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Groton Community Calendar

Wednesday, March 22

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, corn, peaches, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Egg omelets.
School Lunch: Chicken strips, tri taters.
Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm
St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m. (League serves), Worship, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



Thursday, March 23

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, mixed vegetables, garlic toast, Mandarin orange salad.
School Breakfast: Muffins.
School Lunch: Hot dogs, baked beans.
All State Band in Sioux Falls

Friday, March 24

END OF THIRD QUARTER

Senior Menu: Tuna noodle casserole, peas and carrots, fruit, breadstick.
School Breakfast: Eggs and sausage.
School Lunch: Mac and cheese, cooked carrots.
All State Band in Sioux Falls

**The Groton Area School District
will be opening two hours late
on Wednesday, March 22, 2023.**

**Buses will travel on plowed
roads only.**

OST will be opening at 7:00 AM.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

New Orleans LaToya Cantrell have failed after a petition to remove her from office failed to gather enough signatures.

- The Oklahoma Supreme Court overturned part of the state's near-total abortion ban, ruling women have a right to abortion when pregnancy risks their health.
- Japan beat the United States 3-2 in Miami to win the 2023 World Baseball Classic. Shohei Ohtani struck out his Angels teammate Mike Trout in the victory.
- Memphis Grizzlies star guard Ja Morant has vowed to "be more responsible" ahead of his expected return from an eight-game suspension for "reckless" conduct.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin's commitments to each other during Xi's visit to Moscow have been "notably lopsided", according to the Institute for the Study of War, which claimed that Xi is "agreeing to a more reserved version of Russian-Chinese relations than Putin likely desires".

- At least 13 people have died, and more than 200 others were injured after a magnitude 6.5 earthquake hit Pakistan and Afghanistan. The tremors were also felt in parts of India.

- Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador expressed his support for Donald Trump, claiming a possible Trump indictment would be a politically motivated move to keep him out of the 2024 election. Read more about the story below.

- Citizen-led efforts to recall the Democratic Mayor of

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A community bank
with decisions made
close to the people
we serve —
both rural and urban.

DACOTAH BANK


BANKING ♦ INSURANCE ♦ MORTGAGE ♦ TRUST

Thank You!

AG APPRECIATION WEEK

MARCH 21-27

dacotahbank.com

MEMBER **FDIC**  Insurance and Trust
not FDIC Insured.



Addison Hoeft sang, "You Say."



Flute solo by Aurora Washenberger to the tune of "Jessie's Girl."

Middle School Talent Show

Photos lifted from the GDILIVE.COM video



Sharp Dressed Man by the Choir Guys.

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A President's Childhood by Addison Hoeft, Ryelle Gilbert, Makenna Krause, Kyleigh Kroll, Libby Cole, Rylie Rose and Journey Zieroth.



"We Will Rock You" performed by the 6-7 Choir Guys.



"I Love Rock 'n Roll" performed by the 6-7 Choir Girls.

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Teagan Hanten did a piano solo, "Ain't No Mountain High Enough."



Dr. ROCKenstein performed by the 6-7 Band.



Flute Quartet of Desiree Yeigh, Arianna Dinger, Tenley Frost and Novalea Warrington to the tune of "Let Her Go."

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Drumline battle with Sam Crank and Connor Kroll, "The Invader."



Emcees Libby Cole and Mya Feser.



The Junior Drumline did a performance in the dark.



Emcees were Jace Johnson, Layne Johnson and TC Schuster.

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

**March 22, 2023 – 7:00pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street**

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

- Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
- Oath of Office – Groton PD Officer Ben Smith
- Authorization to Bid Street Resurfacing Project
- Gravel Quotes
- Minutes
- Bills
- February Finance Report
- Baseball Concession Discussion
- Economic Development
- Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
- Hire Summer Employees
- Adjournment

Equalization Meeting to Follow at 7:30pm.

Groton City Board of Equalization Agenda

**March 22, 2023 – 7:30pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street**

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

- Convene as Groton City Board of Equalization
- Appeals Filed:
 - Parcel #18732 - 311 N 3rd Street
- Review Assessments
- Adjournment



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem signs temporary tax reduction into law, vows to fight for permanent tax cut

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 21, 2023 4:16 PM

After weeks of veto threats, Gov. Kristi Noem signed what some have called the “largest tax cut in state history” into law Tuesday.

The move reduces the state sales tax from 4.5% to 4.2%, cutting an estimated \$104 million from state revenues in the first year of implementation. But the tax cut has a sunset clause in 2027 — something Noem has opposed.

Lawmakers had just hours left in their annual legislative session earlier this month when they hashed out details and compromised on the tax cut.

Noem criticized legislators even as she signed their bill.

“Our people deserve permanent tax relief. The Legislature has instead offered them a tax holiday for four years,” Noem said in a statement. “It is clear they wish to raise taxes again in the near future, and the method through which they have written this legislation allows them to do so without ever having to take another vote.”

Noem said the tax cut isn’t “the best way” to help South Dakotans at a time of high inflation, but she said a temporary tax is “better than none.” The tax cut will go into effect July 1, which is the standard date for new state laws to become effective. It will expire in 2027 unless legislators extend it.

“Here, my honor and good sense require me to continue to fight for the permanent tax cut the people have earned,” Noem said.

During her fall reelection campaign, Noem promised to eliminate the state sales tax on food, which would have been a \$102 million cut. South Dakota is one of a few states that fully taxes groceries. Noem had recently threatened, without using the word “veto,” to withhold support for the state budget after lawmakers rejected her food tax repeal. But she signed the budget Monday.

Meanwhile, petition circulators unconnected to Noem are gathering signatures to put a repeal of the state food tax on the ballot next year. Noem is a Republican, and a food tax repeal has traditionally been a Democratic priority in the state.

Noem’s signature on the tax cut bill is one of her last major decisions before legislators convene on Monday to consider her vetoes.

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.

Federal government awards \$23 million for Prairie Pothole Region

Announcement is welcome news for South Dakota duck hunters

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 21, 2023 3:59 PM

The federal government plans to spend \$23 million to restore and conserve grasslands and wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region, which is known as the “duck factory” of North America and is home to migratory birds, fish and other wildlife.

The money is part of the Department of the Interior’s \$120 million in funding from the Inflation Reduction Act to restore ecosystems nationwide.

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"These projects will increase the resiliency of habitats and infrastructure to withstand severe and unanticipated weather events, furthering our work to restore America's natural infrastructure through nature-based solutions," Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said in a statement.

The Prairie Pothole Region is an area of wetlands that extends across parts of South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska and Montana, as well as Canada.

The region was covered by a thick sheet of ice over 10,000 years ago. As the ice receded, it left behind depressions in the land that filled with water, forming numerous "pothole" wetlands.

The money will help with a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service effort to restore and conserve native grasslands and wetlands on over 350,000 acres of existing Waterfowl Production Areas. Those are protected wetlands or grasslands managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service to support waterfowl and other wildlife species – ideally located in breeding or nesting areas, or migratory stopover sites for waterfowl. The areas are open to the public for hunting, wildlife observation, and other outdoor recreation, but they are managed with an emphasis on wildlife conservation.

"The projects will build upon critically important breeding areas for waterfowl, grassland birds, pollinators, and threatened and endangered species," said Deborah Kornblut, a spokesperson with the Fish and Wildlife Service, in an emailed statement.

Officials involved are "still identifying project specifics and project leads," Kornblut added. Some of the existing ways the Fish and Wildlife Service works to restore the Prairie Pothole Region is through planting native grasses, wildflowers and wetland vegetation, as well as conducting controlled burns and restoring natural water flows.

Waterfowl and water quality

The announcement is welcome news for many duck hunters.

According to Ducks Unlimited, a waterfowl conservation group, the Prairie Pothole Region is the most important and threatened waterfowl habitat on the continent. The group says many of the potholes in the region have been drained to plant more crops, dried out from drought or degraded by pollutants.

"If we lose those wetlands and grasslands, it's not just going to impact South Dakota and North Dakota," said Bruce Toay, who manages conservation programs for Ducks Unlimited's South Dakota chapter. "It's going to impact all of North America's waterfowl."

Toay said the widespread draining of small wetlands is especially harmful to waterfowl populations, because many ducks are territorial breeders.

"Ten 1-acre wetlands will create three times as many ducks as one 10-acre wetland," Toay said. And while farmers may see an opportunity to increase yields by draining a temporary wetland, "Those temporary, seasonal basins are the most productive during the breeding season."

Toay said people who are not interested in ducks should still want to see their habitats conserved. Wetlands also provide cleaner water, carbon sequestration to fight climate change, flood control and greater biodiversity.

Rocco Murano, a senior waterfowl biologist for the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, recently briefed the Game, Fish and Parks Commission on the state's waterfowl. He said the number of resident duck hunters has fallen from about 25,000 to 11,000 since the late 1990s. The department is unsure what is driving the trend.

That decline impacts the funding for conservation efforts in the state, because license fees and the taxes on hunting, fishing and shooting gear go back into wildlife conservation efforts.

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

Minnehaha County votes to bolster prosecutors, public defense

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 21, 2023 6:11 PM

SIOUX FALLS – Federal grant funding from the Violence Against Women Act could soon bring a domestic violence specialist to the Minnehaha County State’s Attorney’s Office to help shepherd victims through the criminal justice system.

The Minnehaha County Commission voted unanimously on Tuesday to allow State’s Attorney Daniel Hagggar to apply for a Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors grant, which is federal funding administered through the state Department of Public Safety.

The county agreed to fund 25% of the salary for an eighth victim-witness assistant in Hagggar’s office, covering \$21,578 of the \$86,716 annual expense.

The new position would be dedicated to intimate partner violence cases “where the offender is deemed to be a high risk for lethality or a high risk to re-offend,” according to Hagggar’s letter to county commissioners.

The grant funding runs for one year, Hagggar told commissioners, but it can be renewed each year.

On the defense lawyer side, commissioners unanimously approved moving a legal assistant’s position at the Minnehaha County Public Defender’s Office from part-time to full-time.

The county created the position in 2020 in hopes of easing the burden for Public Defender Traci Smith’s legal team, but the part-time nature of the position clashed with cost-of-living realities in Sioux Falls. Three times, the office hired and trained someone to do the work, and on all three occasions the person left for full-time work in short order.

Essentially, once each person was trained as a legal assistant, they took advantage of labor-hungry law firms that offered benefits and full-time wages.

“Each time the person would leave, the exit interviews indicated that the cost of day care made it too difficult to stay in the position,” Smith told commissioners.

Leftover money from staff turnover would help fund the transition from part-time to full-time, Smith told commissioners, so she’d only need a supplement in her budget of \$30,000 to cover the \$64,000 cost. She had previously signaled a need for a new full-time position in 2024.

Commissioner Joe Kipley said the money-saving goal of keeping the position part-time hadn’t worked out as the county hoped.

“I think sometimes we get pennywise and pound foolish,” said Kipley. “I think we need to get more strategic with our hiring.”

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

Trump’s possible arrest by Manhattan DA blasted by U.S. House GOP leaders

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 21, 2023 4:46 PM

Former President Donald Trump’s claim that he would be arrested Tuesday had not materialized by early evening on the East Coast, but U.S. House Republicans harshly criticized any such move as an abuse of prosecutorial authority.

In an all-caps post to his social media site, Truth Social, on Saturday, Trump predicted that he would be arrested Tuesday on charges he said were fabricated by a politically motivated prosecutor in Manhattan. He used the specter of his indictment to galvanize his supporters, calling for protests.

“THE FAR & AWAY LEADING REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE & FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, WILL BE ARRESTED ON TUESDAY OF NEXT WEEK,” he wrote, referring to himself in the

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third person. "PROTEST, TAKE OUR NATION BACK!"

But at the close of business on the East Coast, Trump had not been arrested, and widespread protests had not broken out, though a small group of Trump supporters did gather at the Louisiana Capitol.

The grounds surrounding the U.S. Capitol, the site of the Jan. 6 insurrection that Trump encouraged, were quiet late Tuesday afternoon. A bicyclist rode across the East Front plaza, children played nearby and a dog was having a photo shoot.

A New York grand jury is reportedly investigating payments made to porn actor Stormy Daniels on Trump's behalf during the 2016 presidential race to keep her from disclosing their alleged affair. Trump has denied a sexual relationship with Daniels.

U.S. House Republicans followed Trump's lead in criticizing Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg for what they said was an unfair prosecution of the former president that would undermine confidence in the next presidential election. Trump, who lost reelection in 2020 after one term in office, was the first major candidate to announce he was running for the GOP nomination for president in 2024.

A trio of House committee leaders, Judiciary Chairman Jim Jordan of Ohio, Oversight Chairman James Comer of Kentucky and Administration Chairman Bryan Steil of Wisconsin, sent Bragg a four-page letter on Monday attacking the prosecution and asking for documents related to it.

"You are reportedly about to engage in an unprecedented abuse of prosecutorial authority," the letter began.

Echoing Trump's criticisms, the House members accused Bragg of "searching for a basis — any basis" to prosecute the former president.

Bragg's office said prosecutors would not be deterred by the congressional letter.

"We will not be intimidated by attempts to undermine the justice process, nor will we let baseless accusations deter us from fairly applying the law," a spokesperson for the New York County District Attorney's Office said in an email to States Newsroom.

House Republicans also attempted to use the possibility of an arrest to fundraise and build a campaign list.

"The Radical Left is trying to use this latest witch hunt to intimidate you," an email from the National Republican Congressional Committee said. "House Republicans will stand strong against these fear tactics and threats. But we can't do it alone. Our country is at a turning point. We need every single patriot to immediately condemn this witch hunt."

The email then asks for supporters to click a link to "condemn the witch hunt." The link leads to a page where users can make a campaign contribution and provide their personal information to the committee.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a potential Trump rival for the Republican nomination for president next year, offered a criticism of Bragg at a Monday press conference, while also reminding viewers of the misbehavior of which Trump is accused.

"I don't know what goes into paying hush money to a porn star to secure silence over some type of alleged affair," DeSantis said. "But what I can speak to is that if you have a prosecutor who ... chooses to go back many, many years ago to try and use something about porn star hush money payments, that's an example of pursuing a political agenda and weaponizing the office."

If Trump were indicted, it would be a historic event. No sitting or former president has been criminally indicted.

Jennifer Shutt contributed to this report from Washington, D.C.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

What plaintiffs targeting abortion pill want might not even be possible

BY: SOFIA RESNICK - MARCH 21, 2023 3:28 PM

At the center of the federal anti-abortion lawsuit against the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is the abortion drug mifepristone and the regimen that reportedly accounts for the majority of abortions in post-Roe America. That's why the whole country is bracing itself for a ruling from a notoriously anti-abortion judge in Amarillo, Texas.

The attention and confusion around this case might end up being the most impactful aspects about it, as many legal scholars doubt the judge has the legal authority to do what plaintiffs are asking for, which boils down to forcing the FDA to essentially recall a drug that for two decades has maintained a record of efficacy and safety. But regardless of the lawsuit's outcome, legal experts still think a ruling that even briefly or partially favors plaintiffs will likely have lasting consequences on U.S. abortion access and affect medication policy beyond abortion.

"What this case is doing is only increasing the politicization of mifepristone and abortion, as well as the entire FDA approval process, and [it's] calling into question the impartiality and the legitimacy of our court system, as well as our FDA approval process," Georgia State University law professor Allison M. Whelan told States Newsroom.

Last month Whelan along with 18 other FDA legal scholars co-signed a "friend of the court" brief on behalf of the FDA, arguing that U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk doesn't have the authority to force the FDA to immediately withdraw approval of mifepristone, which plaintiffs have asked him to do via preliminary injunction while the rest of the lawsuit unfolds.

Theoretically, the judge could decline to order the total withdrawal of the drug but could grant some of plaintiffs' other demands, which include ordering the FDA to reinstate regulations that were lifted within the last several years. In 2000 the FDA approved a medication abortion regimen involving the hormone blocker mifepristone followed by misoprostol to expel the pregnancy. Later the FDA extended the gestational age that this protocol could be used from seven weeks to 10, eliminated the in-person dispensing requirement, and most recently has allowed pharmacies to dispense the drug directly to patients under certain restrictions – though that policy is still being rolled out.

The FDA scholars and other legal experts say the process to withdraw drug approval (or to undo decisions made around a drug) can take years, requires public input, and discretion ultimately falls to the FDA. And in the meantime, the agency could choose whether or how to enforce any order that the drug is unapproved, said Whelan, whose scholarship and teaching focus includes FDA law and reproductive justice.

"[T]he FDA would issue this policy statement that signals for manufacturers that from the FDA's perspective, the FDA is not going to bring any sort of a civil or criminal action against the company for continuing to sell their drug," Whelan told States Newsroom. "The FDA has issued enforcement discretion policies many times, including recently with the infant formula crisis."

Even Kacsmaryk questioned his own powers during last Wednesday's injunction hearing.

"[I]s it that you expect this Court to order the FDA to begin a suspension or withdrawal, almost like a writ-type scenario, or that the Court itself can withdraw or suspend on its own accord?" Kacsmaryk asked, according to the court transcript.

"The latter," replied Erik Baptist, senior counsel for Alliance Defending Freedom, the conservative Christian legal shop representing plaintiffs. "We take the position that the Court, on its own accord, can order the FDA to withdraw or suspend the approval of the drug."

"And explain to me your argument on why this Court has that sweeping authority," Kacsmaryk replied.

Baptist replied vaguely that the court has the power to "enjoin and take whatever action to prevent harm."

Despite plaintiffs' claims that medication abortion is dangerous, there is ample evidence of its efficacy and safety. In more than two decades, there have been 28 reported deaths associated with mifepristone and a generally low rate of adverse events, according to the FDA.

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The issue of drug approval is just one among several reasons defendants (and legal analysts) argue the case should be thrown out. Others include that the statute of limitations on plaintiffs' complaints has expired and that plaintiffs did not exhaust administrative remedies to challenge FDA's approval of mifepristone.

Attorneys for the government have argued that plaintiffs do not have standing to bring their claims and have not shown how they would be directly harmed by keeping mifepristone on the market. Plaintiffs have largely argued that doctors represented in the lawsuit might see an increase in workload in their emergency rooms if more medication abortion patients experience complications and seek medical treatment. Even if that were a viable argument, plaintiffs have not provided evidence that medication abortion is causing a large amount of adverse effects and problems – beyond speculation and minimal anecdotes.

Plaintiffs have also asked the court to weigh in on a dormant federal law from the 1800s known as the Comstock Act, which anti-abortion advocates have been trying to argue legally prevents abortion pills from being sent in the mail, but the Biden administration contests this. Defendants have argued that whether a drug can be legally mailed has no bearing on this case about drug approvals.

