers.

The \$132 million deal with Sequence is the just the latest commercial push into the red-hot market for prescription drugs that promise significant weight loss. For months, the diabetes drug Ozempic has been touted on social media by celebrities even though it's not approved for weight loss. The demand for it sparked shortages.

WeightWatchers will be introducing its roughly 3.5 million subscribers to a new generation of medications that go beyond behavioral changes like gym workouts and diet tracking. Obesity experts say the drugs may revolutionize treatment of the disease that affects 42% of American adults.

Here's a look at the promise of these new medications and cautions about their use.

### WHAT ARE THESE NEW DIET DRUGS?

The drugs that have generated most buzz are from a class of medications called GLP-1 agonists. Two of the most popular, Ozempic and Wegovy, are different doses of the same drug, semaglutide.

Ozempic has been used for six years to treat type 2 diabetes and is not approved for weight loss. Wegovy was approved in 2021 to treat obesity in adults and late last year to treat kids and teens 12 and older.

Doctors prescribe the medications to people with diabetes alone, or to people who are obese or who are overweight with additional health problems. Most of these types of drugs are delivered through weekly injections.

Supply problems and soaring demand last year led to a shortage of the drugs, but Novo Nordisk, the manufacturer, said those have been replenished.

### HOW DO THE DRUGS WORK?

They mimic the action of a gut hormone that kicks in after people eat, boosting the release of insulin, blocking sugar production in the liver and suppressing appetite.

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A newer drug, called tirzepatide, mimics the action of two hormones for even greater effect. The Eli Lilly and Co. drug, sold under the brand name Mounjaro, is now approved to treat diabetes, but the FDA granted fast-track status to review it to treat obesity. A decision is expected this spring.

With lower appetite and a greater feeling of fullness, people using these drugs eat less and lose weight.

**HOW EFFECTIVE ARE THE DRUGS?**

In a clinical trial, adults who took Wegovy saw a mean weight loss of nearly 35 pounds, or about 15% of their initial body weight. Adolescents lost about 16% of their body weight.

A clinical trial of Mounjaro, which is still being studied, saw mean weight loss of 15% to 21% of body weight depending on the dose, compared with a weight loss of about 3% for people taking placebo, or dummy drug.

**WHY NOT JUST DIET AND EXERCISE?**

In a typical weight-loss program where participants rely only on diet and exercise, about a third of people enrolled will lose 5% or more of their body weight, noted Dr. Louis Aronne, director of the Comprehensive Weight Control Center at Weill Cornell Medicine.

Most people find it difficult to lose weight because of the body's biological reactions to eating less, he said. There are several hormones that respond to reduced calorie intake to increase hunger and maintain body mass.

"There is a real physical phenomenon," he said. "There is a resistance mechanism that is a coordinated effort by the body to prevent you from losing weight."

**WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF THE DRUGS?**

The most common side effects are short-lived gastrointestinal issues such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain and constipation.

Other possible side effects include thyroid tumors, cancer, inflammation of the pancreas, kidney and gallbladder and eye problems. People with a family history of certain thyroid cancers or a rare, genetic endocrine disorder should avoid the drugs.

**WHAT SHOULD CONSUMERS WATCH OUT FOR?**

These new medications could be an effective part of a multifaceted approach to weight loss, said Dr. Amy Rothberg, an University of Michigan endocrinologist who directs a virtual weight management and diabetes program called Rewind.

But she worries that programs like WeightWatchers are primarily interested in boosting enrollment — and profits.

"My hope is that they do their due diligence and have real monitoring of the patients taking the drugs," she said.

It's important to make sure that patients are taking the drugs for the intended purpose, to make sure there's no reason they shouldn't take the drugs and that they're monitored for side effects, she said.

## Adidas wonders what to do with Yeezy shoes after Ye split

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Adidas is still wrestling with how to dispose of 1.2 billion euros (\$1.3 billion) worth of Yeezy shoes after its breakup with the rapper formerly known as Kanye West, forcing the German sportswear maker into a big loss at the end of last year and expectations of more pain ahead.

CEO Bjorn Gulden said selling the popular line of shoes would mean paying royalties to Ye, who was dropped by Adidas five months ago after making antisemitic remarks on social media and in interviews. During an earnings call Wednesday, he pointed to "many variables" about what to do with the shoes now stacked in warehouses.

Destroying them could "raise sustainability issues," though some companies have offered recycling solutions, said Gulden, who was named CEO after the blowup over Ye's remarks. Restitching them to hide the Yeezy brand so they could be sold "is not very honest, so it's not an option," he added.