A Trump appointee, Kacsmaryk previously served as deputy counsel for a Christian conservative legal group called First Liberty Institute, where he worked on cases fighting access to reproductive access. As a federal judge, Kacsmaryk has struck down protections for LGBTQ workers and trans youth and ruled that a federal family planning program's policy of offering confidential birth control to teens violates federal law and Texas state law, putting that state program in jeopardy (the ruling has been appealed). But given all of the legal problems with the abortion pill case, legal journalist Chris Geidner suggests there are a lot of reasons why this case could fail, despite Kacsmaryk's ideology and sympathies to some of the plaintiffs' arguments

"Anything could happen — and much has been made of Kacsmaryk's background and rulings thus far on the bench — but DOJ and Danco's lawyers made as strong a case as possible that Kacsmaryk would be going far afield of the law by doing anything about the 2000 approval of mifepristone, especially with these plaintiffs on these facts."

This case is ongoing (as are several federal lawsuits about medication abortion), and Kacsmaryk's preliminary injunction is likely to be appealed. Additionally, the ruling itself would only apply to the FDA and Danco Laboratories, one of the manufacturers of the abortion pill. Still, a decision that favors the coalition of national conservative Christian medical associations known as the Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine, and the four plaintiff doctors is sure to have far-reaching legal consequences, and could add more distress and confusion for manufacturers, pharmacists, and health care providers. Beyond abortion, Whelan said a favorable decision could open the door to lawsuits against politically controversial vaccines and hormone replacement therapies.

A favorable decision could also embolden more states to try to ban mifepristone using the argument – if Kacsmaryk buys it – that the medication abortion regimen was not lawfully approved or properly vetted, which many legal and policy analysts say is patently false. A ruling that limits medication abortion in some way – even if it's not enforceable – will add yet another confusing legal layer to the panoply of state anti-abortion laws that have led to pregnant women frantically traveling for abortion care outside their states, even for medical emergencies.

"It's like there is no light at the end of the tunnel as to when this is going to end, and it's just so problematic from a patient and provider perspective because of the uncertainty," Whelan said. "I cannot imagine being a healthcare provider who does reproductive health care going to work every day thinking, 'Can I do this today? I was allowed to do it yesterday. Can I do it today? Will I be able to do it tomorrow?'"

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.

Biden officially designates new monuments in Nevada and Texas at conservation summit

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - MARCH 21, 2023 3:11 PM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden stressed that his administration's efforts to conserve the nation's land and waters are an expression of fundamental American values at the White House Conservation In Action summit Tuesday afternoon.

Biden also announced the designation of two new national monuments in his address, Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in southern Nevada, and the Castner Range National Monument in west Texas. He further introduced a series of policy initiatives designed to protect the nation's public lands and waters.

"This matters because when we conserve our country's natural gifts, we're not just protecting the livelihoods of people who depend on them," Biden said. "We're protecting the heart and the soul of our national pride. We are protecting pieces of history. We are telling our story that will be told for generations and generations to come."

The president's comments come after the administration approved a controversial ConocoPhillips oil drilling project in Alaska on March 13, angering climate advocates and supporters who accused him of breaking his promise on no new drilling for oil and gas developments. Climate advocates protested outside the Interior Department on Tuesday during Biden's remarks.

Biden said that unprecedented investment in conservation — more than \$10 billion through the bipartisan infrastructure law and the Inflation Reduction Act — is helping the nation protect outdoor spaces and historical sites while adapting to climate change.

Biden touted that his administration has conserved more public land and waters in its first two years than any president since John F. Kennedy.

He spoke of major accomplishments in establishing federal protections for the Tongass National Forest and Bristol Bay in Alaska, Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, and Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument off coastal Massachusetts.

Biden also said federal investments in farmer-led efforts have conserved 50 million acres of private land through the Department of Agriculture's Conservation Stewardship Program.

"Our national wonders are literally the envy of the world," Biden said. "They have always been — and always will be — essential to our heritage as a people, and essential to our identity as a nation."

New national monuments

The two new national monuments that Biden designated Tuesday mark the second and third sites Biden has designated as president under the Antiquities Act of 1906. The first was Biden's designation of the Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument in Colorado last October.

Avi Kwa Ame, also known as Spirit Mountain, is a sacred ancestral site among 10 regional Yuman-speaking tribes along with the Hopi and Chemehuevi Paiute tribes. The 500,000-plus acre site is sacred in several Indigenous creation stories, and serves as habitat to species like the desert bighorn sheep and Gila monster.

The president's decision to protect the site follows extensive petitioning by organizers in the area last year, and a summit with Interior Secretary Deb Haaland last November. He credited U.S. Sens. Catherine Cortez Masto and Jacky Rosen, and U.S. Reps. Susie Lee and Dana Titus, all Nevada Democrats, for their work on the designation.

"Nevada has beautiful landscapes and ties together one of the largest contiguous wildlife corridors in the United States," Biden said.

"It's a place of reverence. It's a place of spirituality. It's a place of healing. And now will be recognized for the significance it holds, and be preserved forever."

The Castner Range National Monument consists of roughly 7,000 acres of high desert mountains, and makes up the southern component of the Franklin Mountain range outside of El Paso, Texas. It is also a former Army training ground, along with being ancestral lands for the Apache, Pueblo, Comanche, Hopi, and Kiowa tribes.

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Together, these new national monuments will protect nearly 514,000 acres of public lands, according to a White House release.

Ocean climate initiatives

Biden also announced a memorandum directing Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo to consider establishing sanctuary protections for waters surrounding the Pacific Remote Islands within the next 30 days.

The Pacific Remote Islands lie southwest of Hawaii in the Pacific Ocean, and include Wake, Baker, Howland, and Jarvis Islands, Johnston Atoll, Kingman Reef and Palmyra Atoll.

The decision to establish sanctuary protections would conserve 777,000 square miles of waters, including the existing Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, according to a White House release.

Biden added that the protections he is proposing would make it the largest ocean area on the planet with the "highest level of protection."

The administration said in a statement that establishing the new sanctuary "would ensure the U.S. will reach the President's goal" of conserving at least 30% of ocean waters under American jurisdiction by 2030, as part of an administration initiative.

Biden also announced the administration is releasing the "first-ever" United States Ocean Climate Action Plan, a roadmap to using America's ocean resources to sequester carbon dioxide, generate renewable energy and increase community resilience to climate change.

Moreover, the president said he would work with Washington Democratic Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, along with Republican Idaho Rep. Mike Simpson, to restore healthy salmon runs in the Colorado River.

"Our country's national treasures define our identity as a nation," Biden said. "They're a birthright we have to pass down generation to generation. They unite us. That's why our conservation work is so important."

Praise and protests

Biden's announcements drew a mixed response from leaders outside Washington.

Several regional organizations celebrated the developments, noting progress undertaken to conserve the historical significance and local economies of storied places.

"Together, we will honor Avi Kwa Ame today — from its rich Indigenous history, to its vast & diverse plant and wildlife, to the outdoor recreation opportunities created for local cities and towns in southern Nevada by a new gorgeous monument right in their backyard," said a statement from the Honor Avi Kwa Ame coalition.

The coalition is made up of "tribes, local Searchlight, Boulder City and Laughlin residents, the Nevada Legislature, conservation groups, (and) recreation interests," according to the release.

Janaé Reneaud Field, executive director of the Frontera Land Alliance, said in a Tuesday release that the designation from Biden will honor 52 years of people nationwide fighting for the conservation of the Castner Range.

"To say we're excited is an understatement," Field added.

Yet some environmental advocates say that the Biden administration has not done enough to conserve the nation's natural resources.

A coalition of more than five climate advocacy organizations protested outside the Department of the Interior during Biden's speech Tuesday, condemning the president's March 14 decision to sign off on the ConocoPhillips Willow Project in Alaska.

They demanded on Twitter that the president revoke his "reckless decision" in light of Monday's Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change report, which finds that current consumption patterns will push the planet beyond the 1.5 degree-Celsius threshold for significant environmental harm.

The Willow project will generate enough oil to release 9.2 million metric tons of planet-warming carbon dioxide per year.

"Can you believe Biden has the audacity to host a 'Conservation in Action Summit' a week after approving the Willow project and a day after the release of the new IPCC report," said a tweet from the Climate Justice Alliance. "The hypocrisy is blaring but we will not let him get away with it."

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"Preserving public lands and waters — like Avi Kwa Ame, Castner Range, and Rapid Creek — can be a nature-based solution to taking on climate change," said Chris Hill, senior director of the Sierra Club's Our Wild America campaign, in a Tuesday statement. "But we cannot save more nature if the government continues to approve destructive oil and gas operations like the Willow project."

"The President's actions today show that he is listening to communities and Tribal nations that have been calling for the protection of natural and cultural resources and for safe, equitable access to more public lands. But he still has a long way to go to reach the 30×30 goal," said Jennifer Rokala, executive director of the Center for Western Priorities.

The 30×30 initiative is a Biden administration project established via executive order to conserve 30% of America's public lands and waters by 2030.

White House officials have acknowledged frustration over the Willow project but say that oil giant ConocoPhillips has held leases in that area of Alaska for decades, which strengthens the company's legal right to drill.

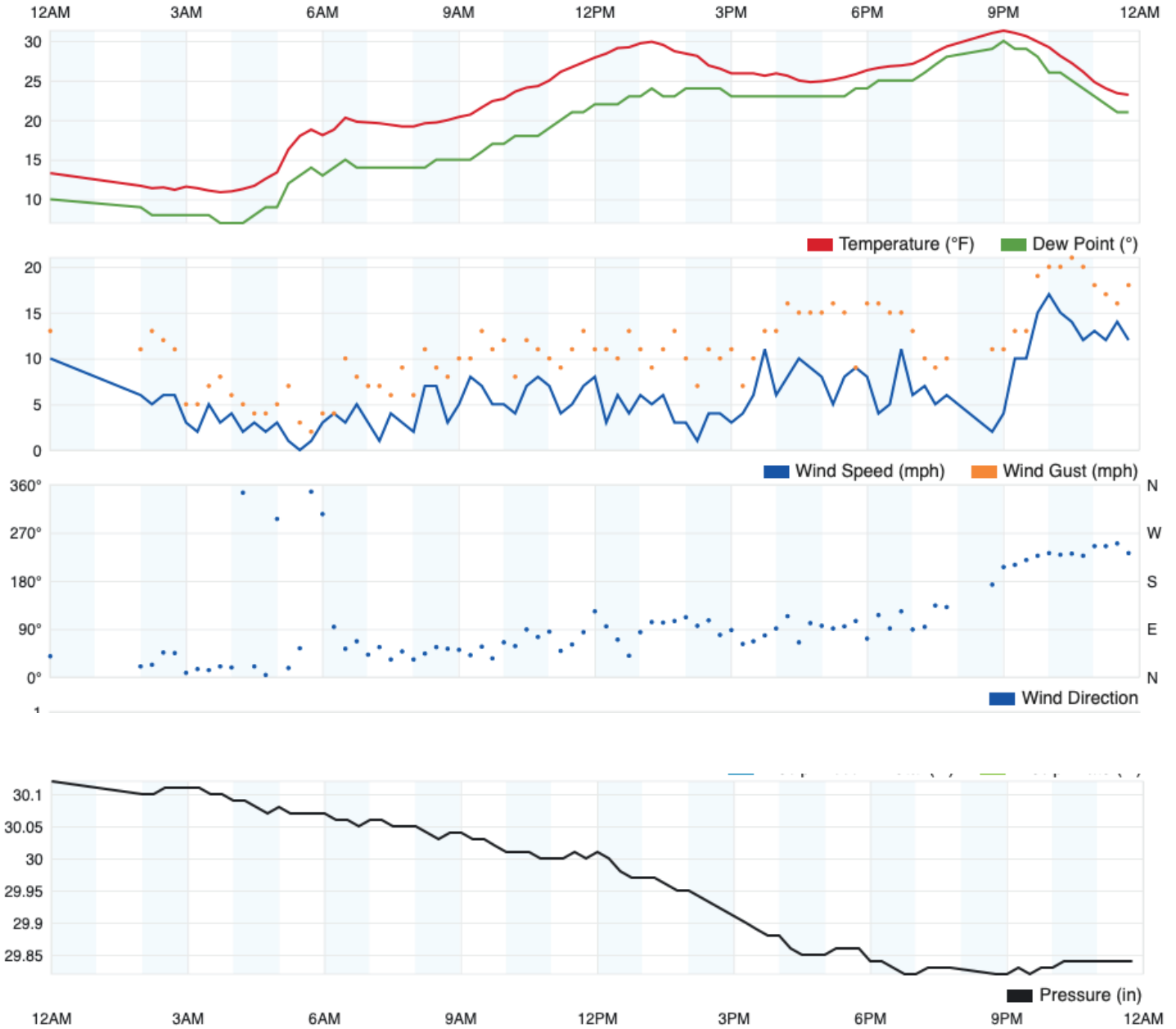
EDITOR'S NOTE: This story has been changed to reflect a correction. An earlier version of this report misstated the name of the Tongass National Forest in Alaska.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs







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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
						
Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy
High: 28 °F	Low: 8 °F	High: 26 °F	Low: 11 °F	High: 35 °F	Low: 18 °F	High: 32 °F



Weather Outlook: Mainly dry. A slight warm up for the weekend!

Today	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			
Highs: 26 to 35°	Highs: 27 to 40°	Highs: 32 to 51°	Highs: 29 to 41°
Light snow south of Hwy 212	Skies clearing east river		Slight chance of snow/rain starting in the early morning

weather.gov/aberndeen

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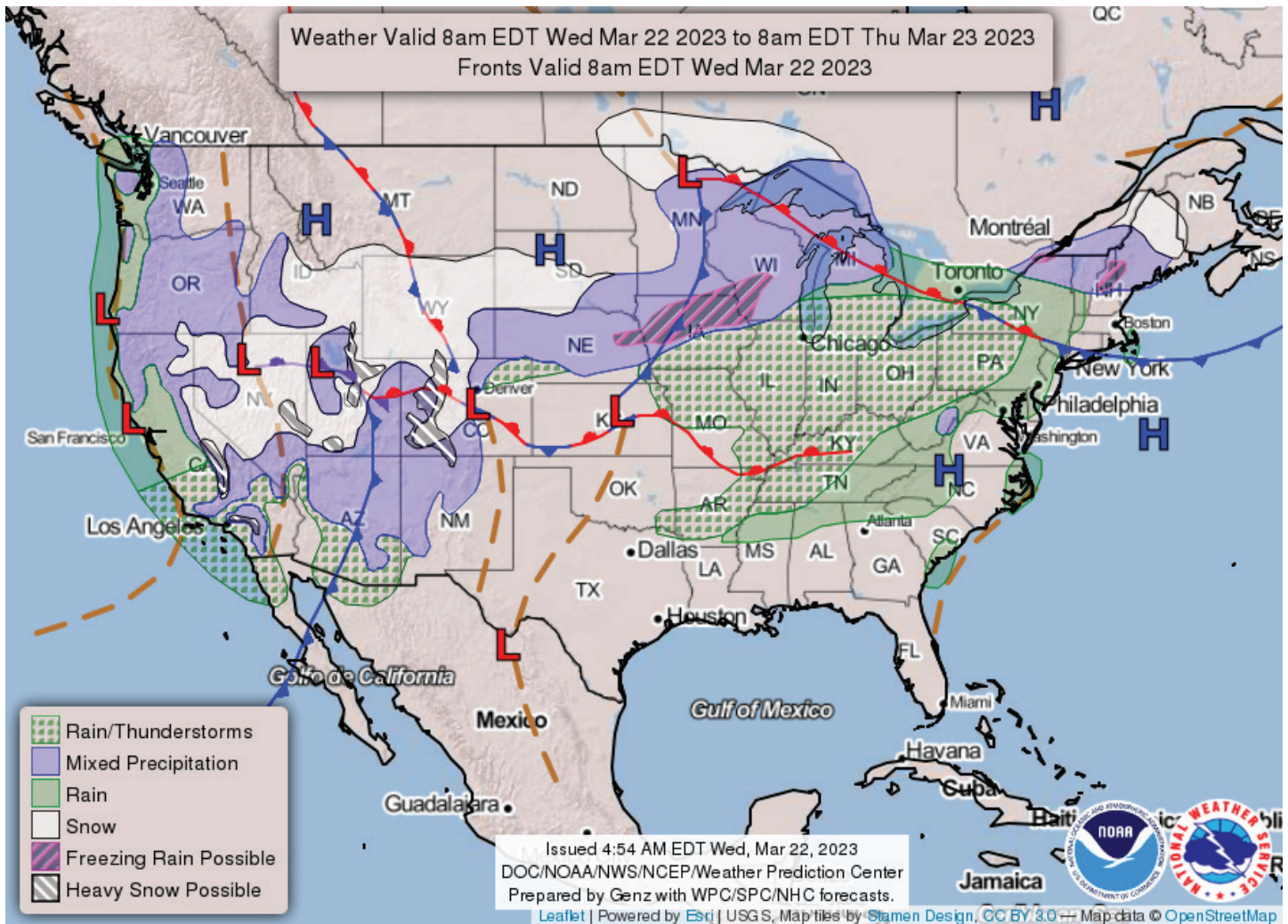
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 31 °F at 8:53 PM
Low Temp: 11 °F at 3:38 AM
Wind: 21 mph at 9:47 PM
Precip: : 5" of Snow - 0.40 moisture

Day length: 12 hours, 18 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 79 in 1907
Record Low: -16 in 1899
Average High: 45
Average Low: 22
Average Precip in March.: 0.58
Precip to date in March.: 1.60
Average Precip to date: 1.75
Precip Year to Date: 3.18
Sunset Tonight: 7:48:34 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:28:02 AM



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Today in Weather History

March 22, 1966: The blizzard began on the 22nd in the west, moving southeastward into Nebraska and then moving northeastward across the southeastern part of South Dakota. Winds up to 50 mph caused blowing snow, which reduced visibility to near zero. Seven to 8 inches of snow fell on the plains of South Dakota with up to 2 feet in the Black Hills. Traffic was paralyzed due to snow-blocked roads. Schools and many businesses were closed. One death was attributed to the storm to exposure and exhaustion. A heart attack indirectly caused one death in Sioux Falls.

March 22, 1987: Snowmelt and rainfall caused some rivers and small streams to rise to very high levels in central South Dakota. Lowland flooding around the basins occurred, submerging some minor roads and streets. Also, high water levels and ice damaged some railroad bridges between Wakpala and Mahto in Corson County.

March 22, 2009: A stretch of warmer weather occurred from March 14th to 17th, which resulted in high temperatures in the 40s and low 50s. The snow depth in Fargo on the 14th was 15 inches, with a melted water equivalent of 3.10 inches. By the 17th, the snow depth in Fargo had dropped to 6 inches. The snow was followed by a couple of colder days, which temporarily slowed down any additional snowmelt. The second period of warmer weather began on March 20th and continued through the 24th. During this period, high temperatures again climbed into the 40s and low 50s. Most of the remaining snow in Fargo melted during this stretch of warm weather, with the Fargo snow depth falling from 2 inches to 0. Conditions were about the same in Grand Forks, with the snow depth dropping to 0 by the 24th. These two warm-ups resulted in the quick response in river levels, especially across the southern Red River Valley and west-central Minnesota. The Red River also rosed, especially in the southern part of the Red River Valley. With all the runoff moving into the river systems, water covered many roads and resulted in numerous road closures. The water covered entire sections of land as well and threatened many homes. A winter storm event on March 24th and 25th brought more snow to the region, along with a turn to colder temperatures. This resulted in the first crest for many rivers in the southern Red River Valley and west-central Minnesota. However, river levels at most points along the Red River continued to stay high. Another winter storm event hit much of the area March 30th to 31st, dropping up to 2 feet of snow in the southern Red River Valley. There was a lot of moisture in this new snow, with snow to liquid ratios of less than 10 to 1. This set the stage for continued flooding into April and early May. The North Dakota Governor issued a statewide disaster declaration on March 13 in anticipation of spring flooding. Most counties in eastern North Dakota later received a Presidential Disaster Declaration.

1888: Chicago's morning low dips to one degree below zero, the latest sub-zero Fahrenheit reading in the city's history. This record still stands today.

1893: The first tornado was recorded in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on this date. It destroyed 14 buildings and injured four people as it passed through the center of town. There was minor damage to the Weather Bureau office, which was located at Grand and Robinson in south Oklahoma City.

1920: A spectacular display of the "Northern Lights" was visible as far south as Bradenton FL, El Paso, TX and Fresno, CA. At Detroit MI, the display was described "so brilliant as to blot out all-stars below the first magnitude."

1936 - A great flood crested on rivers from Ohio to Maine. The flood claimed 107 lives and caused 270 million dollars property damage. (David Ludlum)

1954 - Six to ten inch rains caused the Chicago River to overflow its banks. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - An intense storm produced heavy snow in the southern and central Rockies, and high winds from southern California to West Texas. Wolf Creek Pass CO received 24 inches of snow, and winds gusted to 69 mph at Ruidoso NM. Blizzard conditions were reported in eastern Colorado. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Rain and high winds battered the Northern Pacific Coast Region, with wind gusts to 78 mph at Ocean Shores WA. The high winds uprooted trees and down power lines. Ten cities in the northeastern U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date. Eight cities in the central U.S. reported record highs. Southerly winds gusting to 60 mph helped push the mercury at Ottumwa IA to a record warm reading of 83 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

BE ALL YOU CAN BE

Years ago, after being introduced to the students in a small college in South Carolina, the guest speaker stood quietly for a moment.

She then began her remarks by saying, "I was born to a mother who was deaf and could not speak. I do not know who my father is or where he may be. The first job I ever had was in a cotton field."

Smiling, she continued and said, "I stand before you today as the Treasurer of the United States. My name is Azie Taylor Morton. Nothing has to remain the way it is if that's not the way you want it to be."

Paul said that "I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength that I need." Does that mean we can become the Treasurer of the United States? The chief executive officer of a large corporation? The driver of an eighteen-wheeler? The crossing guard for an elementary school? Perhaps.

The power that is ours through Christ is available to meet every challenge in life as long as we are doing His will. His strength will prevail in us, for us, and through us whenever we do what He has called us to do. But we must be willing and committed to fulfilling the purpose He has for our lives. It is inappropriate for us to expect God to empower us to be or do anything that is not in keeping with His will. What we do must be in keeping with what His character is!

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to be faithful to You in everything we do, and to always seek Your will for our lives. May what we do and think follow the example of Your Son. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength that I need. Philippians 4:13



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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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.21.23

1 21 25 27 40 11

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$302,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 44 Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.20.23

13 14 22 30 37 3

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$39,830,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 44 Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.21.23

7 25 36 38 43 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 14 Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.18.23

1 13 19 22 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 44 Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.20.23

2 18 31 59 60 19

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 43 Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.20.23

1 27 32 47 67 14

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$96,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 43 Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

States cranking out even more tax cuts amid cash surpluses

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Just six months after passing what was billed as the largest tax cut in Missouri history, the Republican-led state House voted Tuesday for an even bigger income tax cut that could return over \$1 billion annually to individuals, corporations and retirees.

The Missouri legislation is the latest in a series of aggressive tax reductions that swept across U.S. states last year and have continued into 2023 — even as some warn that it might be wise for states to hold on to record large surpluses amid economic uncertainty.

“Wouldn’t it be a good idea for us to all just pause for a year?” Democratic state Rep. Deb Lavender asked rhetorically before her Republican colleagues endorsed the tax cut on a 109-45 party-line vote.

The Missouri legislation still has a ways to go — it needs a second House approval before it can move to the Senate and then to the governor. But legislatures and governors in several states already have given final approval to tax cuts and rebates in the first few months of this year. In some states, those tax breaks have been pushed by Republicans, but in others by Democrats.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, a Republican, signed legislation Tuesday that will lower the state’s sales tax for a four-year period, though she had originally wanted the GOP-led Legislature to eliminate the sales tax on groceries.

In Montana, Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte last week signed a \$1 billion package of bills passed by the GOP-led Legislature that will provide both income and property tax rebates, reduce the top income tax rate and increase income tax credits for lower-income working families.

In Michigan, Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer signed a bill passed by the Democratic-led Legislature that provides tax relief to retirees and to lower-income families.

And in West Virginia, Republican Gov. Jim Justice signed a measure passed by the GOP-led Legislature that reduces the income tax rate while also enlarging an income tax credit to offset personal property taxes paid on vehicles. The tax cut package is expected to return more than two-thirds of the state’s record \$1.1 billion surplus to taxpayers, as opposed to spending it on state programs.

Nationwide, states’ total financial balances reached a record \$343 billion at the end of their 2022 fiscal years — up 42% from the previous year, according to a recent report by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Two-thirds of states approved some sort of tax relief last year, according to an analysis by The Associated Press.

Those surplus-induced tax breaks were enabled by stronger than expected state tax collections and an influx of federal pandemic aid both directly to states and to businesses and individuals that, in turn, injected more spending into the economy. But those federal payments are winding down, inflation remains persistently high and new challenges in the banking sector have raised questions about the overall economy.

“This extraordinary chapter in state finances appears to be coming to an end,” said Justin Theal, an officer with Pew’s State Fiscal Policy Project.

“Tax cuts or new spending initiatives aren’t inherently bad or uncommon during good budgetary times,” Theal said. But “if policymakers aren’t careful, these long-term commitments can place them in a more vulnerable fiscal position when the economy inevitably turns.”

In Missouri, some Republican lawmakers argued that more tax cuts ultimately would give residents more money to spend and lead to continued growth in state tax revenues.

Last October, Republican Gov. Mike Parson signed legislation cutting the top individual income tax rate from 5.3% to 4.95% effective Jan. 1 and allowing for an eventual reduction to 4.5% if revenues continue to grow. This year’s bill doesn’t wait to see whether that growth occurs. Instead, it would cut the individual income tax rate to 4.5% beginning in 2024 while also reducing taxes on corporations and Social Security benefits and enabling even more income tax cuts if future revenue targets are met.

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"This is not reckless. This is a meaningful step," Republican state Rep. Doug Richey said in response to critics. "This is simply slowing down the rate of growth for tax revenue."

Other states also are following last year's tax breaks with even more this year.

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, a Democrat up for re-election this year, signed a plan passed by the Republican-led Legislature to cut the state's individual income tax rate to 4% effective in 2024. That comes on the heels of a tax overhaul passed last year, which lowered the income tax rate from 5% to 4.5% in January.

In 2022, Republican Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia suspended the state motor fuel tax for 10 months, and lawmakers approved a \$1 billion income tax refund worth \$250 to \$500 for most tax filers. Earlier this month, Kemp signed an additional \$1 billion income tax refund. He also signed a budget bill that includes nearly \$1 billion for a property tax break.

Tax cut proposals are awaiting action elsewhere.

New Mexico's Democratic-led Legislature recently passed a \$1.1 billion tax relief package that includes \$500 individual rebates, tax credits of up to \$600 per child and a gradual reduction in taxes on sales and business services. Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham has until April 7 to sign or veto bills.

Noem approves tax cut, budget plan, despite disagreements

AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem signed legislation Tuesday that will reduce overall sales taxes in the state for four years, even though the bill fell short of the permanent tax breaks she had urged.

The new law, which will take effect in July, will reduce the state's sales tax from 4.5% to 4.2% — amounting to a general sales tax cut of \$104 million per year. It essentially lowers taxes on groceries, but it doesn't eliminate them entirely as Noem and some lawmakers had wanted.

"Our people deserve permanent tax relief. The legislature has instead offered them a tax holiday for four years," Noem, a Republican, wrote in her letter about the bill signing. She added: "While this legislation is not ideal or the best way to help the people of South Dakota, I recognize that the legislature has chosen this path, and some help, albeit temporary, for our people is better than none at all."

Throughout the session, Noem and legislators argued for a tax cut that addressed the state's \$432 million surplus. Noem and a handful of lawmakers, including Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba, advocated for the grocery sales tax cut, pointing out that few other states tax groceries to the extent that South Dakota's does and that food costs were felt greatly at a time of rising inflation.

While mostly Republican lawmakers acknowledged Noem's efforts, they were steadfast in weighing all options throughout session. Between groceries, sales and property taxes, lawmakers calculated different variations of tax breaks, weighing economic viability with what South Dakotans would support. Noem repeatedly argued that the people of South Dakota can spend their own money better than the government could. Throughout the session's final days, Republicans pushed amendment upon amendment to try to find the right balance as they narrowed their focus on a broad, general sales tax cut.

Noem's move comes a day after she signed a \$7.4 billion state budget for the 2024 fiscal year, in which she also expressed disagreements with lawmakers.

Education and state employees will receive a 7% funding increase, instead of the 5% Noem suggested, and hospitals will receive a 5% funding increase. Nursing homes and some other Medicaid community service providers will be fully reimbursed. The Argus Leader reported that the 2024 budget signed Monday also accounts for future Medicaid expansion costs, helps National Guard members pay college tuition and freezes tuition at public universities and technical colleges.

Debate on Nebraska gender-affirming care bill gets combative

By MARGERY A. BECK Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Debate that began Tuesday on a Nebraska bill to ban gender-affirming care for minors, which led one lawmaker to stage an epic weekslong filibuster, quickly grew contentious, with sup-

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porters and opponents angrily voicing their frustration and admonishing each other for a lack of collegiality.

Sen. John Lowe, of Kearney, cited an activist group's claim that gender dysphoria in youth "is just temporary," while Sen. Brad von Gillern, of Omaha, compared gender-affirming treatment to shock treatments, lobotomies and forced sterilizations of years' past. Bellevue Sen. Carol Blood countered that if lawmakers really cared about medical procedures affecting children, "how come we're not talking about circumcision?"

And that was only the first three hours of an eight-hour Senate debate expected to stretch into Thursday.

The bill introduced by Republican Sen. Kathleen Kauth, a freshman lawmaker in the officially-nonpartisan state Legislature, would outlaw gender-affirming therapies such as hormone treatments, puberty blockers and gender reassignment surgery for those 18 and younger.

The proposal had already caused tumult in the legislative session, cited as the genesis of a nearly three-week filibuster carried out by Omaha Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh over her opposition. Cavanaugh had followed through on her vow in late February to filibuster every bill before the Legislature — even those she supported — declaring she would "burn the session to the ground over this bill."

She stuck with it until an agreement was reached late last week to push the bill to the front of the debate queue. Instead of trying to eat time to keep the bill from getting to the floor, Cavanaugh decided she wanted a vote to put on the record of which lawmakers would "legislate hate against children."

Lawmakers convened Tuesday to begin that debate with the understanding that the bill didn't have enough votes to break a filibuster. But Kauth introduced an amendment to drop the restriction on hormone treatments, instead banning only gender reassignment surgery for minors. That amendment, she said, does have enough votes to advance.

Cavanaugh has said if the bill advances on a vote expected Thursday, she will resume filibustering every bill through the end of the 90-day session in early June.

The hard feelings by lawmakers on both sides of the bill emerged almost immediately Tuesday, with Kauth calling Cavanaugh's filibuster "self-serving and childish." Kauth said the purpose of her bill is to protect youth from undertaking gender-affirming treatments they might later regret as adults, citing research that says adolescents' brains aren't fully developed.

Omaha Sen. Megan Hunt called out that argument as hypocritical, noting that Kauth supports an abortion ban bill introduced this session that would also affect adolescents.

"In a couple of weeks, she's going to turn around and vote for a bill that would force 12-year-olds to have a baby," Hunt said. "She thinks they're mature enough for that."

Cavanaugh called the trans treatment bill "an assault on individuals that members of this body love," and appealed to Republican members of the body to get back to their core principles of getting government out of people's lives.

"So many of you have talked to me about government overreach time and time again," she said. "This bill stands in opposition to the tenets that many of you have expressed to me are the foundation of why you are here."

The Nebraska bill, along with another that would ban trans people from using bathrooms and locker rooms or playing on sports teams that don't align with the gender listed on their birth certificates, are among roughly 150 bills targeting transgender people that have been introduced in state legislatures this year.

Bans on gender-affirming care for minors have already been enacted this year in some Republican-led states, including South Dakota, Utah and Mississippi. Arkansas and Alabama have bans that were temporarily blocked by federal judges. Other states legislatures have given final approval to measures similar to the Nebraska bill, with Georgia sending to the governor Tuesday a bill that would ban most gender-affirming surgeries and hormone replacement therapies for transgender minors.

Minnesota moving to fortify state status as abortion refuge

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Minnesota is moving to fortify its status as a refuge for patients from restrictive states who travel to the state to seek abortions — and to protect providers who serve them.

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The state House on Monday passed a bill by a 68-62 vote to prohibit enforcement in Minnesota of laws, subpoenas, judgements or extradition requests from other states against people who get, perform or assist with abortions in Minnesota. The Senate version passed its first committee test last week.

The House lead author, Democratic Rep. Esther Agbaje, of Minneapolis, said at a news conference before the debate that a prime example of what supporters are worried about is a Texas law that deputizes individuals to enforce their state's strict restrictions by allowing them to sue to anyone who helps a patient obtain an abortion elsewhere.

Democratic House Majority Leader Jamie Long, of Minneapolis, said the bill is needed because Texas-style legislation has been introduced in several states that could put Minnesota providers at risk, as well as residents who might help relatives or friends who come to Minnesota for abortions just by picking them up at the airport.

"Before the Dobbs decision last summer, I'd often care for patients from nearby states like the Dakotas or Wisconsin," said Dr. Sarah Trexler, chief medical officer at Planned Parenthood North Central States, which performs 70% of the abortions in Minnesota. "But now, for the first time ever, I regularly care for patients from Texas, Alabama, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and the list goes on and on."

Like Planned Parenthood and other providers, Whole Woman's Health of Minnesota in Bloomington has also seen a sharp increase in patients from out-of-state, more than doubling from 2019 to 26% in 2022.

"The most remarkable change has come from Texas, where we only saw 2 patients from that state in 2019 to 96 from February 2022 to March of 2023," Amy Hagstrom Miller, president and CEO of Whole Woman's Health Alliance, said in an email.

Democrats made have abortion rights one of their top priorities for Minnesota's 2023 legislative session. They won a one-seat majority in the state Senate in the November elections while maintaining a wider hold on the House to wind up with pro-choice majorities in both chambers. Democratic Gov. Tim Walz signed a fast-tracked bill in January to enshrine in state statutes abortion rights that had been protected under a 1995 Minnesota Supreme Court decision.

Texas and Oklahoma allow private citizens to sue people they believe have helped someone get an abortion. Minnesota has already adopted some protections that apply to those people under an executive order that Walz signed last June. And Democratic Attorney General Keith Ellison pledged that his office wouldn't cooperate with other states seeking to prosecute women who come to Minnesota for abortions. Several other states, including California and Colorado have also adopted safe haven protections for patients traveling to seek abortions, either by executive order or by statute.

A more contentious bill working its way through the Minnesota House and Senate would repeal a long list of state statutes restricting abortion rights — such as 24-hour waiting period and parental notification requirements — that a district judge declared unconstitutional last July. It's meant to ensure that appellate courts can't restore those restrictions.

Long demurred on when that bill might come up for a House floor vote. Asked if supporters now have the votes to pass it, he replied, "We'll have the votes when we bring it to the floor."

Republican critics of the various bills argue they've already left Minnesota with essentially no restrictions on abortion at all — at any stage of pregnancy. But their efforts to scale back the legislation and maintain some limits have all failed. Republican Rep. Peggy Scott, of Andover, said the bill passed Monday will give Minnesota a "black eye" by making it a destination and sanctuary for people seeking to end their pregnancies.

"We are going to reward breaking the law, we are going to reward behavior that leads to felony convictions in other states. We're going to say, 'Come to Minnesota, we'll have you, we'll take you,'" GOP Rep. Anne Neu Brindley said during the debate. "Folks, it's wrong."

North Korea fires cruise missiles as allies stage drills

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea launched cruise missiles toward the sea on Wednesday, South

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Korea's military said, three days after the North carried out what it called a simulated nuclear attack on South Korea to protest its military drills with the United States.

North Korea has stepped up its weapons testing activities, saying they are in response to the ongoing South Korean-U.S. military training that it sees as an invasion rehearsal. Analysts say North Korean leader Kim Jong Un likely intends to enlarge his arsenal to win greater outside concessions, while trying to boost an image of a strong leader amid domestic economic hardships.

The 11-day South Korean-U.S. drills are to end on Thursday. But North Korea is expected to continue its weapons tests as the United States reportedly plans to send an aircraft carrier in coming days for another round of joint drills with South Korea.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said it detected "several" cruise missile launches from the North's eastern coastal town of Hamhung. It said the missiles flew into the waters off the North's east coast and that South Korean and U.S. intelligence authorities were analyzing further details.

The launches are the North's sixth round of missile tests this month and the fourth since the U.S. and South Korean militaries early last week began large-scale military drills, which include field exercises and computer simulations. The field training is the largest of its kind since 2018.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff said the South Korean military will maintain a firm readiness and successfully complete the rest of the drills with the United States.

North Korea keeps a huge stockpile of ballistic missile systems whose tests are banned by multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions. Eleven rounds of U.N. sanctions imposed on North Korea since 2006 were approved because of North Korea's previous ballistic missile and nuclear test explosions.

Cruise missile tests by North Korea aren't prohibited by the U.N. council. But experts say they still pose a serious threat to its neighbors because they are designed to fly at a lower altitude to avoid radar detection.

North Korea has called some of its cruise and ballistic missiles "strategic" weapons, a suggestion that it wants to arm them with nuclear warheads. Foreign experts debate whether the North has overcome the remaining technological hurdles to possess functioning nuclear missiles.