Suggestions to give them away to those in need in places like earthquake-hit Syria or Turkey would mean

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the product would “come back again very quickly” due to its high market value, “so that’s not really an option,” Gulden said.

If Adidas does decide to sell the shoes, “I can promise you that the people that have been hurt by this will also get something good out of it and get donations and proceeds in different ways, shapes or forms,” the CEO said.

Adidas split with Ye in October, following other brands that were facing pressure to end ties with the rapper over his antisemitic and other offensive remarks. The company is now struggling to find ways to become profitable again and replace its banner Yeezy line, which analysts have said amounted to as much as 15% of its net income.

The Ye breakup cost 600 million euros in lost sales in the last three months of 2022, helping drive the company to a net loss of 513 million euros. The decline, also attributed to higher supply costs and slumping revenue in China, contrasts with profit of 213 million euros in the fourth quarter of 2021.

More losses could be ahead, with the company forecasting a 500 million-euro hit to profit earnings this year if it decides not to repurpose the remaining Yeezy products in stock. The company is predicting a 2023 operating loss of 700 million euros.

Gulden said “so many companies” were willing to buy the popular shoes but that would mean paying royalties to Ye. Rumors that the company was in talks to sell them, however, “are not true.”

He had heard from “gazillions of people that have opinions about this, and of course when you’re sitting on the inside, it looks a little bit different than it looks on the outside.”

Gulden also said Adidas is still investigating former employees’ allegations that Ye created a toxic work environment and that the sportswear company knew about his problematic behavior and failed to protect workers.

The CEO called 2023 “a transition year,” saying “we can then start to build a profitable business again in 2024.”

Last year, fourth-quarter net sales were up a bare 1.3% at 5.21 billion euros from the same quarter a year ago. The company pointed to revenue dropping 50% in China and higher costs for supplies and shipping, which could not be offset by price hikes.

For the full year, the Herzogenaurach, Germany-based company said it made a net profit of 638 million euros on sales that rose 6%, to 22.5 billion euros.

Adidas also further shook up its leadership by replacing its top sales and marketing executives. Global sales head Roland Auschel will leave the company after 33 years and be succeeded by Arthur Hoeld, now head of the Europe, Middle East and Africa region.

Brian Grevy, head of global brands, will step down March 31. CEO Gulden will take on his product and marketing responsibilities.

## Germany cautious over Nord Stream pipeline attack reports

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany’s defense minister voiced caution Wednesday over media reports that a pro-Ukraine group was involved in blowing up the Nord Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea last year.

German daily newspaper Die Zeit and public broadcasters ARD and SWR reported Tuesday that investigators were able to largely reconstruct how the pipelines from Russia to Germany were sabotaged on the night of Sept. 26, 2022.

Citing multiple unnamed officials, the news outlets reported that five men and a woman used a yacht hired by a Ukrainian-owned company in Poland to carry out the attack. German federal prosecutors confirmed that a boat was searched in January.

The New York Times also reported Tuesday that U.S. officials reviewed intelligence that suggested a pro-Ukrainian group was behind the blasts. The Ukrainian government has denied involvement.

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said he read the news reports “with great interest” but warned against drawing hasty conclusions.

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"We need to clearly differentiate whether it was a Ukrainian group that acted on the orders of Ukraine or ... without the government's knowledge," he told reporters in Stockholm.

Speaking on the sidelines of a European Union defense ministers meeting, Pistorius said some experts also had raised the possibility of a so-called false flag operation by a group pretending to be Ukrainian.

"It would not be the first time in the history of such events," the German minister said. "As such, I'm refraining from drawing premature conclusions."

Asked whether the reports could undermine Western support for Ukraine, Pistorius said he preferred to respond once he had reliable information. "Anything else is hypothetical," he added.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov rejected suggestions that the attack might have been ordered by Kyiv. "It's like a compliment for our special forces, but this is not our activity," he told reporters in Stockholm.

According to the German media reports, the suspects used forged passports when hiring the boat, which set off from the German port of Rostock. A captain, two divers, two diving assistants and a doctor made up the group, ARD reported.

Germany's Federal Prosecutors Office declined to comment directly on the reports. But it confirmed that investigators conducted a search from Jan. 18-20 "in connection with a suspicious boat hire."

"There is a suspicion that the boat in question could have been to transport explosive devices that exploded on Sept. 26, 2022, on the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines," the prosecutors office said in an email to The Associated Press. "The evaluation of the seized traces and objects is ongoing."

"The identity of the perpetrators and their motives are the subject of ongoing investigations," it added. "At present, it is not possible to make any reliable statements on this, in particular on the question of state control."