After more than 70 missile tests last year — the largest number for a year — North Korea has extended its provocative run in weapons demonstrations in 2023, launching around 20 missiles in 10 separate events. The weapons that were tested this year included short-range nuclear-capable ballistic missiles capable of striking South Korea and intercontinental ballistic missiles designed to attack the mainland U.S.

On March 12, the day before the South Korea-U.S. drills began, North Korea test-fired two cruise missiles from a submarine. Last month, North Korea launched what it called four long-range cruise missiles that demonstrated potential to strike targets 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) away.

On Sunday, Kim supervised a test-firing of a short-range ballistic missile launched from what was possibly a silo dug into the ground. State media called it a simulated nuclear attack on unspecified South Korean targets that was meant to send a "stronger warning" to the United States and South Korea over their drills.

The North's media said a mock nuclear warhead placed on the missile detonated 800 meters (2,600 feet) above water, an altitude that some experts say was aimed at maximizing damage.

It was the first time for North Korea to publicize such an altitude for detonating a nuclear weapon though it has previously claimed to have conducted simulated nuclear strikes on its rivals.

By disclosing such information, North Korea likely wanted to intimidate South Korea and the United States. After a test last week of the country's longest-range Hwasong-17 ICBM, Kim told state media that the launch was meant to "strike fear into the enemies."

The North's testing spree indicates Kim is emboldened by his advancing nuclear arsenal. Last year, North Korea legislated a law that authorizes the preemptive use of nuclear weapons.

South Korea and the United States have been responding by expanding their joint military exercises.

Seoul's Defense Ministry said earlier Wednesday that South Korea and the U.S. are planning to conduct a live-fire exercise that would be "unprecedented" in scale in June.

As part of the ongoing joint drills, South Korean and U.S. troops on Wednesday staged live-fire training at a site near the land border with North Korea. Col. Brandon Anderson, deputy commanding officer of

the 2nd Infantry Division, stressed that the drills were defensive in nature.

"We are (going to) continue to do it," he said. "It is what we expect to do in conflict and to be good at it."

China and Russia: explaining a long, complicated friendship

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Chinese leader Xi Jinping just concluded a three-day visit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, a warm affair in which the two men praised each other and spoke of a profound friendship. It's a high point in a complicated, centuries-long relationship during which the two countries have been both allies and enemies.

Chinese and Russian states have loomed large in each other's foreign affairs since the 17th century, when two empires created a border with a treaty written in Latin.

When you share thousands of miles of border with a neighbor, you're either going to get along very well or very badly. Beijing and Moscow have done both.

"China and Russia relations have always been uneasy," said Susan Thornton, a former diplomat and a senior fellow at the Paul Tsai China Center at Yale Law School.

"THE SOVIET UNION'S TODAY IS OUR TOMORROW"

The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, following a brutal Japanese occupation during World War II and a bloody civil war between the Nationalist and Communist Parties.

Russia was part of the Soviet Union, a global superpower, while China was poor, devastated by war and unrecognized by most governments. Communist leader Mao Zedong was junior to Josef Stalin, who led the Soviet Union until his death in 1953.

The early People's Republic depended on the Soviet Union for economic aid and expertise. In 1953, the slogan that appeared in Chinese newspapers was "The Soviet Union's today is our tomorrow." The Soviets sent some 11,000 experts in 1954-58 to help China rebuild after its civil war, according to Joseph Torigian, an associate professor at American University's School of International Service.

The two countries also had a formal military alliance, but Moscow decided against giving China the technology for nuclear arms.

SINO-SOVIET SPLIT

But there were points of friction, especially after the death of Stalin.

In 1956, then-Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev condemned Stalin's "cult of personality" at an international conference of communist parties. Mao, who had modeled himself on the former Soviet leader, took it personally.

When Mao decided to shell two outlying islands of Taiwan held by the Nationalist Party he had defeated in the Chinese civil war, he did not warn Khrushchev. Khrushchev saw it as a betrayal of the alliance, Torigian said. In 1959, the Soviet Union remained neutral during a border conflict between China and India, which led China to feel that it was not getting enough support from its ally.

The relationship soured until the two countries broke off their alliance in 1961 in the Sino-Soviet Split.

They quickly became open rivals. Beijing blasted Moscow for "phony communism" and revisionism, or straying from the Marxist path. Soldiers clashed along their borders in China's northeast and the western region of Xinjiang.

US-CHINA-RUSSIA TRIANGLE

The Sino-Soviet Split left Beijing isolated, but set the stage for outreach to the United States. In 1972, the revolutionary communist state welcomed President Richard Nixon for a visit that paved the way for global recognition of Mao's government and for the U.S. and China to enter into a tacit alignment against Moscow.

The 1990's led to a rapprochement between China and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The two countries formally settled their border disputes.

In the years since, the world has changed greatly, as have the fortunes of the two countries. China is now the world's second-largest economy, while Russia's economy was stagnating long before its invasion

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of Ukraine last year. Today, it is China facing the U.S. in a strategic competition fueled by intense nationalism on both sides.

Once again, Moscow and Beijing are finding common ground. Under Xi Jinping, "repairing the damage and cultivating the relationship has gone much faster than it has ever before," Thornton, the former diplomat, said.

LEADERS SEE EYE TO EYE

Meanwhile, the similarities between the two leaders, as well as their personal relationship, has helped ties grow.

Both Xi and Vladimir Putin see Western attempts to spread democracy as an attempt to de-legitimize themselves, and they believe that authoritarian regimes are better for confronting the challenges of the modern world. Russia supplies energy and China exports manufactured goods to Russia.

And while some analysts and commentators have started saying that China is now the senior partner in the relationship, given the history, it's not necessarily how that's viewed in China.

Russia's hold over China is not only historical, but also cultural. Students read translated Russian stories and poems in their literature classes, while many educated Chinese of an older generation learned Russian instead of English.

"Many Chinese people, including elites, have not yet realized the historic reversal of China's comprehensive national strength compared to Russia," wrote Feng Yujun, a prominent Russia scholar at Shanghai's Fudan University, in an article published last month that was shared widely. Feng declined to be interviewed.

"Although China's national strength is now ten times that of Russia, the biggest challenge is that many Chinese people are still subservient to Russia ideologically," he wrote.

Kansas could soon approve 'born alive' abortion bill

By JOHN HANNA AP Political Writer

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — A Kansas proposal based on the disputed idea that providers leave newborns to die after unsuccessful abortions is nearing legislative approval, as Republicans pursue limited anti-abortion measures following a decisive statewide vote last year protecting abortion rights.

The Kansas House was set to take a final vote Wednesday on a bill declaring that when an abortion procedure inadvertently results in a live birth, medical personnel must take the same steps to preserve the newborn's life as "a reasonably diligent and conscientious" provider would with other live births. The measure is similar to a proposed Montana law that voters there rejected in November.

The U.S. Supreme Court declared in June that states can ban abortion, and the Republican-controlled Kansas Legislature has long had strong anti-abortion majorities in both chambers. But a 2019 Kansas Supreme Court decision protected abortion rights and in August 2022, voters rejected a proposed change to the state constitution to overturn that decision and give lawmakers the power to greatly restrict or ban abortion.

Supporters of the "born-alive infants protection" bill argued during a House debate Tuesday that the measure will survive a court challenge because it doesn't limit abortion itself. State Rep. Clark Sanders, a Republican from central Kansas, said the bill deals only with cases when a newborn is "completely out of her or his mother," and has a heartbeat and is breathing.

"What we're considering today is: What are a doctor and other medical personnel required to do in that circumstance?" Sanders said during Tuesday's debate. "What rights does that person have?"

House passage would send the measure to the Senate, where GOP leaders have also signaled they see it as a priority.

The bill is similar to laws in at least 18 states, including Arizona, Florida, Ohio and Texas, that require the hospitalization of infants born during unsuccessful abortions and impose criminal penalties for doctors who don't try to save them.

Not providing this care after unsuccessful abortions was already outlawed under a 2002 U.S. law, but it doesn't contain criminal penalties. The Republican-led U.S. House passed a measure in January to add

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penalties, but it's not expected to pass the Democrat-controlled U.S. Senate.

Abortion providers and abortion rights advocates have said it's rare for an abortion to result in a live birth, and measures like the ones in Kansas and Montana are designed only to give abortion care a false and negative public image.

Planned Parenthood Great Plains, which operates clinics in Wichita and the Kansas City area, called the measure "political theater" that harms patients. Zack Gingrich-Gaylord, a spokesperson for Wichita abortion clinic operator Trust Women, said the facility has never seen an abortion result in a live birth.

"This is just this fantasy," Gingrich-Gaylord said. "It's simply not true that there's any kind of danger of this happening."

Opponents of the bill also argued that current state laws against homicide and child neglect, as well as laws on doctors' duties, are sufficient to cover the kind of cases described by supporters.

"This is government entering the patient room with you and your physician," said Rep. Christina Haswood, a Democrat from the northeastern Kansas city of Lawrence.

Opponents also said if the legislation passes, it will create extra trauma for women when they end pregnancies because serious medical conditions mean newborns won't survive long. They said doctors would be forced into futile and expensive attempts to prolong infants' lives and families would be denied opportunities to hold dying babies and to say goodbye. The same arguments were made ahead of last year's vote in Montana.

But supporters of the Kansas bill said that wasn't so, because parents would be allowed to stay with their newborns as they went to the hospital and when they were there. State Rep. Leah Howell, a Wichita-area Republican, said she had a baby die in the 20th week of pregnancy.

"Believe me, when this bill came to my attention, the very first thing I checked for was that this law would allow moms to hold their dying babies in their arms and tell them they loved them and to say goodbye," she said, her voice wavering.

The bill's supporters also said no one knows how many infants are born in Kansas during unsuccessful abortions because the state does not collect such statistics or require abortion providers to report such cases, something the bill would change. Kansas law bans most abortions after the 22nd week of pregnancy — when Kansas automatically considers a fetus able to survive outside the womb — and no abortions after that point have been reported since at least 2016.

Two lawmakers, who are also doctors, told the House that during their training decades ago, they regularly saw cases in which newborns were left alone with no care to die.

One of them, Republican state Rep. John Eplee, a northeastern Kansas doctor, said abandoning such newborns did not violate accepted standards of care when he trained in the 1970s.

He said: "At its core, I really feel this is a basic human rights issue."

Trump's potential indictment caps decades of legal scrutiny

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — For 40 years, former President Donald Trump has navigated countless legal investigations without ever facing criminal charges. That record may soon come to an end.

Trump could be indicted by a Manhattan grand jury as soon as this week, potentially charged with falsifying business records connected to hush money payments during his 2016 campaign to women who accused him of sexual encounters.

It's one of several investigations that have intensified as Trump mounts his third presidential run. He has denied any allegations of wrongdoing and accuses prosecutors of engaging in a politically motivated "witch hunt" to damage his campaign.

An indictment in New York would mark an extraordinary turn in American history, making Trump the first former president to face a criminal charge. And it would carry tremendous weight for Trump himself, threatening his long-established ability to avoid consequences despite entanglement in a dizzying number of cases.

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Indictment, says biographer Michael D'Antonio, would be a "shocking event, both because of the fact that a former president is being indicted for the first time, but also because one of the slipperiest people at the highest level of business, whose devotion to abusing the system is so well established, is being caught."

"Throughout his life, he has done things for which he could have been investigated and potentially prosecuted and learned from those experiences that he could act with impunity," he said.

Trump first faced legal scrutiny in the 1970s when the Department of Justice brought a racial discrimination case against his family's real estate business.

Trump and his father fiercely fought the suit, which accused them of refusing to rent apartments to Black tenants in predominantly white buildings. Testimony showed that applications filed by prospective Black tenants were marked with a "C" for "colored." Trump counter-sued for \$100 million, accusing the government of defamation.

The case ended with a settlement that opened the way for some Black tenants but did not force the Trumps to explicitly acknowledge they had "failed and neglected" to comply with the Fair Housing Act.

Since then, Trump and his businesses have been the subject of thousands of civil lawsuits and numerous investigations. There have been probes into his casino and real estate dealings, allegations of bribery and improper lobbying, fraud allegations against the now-defunct Trump University and charitable Trump Foundation and a probe by the Manhattan district attorney into sales at the Trump SoHo hotel-condominium in Lower Manhattan.

Indeed, according to Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a government watchdog group abbreviated CREW, as of November 2022, Trump had been accused of committing at least 56 criminal offenses since he launched his campaign in 2015, not including allegations of fraudulent business dealings. But he has never been formally indicted.

Trump is a master of delay tactics, "finding ways to endlessly delay in the hopes that the investigation and litigation will go away. And he's had remarkable success," says CREW president Noah Bookbinder, a former federal corruption prosecutor.

"It makes accountability absolutely essential because we can't have people in a functioning democracy operating in positions of power with total impunity where they can commit crimes and never have to face any consequences," he said.

Trump's retort to such strong talk: He commits no crimes, so consequences would themselves be unjust.

As president, Trump continued to face legal scrutiny. For two years, the Justice Department investigated his 2016 campaign's ties to Russia. While special counsel Robert Mueller never found direct evidence of collusion, his final report did lay out evidence for obstruction. He noted that, because of a department opinion that bars indicting a sitting president, he couldn't recommend Trump be criminally charged, even in secret.

Since Trump left office, the investigations have circled ever closer.

In January, his namesake company was fined \$1.6 million for tax crimes, including conspiracy and falsifying business records. The company's longtime executive, Allen Weisselberg, is currently serving jail time as punishment for dodging taxes on job perks.

Additional cases are still being pursued. In Georgia, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis has been investigating whether Trump and his allies illegally meddled in the 2020 election. The foreperson of a special grand jury, which heard from dozens of witnesses, said last month that the panel had recommended that numerous people be indicted, and hinted Trump could be among them. It is ultimately up to Willis to decide whether to move forward.

In Washington, Trump is under scrutiny from special counsel Jack Smith for his handling — allegations say mishandling — of classified documents after leaving office, as well as for his much-publicized efforts to stay in power, despite his 2020 election loss. Justice Department lawyers in the documents probe have said they have amassed evidence of potential crimes involving Trump's retention of national defense information as well as potential efforts to obstruct their work.

Some legal experts have questioned the wisdom of having the Manhattan case be the first brought

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against Trump, when more serious charges could be looming. Trump is expected to be charged with falsifying business records, a misdemeanor unless prosecutors can prove it was done to conceal another crime. And the case dates back years.

"Clearly it's not the cleanest criminal case that could be brought of all of them that are existing right now," said Michael Weinstein, an attorney and former Justice Department prosecutor, who said Trump would likely use its potential weaknesses to his political advantage.

"By this case coming first, it gives him a opening to go on offense and attack, which for him is the only way he knows," Weinstein said.

Still, he said the possible charges felt like a natural culmination of the "unbelievable array of investigations" the former president "has lived through and battled for the last 40 years."

"There's a history and pattern of him saying and doing things without resulting in any consequences," Weinstein said. "After 40 years, do the criminal chickens come home to roost? He's been fighting a long time, and it could be in the next 12 months he's facing two or three criminal cases that carry serious criminal liability for him."

The New York case involves payments made by Trump's former lawyer, Michael Cohen, who served prison time after pleading guilty in 2018 to federal charges, to porn actor Stormy Daniels and model Karen McDougal. Cohen was reimbursed by Trump, whose company logged the reimbursements as "legal expenses."

Politically, Trump allies believe the case actually will benefit the former president in the short term by energizing his base in a competitive Republican primary, and would provide another boost later on if it ultimately fails to yield a conviction.

"The prosecutor in New York has done more to help Donald Trump get elected," says Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., echoing other GOP officials, who have also argued the probe will likely help Trump in the short term, even if it could prove damaging in a general election.

An indictment wouldn't stop Trump from continuing his campaign. There is no prohibition against running while facing criminal charges — or even following conviction. Indeed, convicted felons have run for president before, including from behind bars.

"It boggles the mind to think that we have an ex-president on the eve of being indicted still the front-runner for the Republican Party in 2024," says presidential historian Douglas Brinkley. "You would have thought (potentially) being arrested would have been a disqualifying factor in presidential politics. But Trump constantly surprises people by his devious and inappropriate behavior that he transcends by turning it into being a victim of a witch hunt."

Doctors expected to testify in Gwyneth Paltrow's ski trial

By SAM METZ Associated Press

PARK CITY, Utah (AP) — More witnesses are expected to testify on Wednesday in a trial about a 2016 ski crash between Gwyneth Paltrow and a retired Utah man suing her and claiming her recklessness left him with lasting injuries and brain damage.

On the opening day of the trial, Paltrow and retired optometrist Terry Sanderson appeared across the courtroom from each other, looking nonplussed to hear arguments that have become familiar over the past seven years of legal proceedings. Since Paltrow and Sanderson's skis intertwined on what they expected to be an enjoyable day on the slopes with friends and family, the two have been tangled in a lengthy legal drama about what really happened on a beginner's run that day at one of the most upscale ski destinations in the United States.

The mountain, Deer Valley Resort, has among the region's most expensive lift tickets and is known for its après-ski champagne yurts and proximity to Park City — a posh resort town known for hosting the Sundance Film Festival.

Though the court is not publishing a witness list, attorneys said Wendell Gibby and Sam Goldstein — a radiologist and neuropsychologist — would likely be called to testify on Wednesday. Sanderson's lawyers said they expected to call four witnesses total on Wednesday and left the possibility open that one could

be Paltrow, depending on when others expected to testify arrive in Park City.

Gibby and Goldstein have previously appeared as expert witnesses for Sanderson, who has said he broke ribs and sustained brain damage from the crash. Attorneys have argued over whether Sanderson's medical problems stemmed from the crash or were merely a byproduct of aging.

Both parties blame the other for the collision and claim they were crashed into from behind, relying on a little-known Utah law stipulating that whoever is downhill has the right of way when skiing and snowboarding. Paltrow's attorney have asked Judge Kent Holmberg to enact special restrictions throughout the actor-turned-wellness tycoon's trial, while she has used a blue notebook to shield her face from view when entering and exiting the courtroom.

They called Sanderson's story "utter B.S." building off earlier claims from court filings and previous depositions where they accused him of suing to exploit the Oscar-winning star of "Shakespeare in Love's" wealth and celebrity.

Sanderson's attorneys have attempted to paint her as a negligent celebrity with little care for the injuries inflicted upon the 76-year-old military veteran. They called Sanderson's ex-girlfriend and a ski companion who was nearby during the crash to testify on Tuesday. Karlene Davidson said the crash had "changed" Sanderson and contributed to the demise of their romance. Craig Ramon testified that Paltrow hit Sanderson and said that afterward, one of her family's ski instructors came up to him and said "Your buddy just took out Gwyneth Paltrow."

The trial underway in Park City is the latest development in the seven-year case and follows Sanderson's decision to amend an earlier lawsuit after a \$3.1 million complaint that named Paltrow and Deer Valley was dismissed. Paltrow subsequently filed a counterclaim for \$1 and attorney fees.

Russian drones kill 4 at Ukraine dorm, as rival summits end

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia launched exploding drones that killed at least four people at a student dormitory near Kyiv before dawn Wednesday, just hours after Japan's prime minister left the Ukrainian capital following a show of support for the country. The same day, Chinese leader Xi Jinping left Moscow after discussing his proposal for ending the war, which has been rejected by the West as a non-starter.

A high school and two dormitories were partially destroyed in an overnight drone attack in the city of Rzhyschiv, south of the Ukrainian capital, local officials said. It wasn't clear how many people were in the dormitories at the time.

The body of a 40-year-old man was pulled from the rubble on a dormitory's fifth floor, according to regional police chief Andrii Nebytov.

More than 20 people were hospitalized, Nebytov said, and a few others were unaccounted for.

Ukrainian air defenses downed 16 of the 21 drones launched by Russia, the Ukraine General Staff said. Eight of them were shot down near the capital, according to the city's military administration. Other drone attacks struck central-western Khmelnytskyi province.

The drone barrage and other Russian overnight attacks that struck civilian infrastructure drew a scathing response from President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a day after Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed China's proposals for negotiating an end to the war.

"Over 20 Iranian murderous drones, plus missiles, numerous shelling occasions, and that's just in one last night of Russian terror," Zelenskyy wrote in English on Twitter.

"Every time someone tries to hear the word 'peace' in Moscow, another order is given there for such criminal strikes," he wrote.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who is the current chair of the Group of Seven countries, made a surprise visit to Kyiv on Tuesday, throwing his support behind Zelenskyy's government as his Asian rival Xi sided with Putin.

After returning to Poland Wednesday morning, Kishida said he had expressed the "unwavering determination of solidarity" of Japan and G-7 to Ukraine during his talks with Zelenskyy.

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Kishida's visit to Ukraine was "very meaningful" for Japan's future support for that country, Japan's top government spokesman said Wednesday.

"Through Prime Minister Kishida's visit to Ukraine, Japan was able to show not only to other members of the G-7 but also the international society including the Global South (nations) its determination to defend the rules-based international society," Hirokazu Matsuno said.

Kishida's visit snatched away some of the attention from Xi's trip to Moscow where he promoted Beijing's peace proposal for Ukraine, which Western nations had already dismissed as a way to consolidate Moscow's gains. Xi left Moscow early Wednesday.

The visits by Xi and Kishida, about 800 kilometers (500 miles) apart, highlighted how countries are lining up behind Moscow or Kyiv during the nearly 13-month-old war.

In a joint statement, Russia and China emphasized the need to "respect legitimate security concerns of all countries" to settle the conflict, echoing Moscow's argument that it sent in troops to prevent the U.S. and its NATO allies from turning the country into an anti-Russian bulwark.

Kishida, by contrast, called Russia's invasion a "disgrace that undermines the foundations of the international legal order" and pledged to "continue to support Ukraine until peace is back on the beautiful Ukrainian lands."

Ukraine's finance ministry said Wednesday it has agreed with the International Monetary Fund on a \$15.6 billion loan package aimed at shoring up Kyiv's finances. Russia's invasion has crippled the economy, and Ukrainian officials hope the IMF deal will encourage their allies to provide financial support, too.

Japanese beating Americans in baseball is must-see viewing

STEPHEN WADE undefined

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese television stuck to its live coverage from Miami for almost two hours after Japan defeated the United States 3-2 to win the World Baseball Classic.

This was must see viewing — over and over and over.

Shohei Ohtani striking out Los Angeles Angels teammate Mike Trout on a pitch away to end the game was replayed repeatedly between player interviews, beer-sprayed clubhouse interludes, and the traditional "doage" — team members tossing the winning manager and players into the air.

The country's top circulating newspaper Yomiuri rolled out a special Wednesday afternoon edition for commuters, usually reserved for serious matters of state, late-breaking election news, or as it was last year — the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

"Japan, the World's No. 1," the headline read in Japanese, with commuters at Shibuya station pushing and shoving to grab the collector's item.

The victory and the focus on Ohtani for the past two weeks provided a distraction from economic malaise, missile threats from North Korea, and China's rise across Asia and its implications for Japan.

It also gave a boost in Japan to baseball, which has been challenged by soccer as the country's favorite sport. Japan is unlikely in the short-term to win soccer's World Cup, but its baseball is world class. Its won three of the five WBC titles, dating to the first event in 2006.

Japan joined the Dominican Republic in 2013 as the only unbeaten champions of baseball's premier national team tournament.

"I was OK with either losing or winning," said Hiroya Kuroda, a 44-year-old in a crowd of about 400 watching the game in a studio at Tokyo Tower. "But I was very moved by the fact that they showed us a dramatic game on that stage in the United States."

Toshiya Ishii, a 29-year-old fan, broke down crying at the victory.

"Thank you Ohtani," he said. "Congratulations Samurai Japan. Thank you."

Japan beat the Americans at their own game, and it wasn't the first time.

American teachers and missionaries popularized the game in Japan in the 1870s and 1880s, but it was a game in 1896 in Yokohama between Americans and Japanese that Japan won 29-4 that helped baseball take root in the country.

"The greatest decision I ever made," said Lars Nootbaar, the St. Louis Cardinals outfielder who was the first to play for Japan by ancestry. He spoke in a television interview after the game, and then hugged his mother, Kumiko, who was standing alongside.

"Nippon daisuki," Nootbaar said in Japanese. "Arigato."

"I love Japan. Thank you."

Nootbaar, Ohtani, pitcher Yu Darvish, and manager Hideki Kuriyama were among those tossed into the air by celebrating teammates.

"That's the first time I've ever been lifted up like that before," Nootbaar said. "I hope I got a picture of it because that's something that I want to remember forever."

Muslims in Indonesia gear up for first day of Ramadan

By NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Millions of Muslims in Indonesia are gearing up to celebrate the holy month of Ramadan, which is expected to start on Thursday, with traditions and ceremonies across the world's most populous Muslim-majority country amid soaring food prices.

From colorful torchlight street parades to cleaning relatives' graves and sharing meals with family and friends, every region in the vast Southeast Asian archipelago seems to have its own way to mark the start of Ramadan, highlighting the nation's diverse cultural heritage.

The country's religious affairs minister on Wednesday evening will try to sight the crescent moon to determine the first day of the holy month. If the moon is not visible, as expected, the first day of Ramadan will be a day later. Most Indonesians — Muslims comprise nearly 90% of the country's 277 million people — are expected to follow the government's official date.

Indonesia's second-largest Islamic group, Muhammadiyah, which counts more than 60 million members, said that according to its astronomical calculations Ramadan will begin on Thursday.

During Ramadan, Muslims refrain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse from sunrise until sunset. Even a tiny sip of water or a puff of smoke is enough to invalidate the fast. At night, family and friends gather and feast in a festive atmosphere.

The fasting is aimed at bringing the faithful closer to God and reminding them of the suffering of the poor. Muslims are expected to strictly observe daily prayers and engage in heightened religious contemplation. They are also urged to refrain from gossip, fighting or cursing during the holy month.

Although Indonesia has more Muslims than any other country in the world, its Ramadan traditions have been influenced by other religions. Nyadran is a Javanese ritual heavily influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism that involves visiting ancestors' gravesites to pay respect.

Each year, thousands of villagers who live on the slopes of Mount Merapi in Central Java visit cemeteries to welcome Ramadan. In the ritual, people clean and decorate gravesites and make prayers and offerings. They bring various foods in bamboo containers that they eat together after praying.

In other regions on the main island of Java, including in the capital, Jakarta, Muslims also mark the holy month by cleaning their relatives' graves, scattering flower petals on them and praying for the deceased.

After evening prayers, many boys and girls across Jakarta parade through the streets of the densely populated neighborhoods to welcome the holy month. They carry torches and play Islamic songs accompanied by the beat of the rebana, the Arabic handheld percussion instrument.

People in Indonesia's deeply conservative Aceh province celebrate the beginning of Ramadan with Meugang festivities by slaughtering animals such as oxen or buffalo, as well as smaller animals like chicken and ducks. The meat is then cooked and shared with family, friends and even the poor and orphans in a communal feast that aims to bring the community together.

Hundreds of residents in Tangerang, a city just outside Jakarta, flock to the Cisadane River to bathe in a tradition that involves washing one's hair with rice straw shampoo to welcome the holy fasting month with a symbolic spiritual cleansing.

Islam follows a lunar calendar, so Ramadan begins around a week and a half earlier each year. At the

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end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate the joyous Eid al-Fitr holiday, when children often receive new clothes and gifts.

Indonesia's Trade Ministry has said prices of imported staple foods including wheat, sugar, beef and soybeans have increased sharply this year as a result of rising global commodity prices and supply chain disruptions, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

But many people say the rise in prices not only impacts imported foods but also local commodities like rice, eggs, chili, palm oil and onions. Gas and electricity prices have also gone up. Many blame the government for this.

Some Muslims worry how they will cope financially during Ramadan this year.

"Prices are going up every week. How come the government cannot help with this? Anything to do with cooking is rising," said Yulia Ningsih, a mother of two who lives in Jakarta. "I worry that rising food and energy costs will impact Ramadan celebrations."

Kurds remain biggest winners from US-led invasion of Iraq

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

IRBIL, Iraq (AP) — Complexes of McMansions, fast food restaurants, real estate offices and half-constructed high-rises line wide highways in Irbil, the seat of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq.

Many members of the political and business elite live in a suburban gated community dubbed the American Village, where homes sell for as much as \$5 million, with lush gardens consuming more than a million liters of water a day in the summer.

The visible opulence is a far cry from 20 years ago. Back then, Irbil was a backwater provincial capital without even an airport.

That rapidly changed after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein. Analysts say that Iraqi Kurds — and particularly the Kurdish political class — were the biggest beneficiaries in a conflict that had few winners.

That's despite the fact that for ordinary Kurds, the benefits of the new order have been tempered by corruption and power struggles between the two major Kurdish parties and between Irbil and Baghdad, the Iraqi capital.

In the wake of the invasion, much of Iraq fell into chaos, as occupying American forces fought an insurgency and as multiple political and sectarian communities vied to fill the power vacuum left in Baghdad. But the Kurds, seen as staunch allies of the Americans, strengthened their political position and courted foreign investments.

Irbil quickly grew into an oil-fueled boom town. Two years later, in 2005, the city opened a new commercial airport, constructed with Turkish funds, and followed a few years after that by an expanded international airport.

Traditionally, the "Kurdish narrative is one of victimhood and one of grievances," said Bilal Wahab, a fellow at the Washington Institute think tank. But in Iraq since 2003, "that is not the Kurdish story. The story is one of power and empowerment."

With the Ottoman Empire's collapse after World War I, the Kurds were promised an independent homeland in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres. But the treaty was never ratified, and "Kurdistan" was carved up. Since then, there have been Kurdish rebellions in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, while in Syria, Kurds have clashed with Turkish-backed forces.

In Iraq, the Kurdish region won de facto self-rule in 1991, when the United States imposed a no-fly zone over it in response to Saddam's brutal repression of Kurdish uprisings.

"We had built our own institutions, the parliament, the government," said Hoshyar Zebari, a top official with the Kurdistan Democratic Party who served as foreign minister in Iraq's first post-Saddam government. "Also, we had our own civil war. But we overcame that," he said, referring to fighting between rival Kurdish factions in the mid-1990s.

Speaking in an interview at his palatial home in Masif, a former resort town in the mountains above

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Irbil that is now home to much of the KDP leadership, Zabari added, "The regime change in Baghdad has brought a lot of benefits to this region."

Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid, from the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, also gave a glowing assessment of the post-2003 developments. The Kurds, he said, had aimed for "a democratic Iraq, and at the same time some sort of ... self-determination for the Kurdish people."

With the U.S. overthrow of Saddam, he said, "We achieved that ... We became a strong group in Baghdad."

The post-invasion constitution codified the Kurdish region's semi-independent status, while an informal power-sharing arrangement now stipulates that Iraq's president is always a Kurd, the prime minister a Shiite and the parliament speaker a Sunni.

But even in the Kurdish region, the legacy of the invasion is complicated. The two major Kurdish parties have jockeyed for power, while Irbil and Baghdad have been at odds over territory and the sharing of oil revenues.

Meanwhile, Arabs in the Kurdish region and minorities, including the Turkmen and Yazidis, feel sidelined in the new order, as do Kurds without ties to one of the two key parties that serve as gatekeepers to opportunities in the Kurdish region.

As the economic boom has stagnated in recent years, due to both domestic issues and global economic trends, an increasing number of Kurdish youths are leaving the country in search of better opportunities. According to the International Labor Organization, 19.2% of men and 38% of women aged 15-24 were unemployed and out of school in Irbil province in 2021.

Wahab said Irbil's post-2003 economic success has also been qualified by widespread waste and patronage in the public sector.

"The corruption in the system is really undermining the potential," he said.

In Kirkuk, an oil-rich city inhabited by a mixed population of Kurds, Turkmen and Sunni Arabs where Baghdad and Irbil have vied for control, Kahtan Vendavi, local head of the Iraqi Turkmen Front party, complained that the American forces' "support was very clear for the Kurdish parties" after the 2003 invasion.

Turkmen are the third largest ethnic group in Iraq, with an estimated 3 million people, but hold no high government positions and only a handful of parliamentary seats.

In Kirkuk, the Americans "appointed a governor of Kurdish nationality to manage the province. Important departments and security agencies were handed over to Kurdish parties," Vendavi said.

Some Kurdish groups also lost out in the post-2003 order, which consolidated the power of the two major parties.

Ali Bapir, head of the Kurdistan Justice Group, a Kurdish Islamist party, said the two ruling parties "treat people who do not belong to (them) as third- and fourth-class citizens."

Bapir has other reasons to resent the U.S. incursion. Although he had fought against the rule of Saddam's Baath Party, the U.S. forces who arrived in 2003 accused him and his party of ties to extremist groups. Soon after the invasion, the U.S. bombed his party's compound and then arrested Bapir and imprisoned him for two years.

Kurds not involved in the political sphere have other, mainly economic, concerns.

Picnicking with her mother and sister and a pair of friends at the sprawling Sami Abdul Rahman Park, built on what was once a military base under Saddam, 40-year-old Tara Chalabi acknowledged that the "security and safety situation is excellent here."

But she ticked off a list of other grievances, including high unemployment, the end of subsidies from the regional government for heating fuel and frequent delays and cuts in the salaries of public employees like her.

"Now there is uncertainty if they will pay this month," she said.

Nearby, a group of university students said they are hoping to emigrate.

"Working hard, before, was enough for you to succeed in life," said a 22-year-old who gave only her first name, Gala. "If you studied well and you got good grades ... you would have a good opportunity, a good job. But now it's very different. You must have connections."

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In 2021, hundreds of Iraqi Kurds rushed to Belarus in hopes of crossing into Poland or other neighboring EU countries. Belarus at the time was readily handing out tourist visas in an apparent attempt to pressure the European Union by creating a wave of migrants.

Those who went, Wahab said, were from the middle class, able to afford plane tickets and smuggler fees. "To me, it's a sign that it's not about poverty," he said. "It's basically about the younger generation of Kurds who don't really see a future for themselves in this region anymore."

March Madness Mix: Dominant Gamecocks amid Sweet 16 parity

By PETE IACOBELLI AP Sports Writer

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina is keenly aware that everyone remaining in the women's NCAA Tournament field is coming after the undefeated Gamecocks — and hard.

That conviction has been boosted after two of the top four seeds in Indiana and Stanford were ousted — something that hasn't happened since 1998. If they didn't before, each of the Sweet 16 teams believe they can knock out the defending national champions, no matter how dominant the Gamecocks have been.

It makes for good theater — which is good for the sport.

Rebecca Lobo, the former UConn star turned ESPN analyst, calls South Carolina's dominance combined with Sweet 16 parity "an interesting dichotomy."

"It's like parallel paths, you have this overwhelming favorite to win it all, yet you have UConn losing to Marquette or Stanford losing in the second round," she said. "It's an interesting time for women's basketball."

South Carolina with its 40 straight victories isn't concerned about history, ratings or if the Gamecocks' drive for a second straight championship is good for the game.

"We're just about basketball," coach Dawn Staley says with admiration. "We really are."

Women's basketball is thriving even with the Gamecocks' dominance in the midst of rarely seen tournament chaos. South Carolina's four-team pod in Greenville, South Carolina, is all chalk. The top-seeded Gamecocks (34-0) play No. 4 seeded UCLA on Saturday with No. 2 seed Maryland taking on third-seeded Notre Dame.

South Carolina has three-time All-American Aliyah Boston, high-scoring Zia Cooke and a bench full of players who could start for most NCAA Tournament teams. That's helped the Gamecocks show a relentless push toward a third straight Final Four.

If they run the table, South Carolina would be the 10th undefeated Division I women's champion. The men have had just one in D-I: Indiana in 1976.

Analyst Debbie Antonelli believes women's basketball fans love the new faces and schools still alive in this tournament. She isn't sure how fans would react if the Gamecocks' seemingly inevitable championship run gets derailed short of the national title game.

"As someone who cares about ratings, I'd be curious," Antonelli said.

South Carolina is trying to join an exclusive club. The nine undefeated champions hail from just four schools: Texas, UConn, Tennessee and Baylor:

— UConn, which has gone undefeated an unprecedented six times. In 1995, the Huskies went 35-0 with Lobo leading the way. UConn went 39-0 in 2002, 2009 and 2010 with a slew of All-Americans, including Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi and Swin Cash. UConn followed those title runs by going 40-0 in 2014 and 38-0 in 2016.

— Texas was the first perfect champion, going 34-0 in 1986.

— Tennessee finished 39-0 in 1998 with the three "Meeks" in Chamique Holdsclaw, Tamika Catchings and Semeka Randall.

— Baylor and Brittney Griner went 40-0 in 2012.

Coaches and players say there are no shortcuts for going undefeated.

Lobo, Jennifer Rizzotti and Kara Wolters anchored the 1995 UConn team. There had only been one team prior to the Huskies as undefeated champions, so Lobo and her teammates never discussed that possibility.

"It was fun winning, it was fun not losing, but I can honestly tell you the undefeated portion was not something we thought about," she said in a phone interview with The Associated Press.

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Kellie Harper agrees. She was part of Pat Summitt's Tennessee team that was the first to go 39-0.

Harper said coaches don't enter seasons telling their players, "Let's be perfect this year." However, as the point guard on that 1997-98 team, having star players can be a difference-maker.

"Going down the stretch with three All-Americans, that made my job a lot easier," Harper, now coaching her alma mater, said before adding, "but it gave me a lot of confidence that we can do anything."