"In the course of the further investigation, all leads to clarify the facts of the case will be pursued," prosecutors said. "There are no grounds for suspecting employees of the German company that leased the ship."

Søren Thiim Andersen, an official on the small Baltic Sea island of Christiansoe, told Danish daily Berlingske that he was contacted by police in January seeking to talk to people who may have photographed ships that had been in the harbor around Sept. 16-18.

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby declined Tuesday to comment on the New York Times report, noting that investigations by Denmark, Germany, and Sweden remain active. Aside from the economic damage, the blasts released huge amounts of planet-warming methane.

"We need to let these investigations conclude," Kirby said. "And only then should we be looking at what follow-on actions might or may not be appropriate."

His comments were echoed by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. "There are ongoing national investigations, and I think it's right to wait until those are finalised before we say anything more about who was behind," he told reporters in Stockholm.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday described the media reports alleging Ukrainian involvement in the Nord Stream explosions as a coordinated manipulation intended to cover up the organizers of the attack.

"The masterminds of the terror attack clearly want to distract attention," Peskov said in remarks carried by the state RIA Novosti news agency.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his officials have accused the U.S. of staging the pipeline explosions, which they described as a terror attack.

Peskov again noted that Russia was denied access to evidence from the investigation. He called for a transparent international probe.

The Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines have long been a target of criticism by the United States and some of its allies, who warned that they posed a risk to Europe's energy security by increasing dependence on Russian gas.

Germany halted certification of the still-uncommissioned Nord Stream 2 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine,



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and Moscow stopped the flow of gas in Nord Stream 1 weeks before the attack.

Dutch gas transport and storage company Gasunie said Wednesday it does not expect the sabotaged Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines to come back into service any time soon and has written off its multimillion-euro investment in the project.

"In the current geopolitical context, Gasunie does not foresee a resumption of gas deliveries via Nord Stream for the foreseeable future and, as a result, does not expect to receive any more dividends," the company said in its annual report.

Gasunie, whose transportation and storage activities serve the Netherlands and parts of Germany, had invested 508 million euros for a 9% stake in Nord Stream. It slashed the value of the investment in July to 240 million euros and now has written it off entirely.

## Bruce Lee, Anna May Wong heirs talk legacy, roles for Asians

By TERRY TANG The Associated Press

Almost every working Asian actor in Hollywood can trace their path back to Bruce Lee and Anna May Wong.

The Chinese American screen legends are typically talked about the way one talks about revered ancestors. One was a martial arts icon, the other an actor who stood out during the silent film era despite playing women who were either submissive or dragon ladies. Both are credited with demonstrating Asians could be more than just extras for movies about China or Chinatown.

Although Wong was born in 1905 in Los Angeles and Lee in 1940 in San Francisco, their families like to imagine they crossed paths.

"They may have. Well, they may have seen each other at like a party or something," said Anna Wong, the elder Wong's niece and namesake.

"My father was an actor when he was a child in Hong Kong. So, you know, he may have seen some of her films that came across," Shannon Lee chimed in. "He loved to see Hollywood films as well when he was young."

Lee and Wong had never met before doing a recent joint Zoom interview with The Associated Press. They discovered parallel experiences protecting the legacy of a family member who happens to be an icon of both Hollywood and Asian America.

They have seen their relatives' popularity ebb and flow over decades. They have grappled with bogus long-lost child claims, weird licensing requests and on-screen portrayals out of their control. But they've also seen how the fascination continues: There are museum exhibits, TV show projects and an American quarter tribute.

With "Everything Everywhere All at Once" poised to snag trophies at the Oscars on Sunday — particularly for Asian cast members Michelle Yeoh and Ke Huy Quan — both women reflected on how things have changed since the blatantly racist practices that permeated Wong and Lee's heydays.

Lee has a "soft spot" for Yeoh because she came from kung fu cinema like her father. She's thrilled for Yeoh's recognition, especially because for so long Hollywood used Bruce Lee to justify casting Asians only as characters there just to karate chop.

"Of course she's doing action in the film but being recognized for her artistry and her acting and for all of that is really heartwarming for me to see," she said. "And Ke as well who ... as a young kid was very sort of stereotyped and he was put in a box because of it."

It's especially phenomenal when compared with Anna May Wong's era, according to her niece.

"Back in those days, no one had an Asian man and an Asian woman in the lead roles," Wong said. "It's crazy how far we've come. But then again, how far are we?"

While Lee was 4 when her father died, Wong never met her aunt. She knew her as "the pretty lady" in the pictures her father — Anna May Wong's brother — kept around the house.

"When he started telling me about the pretty lady, I was wanting to realize who she was," Wong said. "And then I became obsessed with her films and seeing all kinds of things."

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Both grew up hearing stories of how Anna May Wong and Bruce Lee fought hard against stereotypes, yet were sometimes stuck in unwinnable situations.

After gaining fame in movies like "The Thief of Bagdad" and "Shanghai Express," Anna May Wong suffered one of the greatest disappointments of her life in 1937. She lost the lead role of a Chinese villager in "The Good Earth" to Luise Rainer, who was white. Rainer went on to win a best actress Oscar.

The younger Wong brings this up on the lecture circuit. Millennial audiences "find it completely irrational to say, 'Okay, so let's take a Caucasian person and make them up to look like an Asian person and ... no one will notice,'" Wong said.

"It's actually a good thing that today's generation thinks that that's crazy," Lee added.

Even earning a lead role didn't necessarily mean a big payday for Asian talent. Before Bruce Lee went to Hong Kong and made hits like "The Big Boss" and "Fist of Fury," he was Kato in "The Green Hornet." The TV series premiered in 1966, only lasting a season and carrying a massive pay disparity.

"When you look at the pay stubs and then they say what everyone's getting paid, he's like way down on the bottom," Lee said. "Hopefully, there's changes happening there."

Neither actor was ever nominated for an Oscar. But the 2020 Netflix miniseries "Hollywood" depicted an alternate universe where Anna May Wong — played by Michelle Krusiec — won an Oscar. It created a nuisance for her niece and a reminder of a sad time in the actor's life.

"After that series came out, people said, 'Do you have her Oscar?'" Wong said. "I'm thinking, 'You know that that series was fictionalized, right?'"

Quentin Tarantino's 2019 flick "Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood" featured a fictitious scene of Bruce Lee picking (and losing) a fight with Brad Pitt's stuntman character. His daughter criticized the cameo as nothing but "horrible tropes," even penning an op-ed in The Hollywood Reporter.

"With this one film now everybody's like, 'Oh, that's what Bruce Lee was really like,'" Lee told the AP. "No, that was not what he was like at all."

Anna May Wong died in 1961 at 56 and Bruce Lee died in 1973 at 32. All these years later, the interest in them hasn't abated.

In a total coincidence, both families recently signed on as producers of biopics. Lee is working with Oscar-winning director Ang Lee (no relation), Wong with "Crazy Rich Asians" star Gemma Chan.

"Ang is a very earnest, gracious man. I think he wants to make a really great film," said Lee, who's been working on her movie for several years. "I would say in this moment I am cautiously optimistic."

Wong almost walked away from her project when several self-proclaimed "Anna May Wong experts" reached out to producers — but they reassured her they're "not going to take these people on when we can have an actual relative of Anna May Wong."

They both also receive (and often deny) steady merchandising proposals like Anna May Wong teacups and Bruce Lee football helmets, snack bowls and tin guitars.

"I guess I have to say it does speak to the love that people have. So I'm grateful for that," Lee said.

Both women hope people take away lessons in perseverance when looking at Bruce Lee's and Anna May Wong's lives. They were "symbols of what's possible," Lee said.

"For them to have gotten the opportunity to get on the screen, in the first place meant that they had extremely big energy, amazing work ethic and then they were able to accomplish the impossible in some way," she added.

## Skynyrd member's death signals end of era for Southern rock

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — Lynyrd Skynyrd guitarist Gary Rossington, who died Sunday, made it big when rock 'n' roll was still a defining cultural force on par with today's TikTok trends and superhero movies.

The iconic band's last surviving co-founder was also perhaps the last flagpole in a once-powerful part of American music: Southern rock. Or at least a rebellious version of it that later became loosely tied to conservative politics and didn't shy away from some of the problematic symbols of the South.

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"They're the band that sort of codified a lot of what we think of as Southern rock," said Stephen Thomas Erlewine, a music critic who writes for AllMusic, Pitchfork and Rolling Stone.

Lynyrd Skynyrd sang about Southern life while playing a form of muscular and gritty blues rock. The music could be raw or bloom into an extended guitar solo, like on their anthem "Free Bird."

But the Lynyrd Skynyrd of 2023 bears little resemblance to the one of nearly 50 years prior, when the original incarnation featured a group of long-haired musicians who fit into the American counterculture and were certainly not embraced by Nixon-era Republicans, Erlewine said.

The band's use of the Confederate flag back then was seen as "part of their rebellious streak," Erlewine said. They didn't really view the battle flag "as insurrectionist or pro-slavery, but more as garden variety rebellion," he said.

In more recent decades, though, the band came to represent a more specific brand of politics, especially after the distinctions between Southern rock and country blurred and their audiences mixed.