Staley's not sure all undefeated seasons are created equal. She recalls other perfect runs celebrated more than her team's current streak.

"My player, Aliyah Boston is not the one that's being talked about on men's games, OK? She's not," Staley said.

Iowa's Caitlin Clark has taken some of the national attention away from the perfect Gamecocks with her barrage of long-range jumpers and triple-doubles.

The Gamecocks have overcome several challenges this season.

They trailed by 10 through three quarters at Stanford last November before pulling out a 76-71 win in overtime. UConn held an 11-point first-half lead in February before South Carolina rallied for an 81-77 victory.

The Gamecocks advanced to their 10th Sweet 16 in 11 tournaments with a 76-45 win over feisty South Florida, which trailed by just 33-29 at the half. There was also an 64-57 overtime win at Ole Miss, which knocked off Stanford.

Yes, there is pressure to stay perfect.

"But it's also a lot of fun," sophomore reserve Bree Hall said.

South Carolina's experienced roster — including Boston, Cooke and fellow senior Brea Beal — knows what it takes to win. They've started since their freshman year in 2020, when their first title run was canceled by COVID-19. South Carolina was No. 1 in the rankings at 31-1 and on a 26-game win streak.

The Gamecocks will need that experience as the pressure ratchets up.

In 1995, UConn's two closest contests was a 67-63 win over Virginia in the Elite Eight and in the championship win, 70-64, over Tennessee.

Both UConn and Tennessee, that pesky Ole Miss squad and the rest of the Sweet 16 field would welcome a shot South Carolina — which is nothing new for the Gamecocks.

Race record trails 'wild card' prosecutor in Louisiana death

By JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

FARMERVILLE, La. (AP) — In this conservative corner of northern Louisiana, where reverence for law enforcement runs deep and Blue Lives Matter flags often fly alongside the Stars and Stripes, the case of five white officers charged in the deadly 2019 arrest of Black motorist Ronald Greene is seen as anything but a slam dunk.

So even with explosive body-camera video showing officers stunning, beating and dragging Greene, the Black district attorney in mostly white Union Parish has decided to bring in a hired gun: an experienced white special prosecutor with a folksy law-and-order bravado and a three-decades-long reputation for winning complicated cases across the state.

But Hugo Holland's background is also marked by accusations of racial bias, including new claims uncovered by The Associated Press, that make him an unlikely advocate for racial justice. In fact, he says the concept has no place in the Greene case or anywhere in the justice system.

"Justice is justice," Holland told the AP. "It doesn't make any difference what race the offender or the victim is. F—— race has got nothing to do with it."

Holland drew criticism as a local prosecutor for displaying a portrait in his office of Confederate general and early KKK leader Nathan Bedford Forrest. He once sent a fellow lawyer an email joking about chasing down "a Black guy or a Mex-can." And he wrote the judge in the 2021 Kyle Rittenhouse murder trial to say he would never have charged the teen acquitted of killing two people during unrest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, calling it a "good shoot."

Beyond that, Holland has served as a reserve police officer in Bossier City for 20 years and has been

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criticized for rarely prosecuting police, deciding in 2018 against charging two white sheriff's deputies seen on body-camera video kicking a Black suspect in the face.

"How can we expect him to fight for us to get justice when he is — and loves — the police?" said Breka Peoples, a Shreveport activist who initially thought it was a joke when she heard Holland had been hired in the Greene case. "He's part of the problem that we have today."

But state prosecutors are betting that Holland's long record of convictions can finally bring justice to a high-stakes, politically fraught case that has simmered for nearly four years.

Greene's May 10, 2019, death on a rural roadside near Monroe was initially blamed by the Louisiana State Police on a car crash at the end of a high-speed chase over a traffic violation. After officials from the governor on down refused for more than two years to release the body-camera video, the AP obtained and published the footage showing white troopers converging on Greene before he could get out of his car and repeatedly stunning and punching him as he wails, "I'm your brother! I'm scared! I'm scared!" A trooper can later be seen dragging the heavyset Greene by his ankle shackles and he is left face down for more than nine minutes before he eventually goes limp.

Years of investigations culminated in December with four current and former Louisiana State Police troopers and a local sheriff's deputy indicted on various state counts ranging from negligent homicide to malfeasance and obstruction.

From the beginning, Greene's family and others worried whether prosecutors could make the indictment stick in a northern Louisiana parish that's nearly 70% white and deeply conservative. On the same day the officers were charged, a federal jury in Shreveport deadlocked in a civil rights trial, despite viewing graphic footage of a white police officer kicking and assaulting a Black man in custody.

"A case like this can be complicated. We really needed someone with a lot of experience," John Belton, the first Black district attorney of Union Parish, said of his decision to hire Holland for the Greene case. "Hugo is one of the top prosecutors in the state and has a history of seeking justice — regardless of politics and regardless of race."

In an interview, Holland bristled at the accusations of bias he's faced throughout his career, including that he consistently excluded Black people from juries. If those claims were true, he said, then why would an elected Black district attorney knowingly "hire a closet Klansman?"

Holland added that, while he is still reviewing evidence in Greene's death, he would have preferred to have been brought in before the grand jury issued its indictments.

"I'm going to review this case with a completely fresh eye," Holland said. "If I think the grand jury overreached, I'm going to tell the district attorney. If I think something additional needs to be done, I'm going to tell him that as well."

"These cases are sort of like prosecuting a parent for cruelty for disciplining their child: Where is the line? That line is fuzzy. It's not black and white," he said. "It's very unusual for there to be an unlawful use of force. It's extremely rare."

Of particular interest to Holland are accusations that some officers were involved in a cover-up of Greene's death. He likened the situation to the Watergate scandal that doomed Richard Nixon's presidency. "If I can prove the cover-up," he said, "those people are in trouble."

Holland's hiring underscores the lingering uncertainty in the Greene case. The U.S. Justice Department is conducting a sweeping review of the Louisiana State Police but has not said whether it will bring its own charges against officers or higher-ups. Meanwhile, a legislative inquiry formed to determine the extent of Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards' role in the case has been dormant for months as members of the committee sought higher office. Even Belton, the district attorney, is running in this year's race for state attorney general.

Greene's mother, Mona Hardin, who has traveled the country drawing attention to her son's death, remains skeptical about the prospects of the state case.

"I want so much to believe that something or someone greater is waiting to do Ronnie justice, but there are question marks all over the place," said Hardin, who was a guest at the recent State of the Union Address when her attorneys told her the "wild card" Holland had been hired.

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"All I hear is that he doesn't like losing," she said. "But who is he winning for? Is he doing this for the blue?"

Bald and bellicose, the 59-year-old Holland is loved and loathed in Louisiana for his brash rhetoric and near-obsession with capital punishment. After a scandal over obtaining automatic weapons forced him from his job as an assistant district attorney in Shreveport, he began prosecuting high-stakes cases around the state on a freelance basis, driven by a passionate belief in "lex talionis," the law of retaliation.

"It would not faze me in the least to watch a man executed," Holland said in a 2017 interview. "I can't imagine how it's fair for you to take another human being's life and yours not be forfeited."

It's not clear how that mindset will apply to Greene's violent in-custody death, which a medical expert recently deemed a homicide.

In 2018, Holland determined two white Rapides Parish sheriff's deputies had been justified in kicking Deterrian Simmons after violently taking the Black man to the ground. Even two steel-toed "distraction strikes" to the man's face were lawful, he said, in part because they did not fracture Simmons' skull, jaw or orbital socket.

"Like almost every other suspect injured by officers in any fashion, Simmons' failure to comply caused this entire incident," Holland wrote in a memo obtained by AP. "It is a waste of time to bring the officers before a grand jury."

Speaking of the case this week, Holland said: "F——— comply and you won't get a bloody lip."

Last year, defense lawyers seeking to show bias in the case of a man sentenced to death turned up an email from Holland in 2017 when he wrote that in observance of Veterans Day he planned to "take my pickup and find a Black guy or a Mex-can."

Holland defended his words as "clearly humor." But defense attorneys argued the email harkened to the infamous 1998 killing of James Byrd, a Black man dragged from a pickup by white supremacists in Texas.

Holland also sent an unsolicited letter of support to Judge Bruce Schroeder, the Wisconsin jurist who drew criticism over his courtroom commentary and unorthodox handling of Rittenhouse's 2021 murder trial.

"Haters gonna hate," Holland wrote, boasting that he too had aroused "the ire of the liberal media."

"I would not have even bothered to take the Rittenhouse case to the grand jury," he added. "I would have pronounced it a good shoot and been done with it."

Holland wrote that he had long ago stopped reading news coverage about himself, and that his life had become calmer as a result.

"I recommend this course to you and remind you that Antonin Scalia said, 'a man who has made no enemies is probably not a very good man.'"

Ohtani fans Trout, Japan tops US 3-2 for WBC championship

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

MIAMI (AP) — Shohei Ohtani and Mike Trout had dreamed of this moment, along with millions of fans throughout Japan and the United States: the two biggest stars on the planet, longtime teammates, facing each other at 60 feet, 6 inches, the world title at stake.

Of course, the count went full.

And then Ohtani got Trout to swing under a slider on the outside corner, sealing Japan's 3-2 win Tuesday night and its first World Baseball Classic title since 2009.

"This is the best moment in my life," Ohtani said through a translator.

Ohtani, the two-way star who has captivated fans across two continents, was voted MVP of the WBC after batting .435 with one homer, four doubles, eight RBIs and 10 walks while going 2-0 with a save and a 1.86 ERA on the mound, striking out 11 in 9 2/3 innings.

"I think every baseball fan wanted to see that. I've been answering questions about it for the last month-and-a-half," said Trout, Ohtani's Los Angeles Angels teammate since 2018.

"Did you think it was going to end in any other way?"

Watching the eighth and ninth innings unfold, Japan first baseman Kazuma Okamoto was in disbelief.

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"I thought it was like a Manga," he said through an interpreter, referring to a Japanese comic book. U.S. manager Mark DeRosa savored the matchup — except for the ending.

"I just would have liked to have seen Mike hit a 500-foot homer," he said.

Ohtani had given a pregame pep talk in Japan's clubhouse.

"Let's stop admiring them," he said, according to a Los Angeles Times translation of the video posted on the website Samurai Japan. "If you admire them, you can't surpass them. We came here to surpass them, to reach the top. For one day, let's throw away our admiration for them and just think about winning."

Japan then joined the Dominican Republic in 2013 as the only unbeaten champions of baseball's premier national team tournament. The Samurai Warriors went 7-0 and outscored opponents 56-18, reaching the final for the first time since winning the first two WBCs in 2006 and 2009. No other nation has won the title more than once.

Trea Turner put the U.S. ahead in the second against Shota Imanaga (1-0) with his fifth home run of the tournament, tying the WBC record set by South Korea's Seung Yuop Lee in 2006.

Munetaka Murakami tied the score on the first pitch of the bottom half off Merrill Kelly (0-1) driving an up fastball 432 feet into the right-field upper deck, a 115.1 mph bullet. Japan loaded the bases and Lars Nootbaar, the first non-Japanese-born player to appear for the Samurai Warriors, followed with a run-scoring groundout off Aaron Loup for a 2-1 lead.

Okamoto boosted the lead in the fourth when he sent a flat slider from Kyle Freeland over the wall in left-center for another solo homer. Kyle Schwarber pulled the Americans within a run when he went deep in the eighth off Yu Darvish.

Ohtani was Japan's designated hitter and first went to the bullpen ahead of the sixth inning. He returned to the dugout and beat out an infield single in the seventh before again walking down the left-field line to Japan's bullpen and warming up for his third mound appearance of the tournament.

He walked big league batting champion Jeff McNeil to begin the ninth, then got six-time All-Star Mookie Betts to ground into a double play.

That brought up Trout, the U.S. captain, a 10-time All-Star and a three-time MVP.

"I saw him take a big deep breath to try and control his emotions," DeRosa said. "I can't even imagine being in that moment, the two best players on the planet locking horns as teammates in that spot."

Ohtani started with a slider low, then got Trout to swing through a 100 mph fastball. Another fastball sailed outside and Trout missed a 99.8 mph pitch over the middle. A 101.6 offering, the fastest of Ohtani's 15 pitches, was low and way outside.

Ohtani stepped off the mound and blew on his pitching hand. He went back to a offspeed option, a slider.

Trout grimaced after his futile swing, his 12th strikeout of a tournament in which he hit .296 with one homer and seven RBIs. Ohtani raised both arms and threw his glove, then his cap, as teammates mobbed him.

Ohtani got his second career save, the first since a 2016 playoff game with the Pacific League's Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters. He and Trout had hugged behind the batting cage during pregame workouts, then held their nation's flag while leading their teams toward home plate in single file during the introductions, Trout down the right-field line and Ohtani in left.

Several thousand fans had arrived hours early to watch Ohtani take batting practice and applauded when he hit a drive off the video board above the second deck in center.

"What he's doing in the game is what probably 90% of the guys in that clubhouse did in Little League or in youth tournaments, and he's able to pull it off on the biggest stages," DeRosa said. "He is a unicorn to the sport. I think other guys will try it, but I don't think they're going to do it to his level."

MONEY MATTERS

Japan gets \$3 million in prize money and the U.S. \$1.7 million. Half of each goes to players, the other half to the national baseball federaton.

UP NEXT

MLB openers are March 30, the same day the season starts in Japan. ____

AP MLB: <https://apnews.com/hub/mlb> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Asian shares advance on back of Wall Street rally

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — Asian shares advanced Wednesday after a Wall Street rally led by the banks most beaten down by the industry's crisis.

Oil prices fell back and U.S. futures were little changed.

Investors are awaiting an interest rate decision by the Federal Reserve, which is expected to temper its efforts to tame inflation given the recent turmoil that has wracked the banking sector. Some of Wall Street's fear washed out after U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the government could offer the banking industry more assistance if needed.

Most economists expect the Fed to announce a relatively modest quarter-point hike in its benchmark rate, its ninth hike since March of last year.

Markets around the world have pinballed sharply this month on worries the banking system may be cracking under the pressure of the fastest set of hikes to interest rates in decades. This week's rally now runs into a huge test with the Fed decision.

In Asian trading, Tokyo's Nikkei 225 surged 2.1% to 27,501.24, catching up on gains after the market was closed on Tuesday for a holiday. Hong Kong's Hang Seng index advanced 1.9% to 19,629.21 and the Shanghai Composite index added 0.3% to 3,263.85.

Australia's S&P/ASX 200 jumped 0.9% to 7,016.40. The Kospi in South Korea climbed 1% to 2,412.94.

Tuesday on Wall Street, the S&P 500 rose 1.3% to lock in its first back-to-back gain since Silicon Valley Bank's rapid failure began two weeks ago. It closed at 4,002.87.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 1% to 32,560.60, while the Nasdaq composite jumped 1.6% to 11,860.11.

Yellen told a bankers' group more government assistance "could be warranted" if risks arise that could bring down the system. That could mean making sure customers at a weakened bank get all their money, even those with more than the \$250,000 limit insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.

"Janet Yellen coming out and saying should other deposits need to be protected, they're willing and able to do that, I think that's a very strong statement," said Mary Ann Bartels, chief investment strategist at Sanctuary Wealth. "And so markets have been able to calm down."

Earlier this month, the U.S. government said it would make all depositors at Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank whole. They were the second- and third-largest U.S. bank failures in history.

Those banks had struggled as depositors rushed to pull their money out en masse. Such runs can topple a bank, and investors have since been hunting for the next one that could fall. Much focus has been on First Republic Bank, which in some ways is similar to Silicon Valley Bank. Its stock had lost 90% for the month through Monday but jumped 29.5% Tuesday.

Other smaller and mid-sized banks also rallied, including a 9.1% climb for Comerica and a 9.3% jump for KeyCorp.

Hopes for the banking industry began to turn over the weekend after regulators pushed together two huge Swiss banks. Shares of both banks rose Tuesday in Switzerland, including a 12.1% jump for acquirer UBS. Credit Suisse, meanwhile, rose 7.3% after tumbling a day earlier.

Central banks have jacked up rates at a blistering pace in hopes of getting high inflation under control. Higher rates slow the economy, raising risks of a recession and also hurting prices for stocks and other investments.

Earlier this month, much of Wall Street was bracing for the Fed to reaccelerate its hikes and raise by 0.50 percentage points on Wednesday after reports on the job market, retail sales and inflation came in hotter than expected. Now, traders are beginning to bet that the Fed might even cut interest rates later this year.

In other trading Wednesday, U.S. benchmark crude oil lost 35 cents to \$69.32 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. It jumped \$1.85 to \$69.67 on Tuesday.

Brent crude, the pricing basis for international oils, declined 34 cents to \$74.98 per barrel. The dollar rose to 132.48 Japanese yen from 132.47 yen. The euro was nearly unchanged at \$1.0770.

Fed facing a blurrier outlook as it meets to weigh rate hike

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve is grappling with a hazier economic picture clouded by turmoil in the banking industry and still-high inflation just as it meets to decide whether to keep raising interest rates or declare a pause.

Yet the Fed will not only have to decide whether to extend its year-long streak of rate hikes despite the jitters roiling the financial industry. The policymakers will also try to peer into the future and forecast the likely path of growth, employment, inflation and their own interest rates.

Those forecasts will be released Wednesday, when most economists expect the Fed to announce a relatively modest quarter-point hike in its benchmark rate, its ninth hike since March of last year.

The projections this time will be particularly difficult. In their most recent forecasts in December, Fed officials projected that they would raise their short-term rate to about 5.1%, roughly a half-point above the current level. Some Fed watchers expect the policymakers on Wednesday to raise that forecast to 5.3%.

But the upheaval in the banking industry has made any expectations far less certain. The Fed is meeting less than two weeks after Silicon Valley Bank failed in the second-largest bank collapse in American history. That shock was followed by the failure of another major bank, Signature Bank. A third, First Republic Bank, was saved from collapse by a \$30 billion cash infusion.

Given the heightened uncertainties overhanging the financial system, there's a small chance that the Fed could decide not to issue its usual quarterly projections. Three years ago, when the pandemic struck, the Fed moved up a scheduled policy meeting to a Sunday, rather than on Tuesday and Wednesday, to urgently address the economic anxieties caused by new pandemic restrictions. After that meeting, the Fed didn't release any quarterly projections.

At the time, Powell said that issuing economic and interest rate forecasts, when the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were so unclear, "could have been more of an obstacle to clear communication than a help." Still, the unusual decision then was as much a reflection of the chaos of the early pandemic as it was of the uncertain outlook.

If the Fed does raise its key rate by a quarter-point on Wednesday, it would reach roughly 4.9%, the highest point in nearly 16 years. Early this month, Powell had said in congressional testimony that a half-point rate increase would be possible at this week's meeting. The banking crisis has suddenly upended that outlook.

It will be a tough call for the 11 Fed officials who will vote on the rate decision. With hiring still strong, consumers still spending and inflation still elevated, a rate hike would normally be a straightforward move.