Some of the band's current members have been openly political. Last year, current lead vocalist Johnny Van Zant penned a song with his brother Donnie — apart from the band — that praised Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a potential Republican presidential candidate in 2024. Erlewine said the band's sound — and that of Southern rock in general — eventually became "a sort of Red State, old-fashioned rock."

The original members of Lynyrd Skynyrd, which released its first album in 1973, had an intense musical chemistry and were harder and grittier than other groups lumped under the Southern rock banner, such as The Allman Brothers Band and The Marshall Tucker Band.

They came to have three guitarists, whose layers produced a thick, brawny sound that could become "a locomotive for solos," Erlewine said.

But the label "Southern rock" was nebulous at best, said Alan Paul, a music journalist who interviewed Rossington several times for Guitar World and for his upcoming book, "Brothers and Sisters: The Allman Brothers Band and the Inside Story of the Album That Defined the '70s."

The most accurate way to describe the genre shaped by wide-ranging influences "would be rock bands who sounded distinctly Southern — they didn't hide anything about their Southernness," Paul said.

The Georgia-based Allman Brothers Band hated the term, Paul said, because it was too reductive. But Lynyrd Skynyrd embraced the Southern rock label "to the point of making people uncomfortable," Paul said.

The Florida band's pervasive "Sweet Home Alabama" was a response to Neil Young's "Alabama" and "Southern Man," which rebuked slavery in the South. The song name-checks Young and obliquely references Alabama Gov. George Wallace, a staunch segregationist who later softened his views.

The band's original lead singer and songwriter, Ronnie Van Zant, claimed the reference wasn't supporting Wallace.

"A lot of people believed in segregation and all that. We didn't. We put the 'boo, boo, boo' there saying, 'We don't like Wallace,'" Rossington concurred, in a documentary interview.

But Paul said he doesn't really believe that — "I don't think most people do." Paul cites a memoir written by the band's original manager, Alan Walden, who said Ronnie Van Zant was "a Wallace man all the way."

And yet Erlewine also points out that Van Zant wrote a 1975 song, "Saturday Night Special," that subtly questioned the uses of handguns.

"There was definitely a reactionary conservatism in parts of Skynyrd, but they could not be seen strictly in terms of what you would think of as conservative politics," Erlewine said of their first incarnation.

A 1977 plane crash killed Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist Steve Gaines and backing vocalist Cassie Gaines and injured Rossington. The band reformed a decade later with Johnny Van Zant taking his older brother's role. Rossington was among the returning members and, as the lineup continued to change, would remain.

It was this reconstituted version of Lynyrd Skynyrd that seemed to really embrace a more conservative image, Erlewine and Paul each said.

In the 1990s, the group's audiences began to overlap with those of Hank Williams Jr. and Charlie Daniels, a Southern rock pioneer whose sound became more country.

"A lot of the sounds that were progressive in the '70s and rock-based became incorporated into coun-

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try music, and became the sound of country music," Erlewine said. "Lynyrd Skynyrd doesn't really play country music but there's an overlap between the audiences ... it all becomes sort of like a certain kind of Southern music."

He added: "Certain images, certain sounds, certain ideas were set in place. And it's easier to keep playing to that stuff, because that's where the audience is."

The still touring Lynyrd Skynyrd regularly used the Confederate battle flag in their live shows for decades. Rossington told CNN in 2012 that the band would stop using the flag because of its association with hate groups, but then walked back the comment to say they would continue to use it, alongside the state flag of Alabama and the American flag.

These days, musicians who could be seen as honoring the cultural and musical ideas of 1970s Southern rock — and building upon them — tend to be more progressive politically, Erlewine said. They include Jason Isbell and groups such as the Tedeschi Trucks Band and the Drive-By Truckers who've also sung about life in the South.

The Truckers' 2001 album "Southern Rock Opera" examined misconceptions about the South, Lynyrd Skynyrd's legend and Wallace's legacy, among other things.

"I was a (Skynyrd) fan in elementary school, which is when they were actually making records," the band's Patterson Hood told The Associated Press in 2002, saying he rediscovered a love for their music after buying a vinyl copy of the pre-crash double live set "One More for the Road" years later.

"After the crash, I didn't really care for the other Southern rock being made at that time," Hood said. "A lot of Southern rock took a right-wing direction after the plane crash."

In the span of half a century, Lynyrd Skynyrd morphed from playing pivotal rock 'n' roll into a near tribute band to itself. They were rebellious longhairs who became entrenched in a culture aligned with the conservative establishment. And Rossington was there for all of it, with his rhythmic and crunchy guitar keeping the band rooted.

"This kind of rocker is gone now," Erlewine said of Lynyrd Skynyrd's last surviving original member.

Added Paul: "Lynyrd Skynyrd was one of the biggest bands of the mid to late '70s. When rock and roll was really at the center of the cultural conversation — in a way that arguably hasn't been since and certainly isn't now."

## Christopher Paolini returns to Eragon's world with 'Murtagh'

NEW YORK (AP) — Christopher Paolini will have new adventures out this fall from Alagaësia and the world of Eragon, featuring the Dragon Rider Murtagh.

Random House Children's Books announced Wednesday that Paolini's "Murtagh," a standalone novel that takes place a year after the events of his blockbuster "Inheritance Cycle," will be published Nov. 7 with an announced first printing of 2 million copies. According to Random House, the novel is an "epic journey into lands both familiar and untraveled" as Murtagh and his dragon Thorn confront a "mysterious witch."

"Murtagh" is the novel I've been waiting to write for over 13 years," Paolini said in a statement.

"It's a deep dive into the life of our titular character and his dragon, Thorn. Here you'll find mystery, magic, and revelations as Murtagh attempts to answer some of the deepest questions in the land, as well as those of his own life," he said. "I've had a ridiculous amount of (sometimes devilish) fun writing MURTAGH, and I can't wait for readers to experience it for themselves. Welcome back to Alagaësia!"

Paolini, 39, had yet to turn 20 when his debut novel "Eragon" made him one of the world's most popular fantasy writers. His four "Inheritance" books — "Eragon," "Eldest," "Brisings" and "Inheritance" — have sold more than 40 million copies, according to his publisher.

To mark the 20th anniversary of "Eragon," Alfred A. Knopf House is releasing an illustrated version of the book on the same day "Murtagh" comes out. New paperback editions of the "Inheritance" novels will be published April 25 by Knopf, which, like Random House, is part of Penguin Random House.

Another new Paolini book, "Fractal Noise," will be released May 16 by Tor Publishing Group.

## 'Stranger at the Gate,' an Oscar nominee on love after hate

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

When Richard McKinney was getting married last year, friends stepped in to help. Bibi Bahrami cooked Afghan dishes — from rice with carrots and raisins to chicken and beef — for the wedding guests. Her husband officiated the Islamic part of the ceremony.

At first glance, nothing seems unusual about that off-camera wedding scene — until you know the on-camera story of how McKinney and the Bahramis met. The short version is this: Angry and filled with hate for Muslims, the broad-shouldered, tattooed veteran once wanted to bomb the Bahramis' Islamic Center of Muncie in Indiana and inflict mass casualties on its congregation.

The longer version of what followed, how the kindness he's encountered from congregation members helped change not just his plans but his life's course, is chronicled in "Stranger at the Gate." The 30-minute movie is nominated for best documentary short film at the 95th Academy Awards, held this Sunday.

"We have been friends for years," Bahrami, a former Afghan refugee and a grandmother of seven (the eighth is on the way), said of McKinney in an interview. "He's like family at this point."

McKinney acknowledged that their unlikely bond is probably "mind-boggling" to many. "This whole journey has been very surreal," he said.

His is a story of second chances and transformation. It's also one of love conquering hate, said "Stranger at the Gate" director Joshua Seftel.

"It's easy to feel hopeless these days; when I saw this story, I thought, 'Wow, maybe there is a reason to believe in humanity,'" Seftel said. "If these two people can be friends, then why can't any of us?"

Seftel came across McKinney's story when he was working on a documentary series titled the "Secret Life of Muslims," featuring American Muslims of diverse backgrounds and seeking to shatter negative stereotypes.

"It's easy to hate someone that we don't know," Seftel said. "The power of film and storytelling is that you can get to know someone through a film and it can change the way people think."

The inspiration for that series, he said, was rooted in his own memories of antisemitism that he's encountered and being called names as a Jewish kid.

"After 9/11, I saw that kind of hate toward Muslims and I just thought, 'Maybe I can do something with my film work to try to help,'" he said.

A poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted ahead of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in 2021 found that 53% of Americans have unfavorable views toward Islam.

McKinney was once one of those — fervently so.

The end of a long military career left him angry, bitter, feeling worthless and drinking too much. His "destiny" to die in combat and return home in a flag-draped coffin, a hero, never panned out. He would look at himself and wonder who he was.

He focused his hate on Muslims, some of whom, he said, had been his battlefield enemies when he was serving overseas.

"My plan was to detonate an IED," or improvised explosive device, outside the Islamic center on a Friday when worshippers would be gathered, he said in the film. "I was hoping for at least 200 or more, dead, injured."

He started going to the mosque in 2009, introducing himself as someone who wanted to learn about Islam.