Not this time. The Fed is expected to treat inflation and financial turmoil as two separate problems, to be managed simultaneously by separate tools: Higher rates to address inflation and greater Fed lending to banks to calm financial turmoil.

Complicating matters will be the difficulty in determining the impact on the economy of the collapse of Silicon Valley and Signature. The Fed, Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., and Treasury Department agreed to insure all the deposits at those banks, including those above the \$250,000 cap. The Fed also created a new lending program to ensure that banks can access cash to repay depositors, if needed.

But economists warn that many mid-sized and small banks, in order to conserve capital, will likely become more cautious in their lending. A tightening of bank credit could, in turn, reduce business spending on new software, equipment and buildings. It could also make it harder for consumers to obtain auto or other loans.

Some economists worry that such a slowdown in lending could be enough to tip the economy into recession. Wall Street traders are betting that a weaker economy will force the Fed to start cutting rates this summer. Futures markets have priced in three quarter-point cuts by the end of the year.

The Fed would likely welcome slower growth, which would help cool inflation. But few economists are sure what the effects would be of a pullback in bank lending.

Most recent data still points to a solid economy and rampant hiring. Employers added a robust 311,000 jobs in February, the government said earlier this month. And while the unemployment rate rose, from 3.4% to a still-low 3.6%, that mostly reflected an influx of new job-seekers who were not immediately hired.

Consumer spending was robust in January, fueled in part by a large cost-of-living adjustment for 70 million recipients of Social Security and other benefits. The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta projects that the economy will have expanded at a healthy annual rate of 3.2% in the first three months of this year.

Oklahoma court OK's abortion to preserve mother's life

By KEN MILLER Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A divided Oklahoma Supreme Court on Tuesday overturned a portion of the state's near total ban on abortion, ruling women have a right to abortion when pregnancy risks their health, not just in a medical emergency.

It was a narrow win for abortion rights advocates since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the landmark *Roe v. Wade* last year. Since then, conservative states including Oklahoma have enforced restrictions on abortion.

Oklahoma's top court ruled that a woman has the right under the state Constitution to receive an abortion to preserve her life if her doctor determines that continuing the pregnancy would endanger it due to a condition she has or is likely to develop during the pregnancy. Previously, the right to an abortion could only take place in the case of medical emergency.

"Requiring one to wait until there is a medical emergency would further endanger the life of the pregnant woman and does not serve a compelling state interest," the ruling states.

In the 5-4 ruling, the court said the state law uses both the words "preserve" and "save" the mother's life as an exception to the abortion ban.

"The language 'except to save the life of a pregnant woman in a medical emergency' is much different from 'preserve her life,'" according to the ruling.

"Absolute certainty," by the physician that the mother's life could be endangered, "is not required, however, mere possibility or speculation is insufficient" to determine that an abortion is needed to preserve the woman's life, according to the ruling.

The court, however, declined to rule on whether the state Constitution grants the right to an abortion for other reasons.

The court ruled in the lawsuit filed by Planned Parenthood, Tulsa Women's Reproductive Clinic and others challenging the state laws passed after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the *Roe v. Wade*, which had guaranteed a nationwide right to abortion for nearly half a century.

Since then, a patchwork of laws has meant some patients have had to travel to other states to get abortions when it was outlawed where they lived.

"This ruling leaves out too many Oklahomans. Oklahomans shouldn't have to travel across state lines just to reach an abortion clinic, and it is heartbreaking that many will not be able to do so," said Dr. Alan Braid, an abortion provider and plaintiff in the case said in a statement.

The ruling in Oklahoma is unlikely to mean abortion becomes widely available.

In a lawsuit filed earlier this month over Texas' abortion ban, five women said they were denied abortions even when pregnancy endangered their lives. The suit claims the Texas law is creating confusion among doctors, who are turning away some pregnant women experiencing health complications because they fear repercussions.

Emily Wales, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Great Plains called the ruling a small step toward restoring the right to abortion.

"The Oklahoma Supreme Court recognized one fundamental truth: patients must be permitted to access critical care to save their lives," she said. "But the right recognized today is so limited that most people

who need abortion will not be able to access it.”

Arkansas restricts school bathroom use by transgender people

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders on Tuesday signed a law prohibiting transgender people at public schools from using the restroom that matches their gender identity, the first of several states expected to enact such bans this year amid a flood of bills nationwide targeting the trans community.

The bill signed by the Republican governor makes Arkansas the fourth state to place such restrictions at public schools, and it comes as bills in Idaho and Iowa also await their governor’s signature. And it might be followed by an even stricter Arkansas bill criminalizing transgender adults using public restrooms that match their gender identity.

Arkansas’ law, which won’t take effect until later this summer, applies to multi-person restrooms and locker rooms at public schools and charter schools serving prekindergarten through 12th grade. The majority-Republican Legislature gave final approval to the bill last week.

“The Governor has said she will sign laws that focus on protecting and educating our kids, not indoctrinating them and believes our schools are no place for the radical left’s woke agenda,” Alexa Henning, Sanders’ spokesperson, said in a statement. “Arkansas isn’t going to rewrite the rules of biology just to please a handful of far-left advocates.”

Similar laws have been enacted in Alabama, Oklahoma and Tennessee, although lawsuits have been filed challenging the Oklahoma and Tennessee restrictions.

Proposals to restrict transgender people using the restroom of their choice have seen a resurgence this year, six years after North Carolina repealed its bathroom law in the wake of widespread protests and boycotts. More than two dozen bathroom bills have been filed in 17 states, according to the Human Rights Campaign.

“They’re singling out transgender people for no other reason than dislike, disapproval and misunderstanding of who transgender youth are,” said Paul Castillo, senior counsel and students’ rights strategist for Lambda Legal. “And the entire school population suffers as a result of these types of bills, particularly schools and teachers and administrators who are dealing with real problems and need to focus on creating a welcome environment for every student.”

The proposals are among a record number of bills filed to restrict the rights of transgender people by limiting or banning gender-affirming care for minors, banning transgender girls from school sports and restricting drag shows. Transgender people have also faced increasingly hostile rhetoric at statehouses.

Another bill pending in Arkansas goes even further than the North Carolina law by imposing criminal penalties. That proposal would allow someone to be charged with misdemeanor sexual indecency with a child if they use a public restroom or changing room of the opposite sex when a minor is present.

“It’s a flagrant message from them that they refuse to respect (transgender people’s) rights and humanity, to respect Arkansans’ rights and humanity,” said Holly Dickson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas.

The new Arkansas law requires schools to provide reasonable accommodations, including single-person restrooms. Superintendents, principals and teachers who violate the prohibition could face fines of at least \$1,000 from a state panel, and parents could also file private lawsuits to enforce the measure.

“Each child in our schools has a right to privacy and to feel safe and to feel comfortable in the bathroom they need to go to,” Republican Rep. Mary Bentley, the bill’s sponsor, told lawmakers earlier this year.

But Clayton Crockett, the father of a transgender child, described to lawmakers earlier this year how a similar policy adopted at his daughter’s school made her feel further marginalized.

“She feels targeted, she feels discriminated against, she feels bullied, she feels singled out,” Crockett said at a House panel hearing on the bill in January.

Opponents have also complained the legislation doesn’t provide funding for schools that may need to build single-person restrooms to provide reasonable accommodations.

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At least two federal appeals courts have upheld transgender students' rights to use the bathroom corresponding with their gender identity. Supporters of the bill, however, have cited a federal appeals court ruling upholding a similar policy at a Florida school district last year.

The Arkansas measure won't take effect until 90 days after the Legislature adjourns this year's session, which isn't expected to happen until next month at the earliest.

Sanders signed the bill a week after she approved legislation making it easier to sue providers of gender-affirming care to minors. That law, which also doesn't take effect until this summer, is an effort to effectively reinstate a ban on such care for minors that's been blocked by a federal judge.

Sanders earlier this month also signed a wide-ranging education bill that prohibits classroom instruction on gender identity and sexual orientation before 5th grade. The restriction is similar to a Florida measure that critics have called the "Don't Say Gay" law.

Pence seeks 'common sense' Social Security, Medicare reform

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

As he mulls a 2024 presidential bid, former Vice President Mike Pence on Tuesday called for "common sense and compassionate solutions" to reform entitlement programs and the nation's debt burden, suggesting changes to Social Security and Medicare programs hurtling toward insolvency, particularly for younger generations, without naming specific recommendations.

"What we need now is leadership because, if we act in this moment with the support of this generation, we can introduce common sense reforms that will never touch anyone who is in retirement, or anyone who will retire in the next 25 years," Pence told an audience of college students at Washington & Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. "It'll just take courage to do it, and that's where your generation will come in."

What to do with Social Security and Medicare, as the programs close in on projected insolvency dates, has emerged as a dividing line for Republicans seeking to lead their party in the 2024 presidential contest.

Forecasters say Social Security won't be able to pay out its promised benefits in about a dozen years, and Medicare won't be able to do so in just five years. Economists say both programs will drive the national debt higher in the decades to come, forcing teeth-gritting choices for the next generation of lawmakers.

Pence — yet to announce a 2024 presidential bid but saying Tuesday he was "continuing to pray and reflect" on one — has previously suggested tweaks for the programs, telling CNBC in February that cuts to Medicare and Social Security should be "on the table for the long term."

"President Biden won't even discuss common sense reforms of Social Security and Medicare, and too many leaders in my political party take the same position," Pence said during remarks at Washington & Lee's quadrennial mock presidential nominating convention known as Mock Con. It predicts the presidential nominee of the party out of power in the White House.

"If that frustrates you, good — it should, because it'll be your generation that's robbed of your dreams and opportunities," he said.

Pence's ideas are broadly in line with former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, already in the 2024 GOP race, who last week opened the door to potential cuts for younger generations. During a campaign rally in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Haley said that, while she wouldn't touch the benefits of older people who retired with certain guarantees of a financial future, "the rules have changed" for "anyone new coming in this system."

Other Republicans likely vying for the party's nomination disagree. At the Conservative Political Action Conference this month, former President Donald Trump — officially mounting a third run — took a veiled jab at Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, calling out those who have proposed raising the age for Social Security or privatizing Medicare — positions DeSantis has expressed support for in the past but has since abandoned.

"We're not going to mess with Social Security as Republicans," DeSantis, yet to announce a 2024 run, recently said.

Many leading Republicans have recently sought to signal their unwillingness to touch entitlement programs, though the GOP has a long history of threatening to slash the benefits. Democrats have pointed to a plan by Republican Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, introduced last year but later amended, that called for all federal

spending legislation to sunset in five years, subject to votes in Congress that could preserve programs. Met with boos from congressional Republicans when he said during his State of the Union address that "some Republicans want Medicare and Social Security to sunset," President Joe Biden last week took aim at "MAGA" Republicans he said are intent on dialing back Medicare coverage for millions of Americans, promising to "defend and strengthen" the programs. After Biden's speech, Scott amended the plan to exempt Social Security, Medicare, national security, veterans benefits and other essential services.

'Winnie the Pooh' film pulled from Hong Kong cinemas

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Public screenings of a slasher film that features Winnie the Pooh were scrapped abruptly in Hong Kong on Tuesday, sparking discussions over increasing censorship in the city.

Film distributor VII Pillars Entertainment announced on Facebook that the release of "Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey" on Thursday had been canceled with "great regret" in Hong Kong and neighboring Macao.

In an email reply to The Associated Press, the distributor said it was notified by cinemas that they could not show the film as scheduled, but it didn't know why. The cinema chains involved did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

For many residents, the Winnie the Pooh character is a playful taunt of China's President Xi Jinping and Chinese censors in the past had briefly banned social media searches for the bear in the country. In 2018, the film "Christopher Robin," also featuring Winnie the Pooh, was reportedly denied a release in China.

The film being pulled in Hong Kong has prompted concern on social media over the territory's shrinking freedoms.

The movie was initially set to be shown in about 30 cinemas in Hong Kong, VII Pillars Entertainment wrote last week.

The Office for Film, Newspaper and Article Administration said it had approved the film and arrangements by local cinemas to screen approved films "are the commercial decisions of the cinemas concerned." It refused to comment on such arrangements.

A screening initially scheduled for Tuesday night in one cinema was canceled due to "technical reasons," the organizer said on Instagram.

Kenny Ng, a professor at Hong Kong Baptist University's academy of film, refused to speculate on the reason behind the cancellation, but suggested the mechanism of silencing criticism appeared to be resorting to commercial decisions.

Hong Kong is a former British colony that returned to China's rule in 1997, promising to retain its Western-style freedoms. But China imposed a national security law following massive pro-democracy protests in 2019, silencing or jailing many dissidents.

In 2021, the government tightened guidelines and authorized censors to ban films believed to have breached the sweeping law.

Ng said the city saw more cases of censorship over the last two years, mostly targeting non-commercial movies, such as independent short films.

"When there is a red line, then there are more taboos," he said.

Effort to recall New Orleans' first female mayor fails

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — The effort to recall Democratic New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell has failed, following an official count of petition signatures released by the Louisiana governor's office Tuesday.

Although the petition sheets contained over 67,000 signatures, most were declared invalid by the registrar. Gov. John Bel Edwards announced that only 27,243 of the signatures were valid — falling about 18,000 short of what was needed to force a referendum. Signatures can be rejected for a multitude of reasons including, if they are dated after the deadline, the title page is mislabeled, there is erroneous information

or profanity, if the person is out-of-parish or if the signature is a duplicate.

"My administration has always remained focused on addressing the real pressing issues that face our city," Cantrell said in a statement to WAFB-TV. "Now, with the divisiveness of the failed recall campaign officially behind us, we must heal and recommit ourselves to working collaboratively to continue the progress we've made towards reducing crime, increasing public safety, building a more sustainable and resilient city and creating economic and job opportunities that benefit all of our people."

The number of signatures needed to force the recall has been debated in court. Recall organizers sued officials, saying the rolls were inflated with hundreds of dead people and thousands of people who have moved away.

Earlier this month, New Orleans Civil District Court Judge Jennifer Medley approved a lawsuit settlement agreement that significantly lowered the number of signatures needed to force a recall election. However, after The Times-Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate revealed the judge herself had signed the recall petition, Medley said another judge would decide whether she should be removed from the case.

"The recall campaign has been divisive, dishonest, and opaque to say the least. It's time for New Orleansians to better our city in the way we do best - by coming together," Maggie Carroll, the longtime campaign manager for Cantrell, said in a written statement Tuesday.

Recall efforts against Cantrell, the first woman to serve as New Orleans mayor, began last August, less than a year after she began her second term.

She was easily reelected in 2021 but has since faced numerous problems, including violent crime, fitful progress on major street projects and unreliable garbage collection. Questions also have been raised about her travel expenses and her personal use of a city-owned apartment. The City Council recently opened an investigation into the use of public money to send a mailer to city residents earlier this year touting Cantrell's accomplishments.

Cantrell has repeatedly criticized the recall effort as a Republican-led attack on the administration of a Black, Democratic woman.

Def Leppard drummer recovering from attack outside hotel

By The Associated Press undefined

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Def Leppard drummer Rick Allen says he is recovering from an attack earlier this month outside a Florida hotel.

Allen, who was in South Florida to perform a show at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino, was attacked while taking a smoke break outside the the Four Seasons hotel on Fort Lauderdale Beach.

Police arrested a 19-year-old man, but said they don't have a motive for the attack. They did not identify either the suspect, or Allen, in the police report.

But in a social media post, Allen, 59, said he's thankful for all the support he has received from this fans. He said he's also relieved that his wife, Lauren, wasn't with him when the incident occurred, and that they are now "working on recovering in a safe space."

Police said the assailant was hiding behind a pillar outside the hotel while Allen was smoking a cigarette. The man ran at Allen, knocking him to the ground.

According to the police report, a woman saw Allen fall and ran to help him, and the man then attacked her.

The man then ran to another hotel and started breaking car windows until he was stopped by witnesses and police arrived. He was arrested and charged with two counts of battery, four counts of criminal mischief, and abusing an elderly or disabled adult.

Allen lost his left arm in an accident in 1984.

In a photo posted on Instagram, Allen was wearing a blue Fort Lauderdale police t-shirt.

Gwyneth Paltrow's lawyer calls Utah ski collision story 'BS'

By SAM METZ Associated Press

PARK CITY, Utah (AP) — Gwyneth Paltrow's lawyer called the story of a retired optometrist who is su-

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ing her over a 2016 ski collision “utter B.S.” on Tuesday during the trial’s opening day in Utah, where the actor-turned-lifestyle influencer appeared in court looking somber.

Paltrow and Terry Sanderson, the man suing her, sat across from each other in a Park City courtroom as their attorneys gave opening statements that provided strikingly different accounts of the crash. Both described their clients as victims and blamed the other for the collision at Deer Valley, one of the country’s most upscale ski resorts.

The two showed little emotion as attorneys questioned their credibility and version of events on the first day of the trial, which is expected to last eight days. Sanderson’s attorneys said that they plan to call Paltrow to the stand to testify on Friday, but they could do so earlier in the week depending on the other witnesses’ availability.

Paltrow — wearing a cream-colored knit sweater, tweed harem pants and aviator-style reading glasses — shielded her face from photographers using a blue “GP”-initialed notebook as she entered and exited the courtroom. Sanderson wore a gray suit and left halfway before witnesses began testifying.

Sanderson claims that Paltrow was cruising down the slopes so recklessly that they violently collided, leaving him on the ground as she and her entourage continued their descent down the skiers-only mountain known for its groomed runs, après-ski champagne yurts and posh clientele.

“All skiers know that when they’re skiing down the mountain, it’s their responsibility to yield the right of way to skiers below them,” Sanderson’s attorney, Lawrence Buhler, told jurors, who — unlike those selected for most trials — walked into the courtroom smiling, likely because of their proximity to a major celebrity.

Buhler highlighted his client’s military service record and tried to appeal to the jury’s sympathies — describing the broken ribs and brain trauma Sanderson sustained during and after the crash. Attempting to draw a contrast, Buhler described Paltrow as a wealthy, experienced skier who adopted a “So what?” attitude about the collision.

“She hires multiple ski instructors for her children, which allows them to skip the lines. Private instructors cost thousands of dollars per day,” he said.

Park City is a resort town in the Rocky Mountains that hosts the Sundance Film Festival, which draws a throng of celebrities each year.

Paltrow and Sanderson both agree that they collided while on a beginner’s run seven years ago, yet both accuse the other of being at fault and skiing up behind them.

Sanderson is suing Paltrow for \$300,000 — claiming that the accident in Park City was a result of negligence, and left him with physical injuries and emotional distress. After the collision, Sanderson’s attorneys said their client went to urgent care and to the emergency room.

On ski slopes, Utah law gives the skier who is downhill the right of way, so a central question in the case is who was farther down when the collision transpired. Both Paltrow and Sanderson claim that they were farther downhill when the other rammed into them.