"I didn't trust them. ... I figured they would have me in the basement with a sword to my throat," he recalled in the film.

In reality, he said, he was welcomed and embraced by congregation members.

Bahrami, who viewers learn is a fan of country music and whose husband dubbed her "the Mother Teresa of the Muslim community," recounted comforting McKinney and giving him attention. Eventually, he found the sense of belonging he so craved.

"I said I need to be Muslim," McKinney said.

"Stranger at the Gate" is not the only nominee with a religious theme this year.

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For instance, "Women Talking," nominated for best picture, is based on a Miriam Toews novel that itself is based on a horrifically true story at a Mennonite colony in Bolivia. Men from that community were convicted of the rape of scores of women and girls. In the movie, survivors wrestle with whether to leave or stay in their insulated religious community, where they will be pressured to forgive the perpetrators.

Today, McKinney and Bahrami say they see the impact of the message behind their story in interactions with audiences after talks or screenings.

"One of the best compliments I've ever received was when somebody told me after seeing the film that 'You have given me a lot to think about,'" McKinney said. "I want people to think because we live in a society where, unfortunately, there's a lot of followers."

Someone told him how hearing his story saved him as it made him think that everyone has a purpose to find.

Bahrami, who Seftel said shows up at screenings with cookies for the audience, has had people hug her. Some have come up to her with tears, told her she gave them hope and courage or asked if they could "borrow" her for their own community.

Others have posed a tough question: How did she forgive McKinney?

She said that when she heard, in disbelief, of the plans McKinney once harbored, she invited him for dinner and asked him what he was thinking.

"I'm a strong believer," she said. "I think my faith is a big part of this forgiveness."

Another aspect, she added, was the vulnerability she saw in him and how apologetic he was.

Bahrami recalled how when Seftel approached her to participate in the film, she was experiencing vulnerability of a different kind herself; she was in a coma. As she later considered his request while recovering, she had one thought:

"God gave me a second life," she said, "and if I die again, the story could live."

## Oldest reference to Norse god Odin found in Danish treasure

By JAMES BROOKS Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Scandinavian scientists said Wednesday that they have identified the oldest-known inscription referencing the Norse god Odin on part of a gold disc unearthed in western Denmark in 2020.

Lisbeth Imer, a runologist with the National Museum in Copenhagen, said the inscription represented the first solid evidence of Odin being worshipped as early as the 5th century — at least 150 years earlier than the previous oldest known reference, which was on a brooch found in southern Germany and dated to the second half of the 6th century.

The disc discovered in Denmark was part of a trove containing about a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of gold, including large medallions the size of saucers and Roman coins made into jewelry. It was unearthed in the village of Vindelev, central Jutland, and dubbed the Vindelev Hoard.

Experts think the cache was buried 1,500 years ago, either to hide it from enemies or as a tribute to appease the gods. A golden bracteate — a kind of thin, ornamental pendant — carried an inscription that read, "He is Odin's man," likely referring to an unknown king or overlord.

"It's one of the best executed runic inscriptions that I have ever seen," Imer said. Runic symbols that early tribes in northern Europe used to communicate in writing.

Odin was one of the main gods in Norse mythology and was frequently associated with war as well as poetry.

More than 1,000 bracteates have been found in northern Europe, according to the National Museum in Copenhagen, where the trove discovered in 2020 is on display.

Krister Vasshus, an ancient language specialist, said that because runic inscriptions are rare, "every runic inscription (is) vital to how we understand the past."

"When an inscription of this length appears, that in itself is amazing," Vasshus said. "It gives us some quite interesting information about religion in the past, which also tells us something about society in the past."

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During the Viking Age, considered to be from 793 to 1066, Norsemen known as Vikings undertook large-scale raiding, colonizing, conquest and trading throughout Europe. They also reached North America.

The Norsemen worshipped many gods and each of them had various characteristics, weaknesses and attributes. Based on sagas and some rune stones, details have emerged that the gods possessed many human traits and could behave like humans.

"That kind of mythology can take us further and have us reinvestigate all the other 200 bracteate inscriptions that we know," Imer said.

## Today in History: MARCH 9, Notorious B.I.G. slain

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 9, the 68th day of 2023. There are 297 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 9, 1933, Congress, called into special session by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, began its "hundred days" of enacting New Deal legislation.

On this date:

In 1796, the future emperor of the French, Napoleon Bonaparte, married Josephine de Beauharnais (boh-ahr-NAY'). (The couple later divorced.)

In 1841, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *United States v. The Amistad*, ruled 7-1 in favor of a group of illegally enslaved Africans who were captured off the U.S. coast after seizing control of a Spanish schooner, *La Amistad*; the justices ruled that the Africans should be set free.

In 1862, during the Civil War, the ironclads USS Monitor and CSS Virginia (formerly USS Merrimac) clashed for five hours to a draw at Hampton Roads, Virginia.

In 1916, more than 400 Mexican raiders led by Pancho Villa (VEE'-uh) attacked Columbus, New Mexico, killing 18 Americans. During the First World War, Germany declared war on Portugal.

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. B-29 bombers began launching incendiary bomb attacks against Tokyo, resulting in an estimated 100,000 deaths.

In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, raised the standard for public officials to prove they'd been libeled in their official capacity by news organizations.

In 1976, a cable car in the Italian ski resort of Cavalese fell some 700 feet to the ground when a supporting line snapped, killing 43 people.

In 1987, Chrysler Corp. announced it had agreed to buy the financially ailing American Motors Corp.

In 1989, the Senate rejected President George H.W. Bush's nomination of John Tower to be defense secretary by a vote of 53-47. (The next day, Bush tapped Wyoming Rep. Dick Cheney, who went on to win unanimous Senate approval.)

In 1997, rapper The Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace) was killed in a still-unsolved drive-by shooting in Los Angeles; he was 24.

In 2000, John McCain suspended his presidential campaign, conceding the Republican nomination to George W. Bush. Bill Bradley ended his presidential bid, conceding the Democratic nomination to Vice President Al Gore.

In 2020, global stock markets and oil prices plunged, reflecting mounting alarm over the impact of the coronavirus. An alarmingly sharp slide at the opening bell on Wall Street triggered the first automatic halt in trading in more than two decades; the Dow industrials finished nearly 8% lower.

Ten years ago: During U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's first trip to Afghanistan as defense chief, two suicide bombings, one outside the Afghan Defense Ministry and the other near a police checkpoint in eastern Khost province, killed at least 19 people.

Five years ago: A combat veteran who'd been expelled from a treatment program at a California veterans home fatally shot three mental health workers there before taking his own life. Weeks after the shooting that left 17 people dead at a Florida high school, Gov. Rick Scott signed a school-safety bill that included

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new restrictions on guns, prompting a lawsuit from the National Rifle Association; the bill raised to 21 the minimum age to buy rifles and created a program enabling some teachers and other school employees to carry guns. Martin Shkreli, the former pharmaceutical CEO who'd been vilified for jacking up the price of a lifesaving drug, was sentenced in New York to seven years in prison for securities fraud.

One year ago: A Russian airstrike devastated a maternity hospital in the besieged Ukrainian port city of Mariupol and wounded at least 17 people. Police and soldiers rushed to evacuate victims, carrying out a heavily pregnant and bleeding woman on a stretcher. A Maryland hospital said the first person to receive a heart transplant from a pig died, two months after the groundbreaking experiment. Scientists said they had found the sunken wreck of polar explorer Ernest Shackleton's ship Endurance, more than a century after it was lost to the Antarctic ice.

Today's birthdays: Former Sen. James L. Buckley is 100. Actor Joyce Van Patten is 89. Actor Trish Van Devere is 82. Singer-musician John Cale (The Velvet Underground) is 81. Singer Mark Lindsay (Paul Revere and the Raiders) is 81. Former ABC anchorman Charles Gibson is 80. Rock musician Robin Trower is 78. Singer Jeffrey Osborne is 75. Country musician Jimmie Fadden (The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) is 75. Actor Jaime Lyn Bauer is 74. Magazine editor Michael Kinsley is 72. TV newscaster Faith Daniels is 66. Actor Linda Fiorentino is 65. Actor Tom Amandes is 64. Actor-director Lonny Price is 64. Country musician Rusty Hendrix (Confederate Railroad) is 63. Actor Juliette Binoche is 59. Rock musician Robert Sledge (Ben Folds Five) is 55. Rock musician Shannon Leto (30 Seconds to Mars) is 53. Rapper C-Murder (AKA C-Miller) is 52. Actor Emmanuel Lewis is 52. Actor Jean Louisa Kelly is 51. Actor Kerr Smith is 51. Actor Oscar Isaac is 44. Comedian Jordan Klepper (TV: "The Daily Show") is 44. Rapper Chingy is 43. Actor Matthew Gray Gubler is 43. Rock musician Chad Gilbert (New Found Glory) is 42. NHL defenseman Brent Burns is 38. Actor Brittany Snow is 37. Rapper Bow Wow is 36. Rapper YG is 33. Actor Cierra Ramirez is 28. U.S. Olympic gold-medal-winning gymnast Sunisa Lee is 20.