Both sides are presenting their clients as conservative skiers who were stunned when a skier above them crashed into them.

Paltrow’s attorneys told jurors Tuesday that Sanderson was the one who crashed into her — a collision in which she sustained what in court filings they called a “full body blow.” Attorney Steve Owens noted that members of Paltrow’s group checked on Sanderson, who assured them he was fine — an interaction Sanderson doesn’t deny but said in court filings that he can’t remember.

Paltrow’s attorney cautioned jurors not to let sympathy for Sanderson’s medical ailments skew their judgements. He questioned the 76-year-old’s credibility, noting his age and documented, pre-collision brain injuries. He said that the Utah man had confirmed he was fine after the crash. Owens also said that Sanderson posted a “very happy, smiling picture” of himself online, being tobogganed down post-crash.

“His memories of the case get better over the years. That’s all I’m gonna say. That’s not how memory works,” Owens said.

Two witnesses testified on Tuesday: Craig Ramon, a friend and ski companion of Sanderson’s, and Karlene Davidson, a woman who was dating him in February 2016 during the crash.

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Ramon, who said he was skiing roughly 35 feet (11 meters) away at the time of the crash, testified on Tuesday afternoon. An outdoorsman who skis more than 150 days annually, Ramon said he heard a loud scream and saw Sanderson's ski tips fly up, causing him to fall face-down "spread-eagle" upon the collision. He testified that Paltrow hit Sanderson, bouncing off his back and sliding to his right.

Paltrow's ski instructor, a Deer Valley employee, approached moments later and said, "Your buddy just took out Gwyneth Paltrow," Ramon testified.

Paltrow's attorney's attempted to paint Ramon as a close friend of Sanderson by showing pictures of him calmly smiling with other friends after the crash and brought up — but did not probe into — an email chain with Sanderson's family that suggested the collision was captured with a GoPro camera. The footage has not been seen or included as part of the trial's evidence.

Davidson, Sanderson's ex-girlfriend, said that in addition to his injuries, she noticed his demeanor changed after the crash. He grew more distant and she said "had no joy left in his life," which led to the demise of their relationship. Sanderson's attorneys attributed the changes to the crash. Paltrow's attorneys noted that the man had started dating another woman quickly after their break-up.

After his initial lawsuit seeking \$3.1 million was dismissed, Sanderson amended the complaint and he is now seeking \$300,000. Paltrow — the Oscar-winning actor known for her roles in "Shakespeare in Love" and Marvel's "Iron Man" movies — filed a counterclaim, seeking attorney fees and \$1 in damages.

Paltrow has alleged that Sanderson is overstating his injuries and trying to exploit her celebrity and wealth. In addition to her acting career, she is also the founder and CEO of high-end wellness company Goop.

"He demanded Ms. Paltrow pay him millions. If she did not pay, she would face negative publicity resulting from his allegations," her attorneys wrote in a 2019 court filing.

The trial is expected to include testimony from numerous medical professionals and Paltrow's children, Moses and Apple.

Lawsuit seeks to block abortion pill ban in Wyoming

By MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — Abortion-rights supporters filed an amended lawsuit Tuesday seeking to block Wyoming's new abortion pill ban from taking effect.

A group hoping to open what would be the state's second clinic offering abortions filed the amended lawsuit days after Republican Gov. Mark Gordon signed what is the nation's first explicit ban on abortion pills. Absent court intervention, that ban would take effect July 1.

Abortion-rights supporters already were seeking to block a separate sweeping abortion ban that took effect Sunday in Wyoming without the governor's signature. That law seeks to overcome objections that prompted a judge to suspend a previous ban.

The abortion pill ban and the sweeping ban conflict and create confusion about what is and isn't permissible under the new laws, according to the lawsuit. If they're allowed to be in effect, "the fundamental rights of Wyoming women and their families will be taken away by the state government and those rights will cease to exist," the amended lawsuit said.

Both of the new Wyoming abortion bans make exceptions to save a pregnant woman's life and for cases of rape or incest that are reported to police.

Until Gordon signed the ban on medication abortions, no state had passed a law specifically prohibiting such pills, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research group that supports abortion rights. However, abortion pills already were banned in 13 other states with blanket bans on abortion, and 15 states already had limited access to the pills.

Medication abortions also are a target of a separate lawsuit in Texas, where abortion opponents have asked a federal judge to reverse the Food and Drug Administration's 2000 approval of mifepristone. A two-pill combination of mifepristone and another drug is the most common form of abortion in the U.S.

Wyoming has only one abortion provider, a women's health clinic in Jackson that only provides medication abortions but has canceled appointments after the state's broad ban took effect this week. Teton

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County District Court Judge Melissa Owens is scheduled to hold a hearing Wednesday to consider whether to block that new ban while the legal challenge over it moves ahead.

Wellspring Health Access, which is seeking to block the abortion pill ban and the broader measure, has been planning to open a clinic in Casper that would provide surgical and medication abortions. After an arson attack prevented that clinic from opening as planned last summer, organizers hoped to open it next month.

"Wyomingites deserve access to the full spectrum of reproductive health care, including both surgical and medication abortion, and that's why we are fighting to keep medication abortion legal in Wyoming," Julie Burkart, president of Wellspring Health Access said in a statement.

Also suing are four women, including two gynecologists, and Chelsea's Fund, a Wyoming abortion access advocacy group.

Wyoming Attorney General Bridget Hill "will vigorously defend the legality of this law, just as she does with all statutes when their constitutionality is challenged," Gordon spokesman Michael Pearlman said by email.

Until this week, abortion had remained legal in Wyoming despite a ban that followed the U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn its landmark Roe v. Wade abortion ruling. In putting that ban on hold in July, Owens ruled that it stood to harm women with pregnancy complications and their doctors.

She also found that a 2012 state constitutional amendment guaranteeing the right to make one's own health care decisions could allow abortion.

The new sweeping ban asserts that abortion is not health care and the amendment therefore doesn't apply to abortion.

Since the reversal of the Roe in June, abortion restrictions have been up to states, and the landscape has shifted quickly.

Other states where courts have put on hold bans or deep restrictions are Arizona, Indiana, Montana, Ohio, South Carolina and Utah. Idaho courts forced the state to allow abortions during medical emergencies.

Willis Reed, leader on Knicks' 2 title teams, dies at 80

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Willis Reed, who dramatically emerged from the locker room minutes before Game 7 of the 1970 NBA Finals to spark the New York Knicks to their first championship and create one of sports' most enduring examples of playing through pain, died Tuesday. He was 80.

Reed's death was announced by the National Basketball Retired Players Association, which confirmed it through his family. The cause was not released, but Reed had been in poor health recently and was unable to travel to New York when the Knicks honored the 50th anniversary of their 1973 NBA championship team during their game against New Orleans on Feb. 25.

The Knicks tweeted a photograph picturing Reed from behind walking onto the floor as his teammates were warming up for the 1970 finale, one of the most memorable moments in NBA and Madison Square Garden history.

"As we mourn, we will always strive to uphold the standards he left behind — the unmatched leadership, sacrifice and work ethic that personified him as a champion among champions," the team said. "His is a legacy that will live forever."

Nicknamed "The Captain," Reed was the undersized center and emotional leader on the Knicks' two NBA championship teams, with a soft shooting touch from the outside and a toughness to tussle with the era's superstar big men on the inside.

He was remembered Tuesday perhaps more for the manner he led the Knicks than how superbly he played for them.

"Willis Reed was the ultimate team player and consummate leader. My earliest and fondest memories of NBA basketball are of watching Willis, who embodied the winning spirit that defined the New York Knicks' championship teams in the early 1970s," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said. "He played the game with

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remarkable passion and determination, and his inspiring comeback in Game 7 of the 1970 NBA Finals remains one of the most iconic moments in all of sports.”

Reed’s accomplishments — seven All-Star selections, two NBA Finals MVP awards among them — would have warranted Hall of Fame induction by themselves. During the 1969-70 season, he became the first player to sweep the MVP awards for the regular season, All-Star Game and NBA Finals.

But his spot in history was secured simply by walking onto the floor on the final night of that season.

Reed had injured a thigh muscle in Game 5 of the series between the Knicks and Los Angeles Lakers, tumbling to the court in pain. He sat out Game 6 as counterpart Wilt Chamberlain had 45 points and 27 rebounds in a Lakers romp that forced a deciding game at Madison Square Garden.

Reed’s status was unknown even to his Knicks teammates as he continued getting treatment until shortly before Game 7. Both teams were warming up when Reed came out of the tunnel, fans rising and roaring when they saw him emerge from the tunnel leading to the locker room.

“And here comes Willis and the crowd is going wild,” radio announcer Marv Albert said.

The Lakers stopped to watch Reed, who made two quick jump shots in the early minutes of the game, running back down the court after both with a noticeable limp. He wouldn’t score again but the Knicks didn’t need it, with their captain’s return and Walt Frazier’s 36 points and 19 assists energizing them to a 113-99 romp and their first NBA title.

Frazier’s performance was one of the finest ever in a deciding game, but it was forever a footnote to Reed’s return. In 2006, to coincide with the NBA’s 60th anniversary, it finished third in voting of the league’s 60 greatest playoff moments, behind Michael Jordan’s championship-winning jumper for his sixth title in 1998 and Magic Johnson ending his rookie season by filling in for Kareem Abdul-Jabbar at center in Game 6 of the 1980 finals to lead the Lakers to a championship.

Long afterward, a player’s return from injury has sometimes compared to Reed, such as when Boston’s Paul Pierce was carried off the floor with a knee injury in Game 1 of the 2008 NBA Finals against Los Angeles before quickly returning. But Phil Jackson, a teammate of Reed’s and then Lakers coach, dismissed that because of how serious Reed’s injury was.

“If I’m not mistaken, I think Willis Reed missed a whole half and three-quarters almost of a game and literally had to have a shot — a horse shot, three or four of them — in his thigh to come back out and play,” Jackson said.

Reed wouldn’t be able to recover so quickly from injuries in the coming years. He was limited to just 11 games in 1971-72 but came back strong the next season to spark the Knicks to a second title in what was his last full season.

Though his return always made the ‘70 title the more celebrated one, it was the ‘72-73 squad, having been fortified by Hall of Famers Earl Monroe and Jerry Lucas, that stood out to Reed.

“That, to me, in my mind was the best team,” he said during its 40th anniversary celebration.

Reed would play only 19 games in 1973-74 before retiring because of a knee injury after just 10 seasons.

That was long enough to collect more than 12,000 points and 8,400 rebounds, both of which still rank in the top three on the Knicks’ career lists.

He had a successful post-playing career as a coach and executive, with 76ers coach Doc Rivers recalling playing for Atlanta when Reed was an assistant coach.

“He was simply a great person, A man!!! A leader!!! A Winner!!!” Rivers tweeted.

Willis Reed was born June 25, 1942, in Hico, Louisiana. He stayed in his home state for his college career, leading Grambling State to the 1961 NAIA championship and a third-place finish in 1963. The school retired his number and named its court after Reed in 2022.

A second-round pick in 1964, he quickly proved that standing only 6-foot-9 wouldn’t keep him from becoming one of the league’s top centers. He was voted Rookie of the Year and earned the first of his seven straight All-Star selections.

Reed was the anchor as the Knicks became one of the best teams in the NBA, with Hall of Famers such as Frazier, Bill Bradley and Dave DeBusschere.

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Reed provided them with 18.7 points and 12.9 rebounds for his career, along with plenty of toughness. An ESPN documentary in 2014 on those Knicks showed footage of a 1966 fight in a game against the Lakers in which Reed appeared to throw punches at multiple opponents, with Jackson noting that it appeared Reed "decimated this team."

His No. 19 was the first number retired by the Knicks and he was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame in 1982.

Reed went on to coach the Knicks to a playoff berth in 1977-78 but coached them only 14 more games the following season. He also was a head coach at Creighton and the New Jersey Nets, but his greatest success after his playing career came in the front office.

He was their senior vice president of basketball operations when they drafted Derrick Coleman and Kenny Anderson, who became All-Stars and led the Nets to the playoffs in the 1990s.

Fox, Dominion face off over airing of false election claims

By RANDALL CHASE and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — Fox News and a voting machine company that claims the conservative network defamed it by amplifying baseless allegations of fraud following the 2020 presidential election faced off in a courtroom Tuesday during a key hearing over whether journalists have a responsibility to be cautious with explosive and implausible allegations.

Denver-based Dominion Voting Systems argued that Fox recklessly repeated false accusations from supporters of former President Donald Trump that its machines and the software used were responsible for Trump's 2020 election loss. Documents released during the lawsuit have shown that top Fox executives and personalities didn't believe the claims but aired them anyway.

"There was a deliberate decision by those responsible for the broadcasts ... to let the story be out there," Dominion attorney Rodney Smolla said, adding that Fox News was desperate to win back viewers infuriated that the network had correctly called Arizona, a key battleground state, on election night for Joe Biden. "What they did to get viewers back was start this new narrative that the election had been stolen and that Dominion was the thief."

But Fox contended it was simply reporting on newsworthy allegations — a sitting president's claim that the election was being stolen from him.

"We never reported those to be true," Fox lawyer Erin Murphy said. "All we ever did was provide viewers the true fact that these were allegations that were being made."

The arguments, which are scheduled to continue Wednesday, came during a summary judgment hearing as both sides in the case asked Delaware Superior Court Judge Eric Davis to find in their favor ahead of an April 17 trial date. It's unclear when Davis might issue a ruling.

Davis told lawyers for both sides he hasn't made up his mind.

"I need to be educated," the judge said as the hearing began. "I haven't pre-decided this."

The hearing followed the filing of a separate lawsuit Monday by Fox News producer Abby Grossberg claiming that the network pressured her to give misleading testimony during her deposition in the Dominion case.

A producer on Fox's Tucker Carlson Tonight show who previously worked for Maria Bartiromo's show, Grossberg contends that Fox attorneys advised her against hiring a personal attorney for the case and implied that she should not be "too candid" in her depositions.

"Ms. Grossberg convinced herself that discretion would be the better part of valor in this instance, and decided she would follow the directions of the attorneys who claimed they represented her best interests in connection with her deposition and kept her truth to herself," Grossberg's lawsuit contends.

Fox countered with its own lawsuit, trying to bar Grossberg from disclosing confidential discussions with Fox attorneys.

"Her allegations in connection with the Dominion case are baseless, and we will vigorously defend Fox against all of her claims," the network said in a statement about Grossberg's case.

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Tuesday's hearing was perhaps the most significant court action to date in a lawsuit that already has embarrassed Fox by revealing its personalities' private disdain for former President Donald Trump and illustrating how political pressures can inform its coverage. The case also holds the potential for redefining libel law in the U.S.

Dominion, which sells electronic voting hardware and software, contends that some Fox News employees deliberately amplified false claims by Trump allies that Dominion machines had changed votes in the 2020 election and that Fox provided a platform for guests to make false and defamatory statements about the company.

Dominion's attorney began Tuesday's arguments by rejecting Fox's claim that it should not be held liable for reporting what Trump supporters were saying.

"If you repeat or publish a defamatory statement from someone else, you adopt it as your own," Smolla said.

He added that Fox's reputation gave statements being made by Trump allies Sidney Powell, Rudy Giuliani and Mike Lindell "gravitas." Smolla said Fox employees did not engage in neutral reporting, but instead "espoused and endorsed" false statements made by program guests.

Dominion attorneys argued that Fox employees allowed guests to falsely claim that the company had rigged the election, flipped large numbers of votes to Biden through a secret algorithm, was owned by a company founded in Venezuela to rig elections for Hugo Chavez, and bribed government officials.

They pointed to deposition testimony and internal communications — including fact checks from a Fox "brain room," indicating that, within days of the election, many Fox employees harbored serious doubts about those claims: "There's no evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 election," according to one fact check from Nov. 13, 2020.

But Fox's attorney argued that the accuracy of the allegations isn't the main issue.

"What matters is whether the press accurately reports the allegations, not whether the underlying allegations are true or false," said Murphy, adding that the distinction between a factual statement and an opinion is also important.

She also contended there's no evidence that Fox Corp. showed any malice — a key legal standard in libel cases — toward Dominion, because there is no evidence that any corporate executives were directly responsible in deciding to air the alleged defamatory statements.

However, as Murphy led the judge through a list of Fox broadcasts, it became clear that programs of former Fox host Lou Dobbs, aired shortly after the 2020 election, could be an issue for the network.

"There seems to be a Dobbs problem," Davis said.

Murphy countered that Dobbs was "an opinion host" who cited Dominion's denials, but also acknowledged: "It's abundantly clear that he believes all of these things."

Virginia teacher shot by 6-year-old: 'I thought I had died'

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — A Virginia teacher who was shot and wounded by her 6-year-old student said it has changed her life and she has vivid memories and nightmares about that day.

"I just will never forget the look on his face that he gave me while he pointed the gun directly at me," first-grade teacher Abby Zwerner said during an exclusive interview with NBC's Savannah Guthrie about the student. "It's changed me. It's changed my life."

She said she's still in shock and can't make sense of it, in a portion of the interview that aired Tuesday morning on "Today."

"I'm not sure when the shock will ever go away because of just how surreal it was and the vivid memories I have of that day. I think about it daily. Sometimes I have nightmares," she said.

Speaking publicly for the first time since the Jan. 6 shooting, Zwerner said in a portion of the interview that aired Monday on "NBC Nightly News" that she's had a challenging recovery. She's had four surgeries and has some days when she "can't get up out of bed." Other days she can go about her day.

"For going through what I've gone through, I try to stay positive. You know, try to have a positive outlook

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on what's happened and where my future's heading," Zwerner said.

Zwerner was hospitalized for nearly two weeks after being shot in the chest and left hand as she taught her class at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia. The shooting rattled the military shipbuilding community and sent shock waves around the country, with many wondering how a child so young could get access to a gun and shoot his teacher.

In the moments after she was shot, Zwerner said the other first-graders in her class were screaming. She was terrified. But her concern centered on the children — "I just wanted to get my babies out of there."

"I think they knew as well that they had to get out of there," Zwerner said. "But they were extremely frightened and screaming."

What happened next is still kind of a blur. Zwerner got the kids out of the classroom.

She knew she needed help. The fire alarm had gone off, heightening her awareness that she'd been shot. She had trouble breathing. Her vision failed.

"I went to the office and I just passed out," Zwerner said. "I thought I had died."

Zwerner didn't know it at the time, but her lung had collapsed. Doctors said the bullet could have killed her. She likely survived because she had put up her hands.

"The initial gunshot went through my left hand and ruptured the middle bone as well as the index finger and the thumb," she said. "The gunshot then went into my chest up here, where it actually still remains. So I have the scar up here. And I still have some bullet fragments up here."

At the hospital, Zwerner called her mother "Mommy" for the first time in a long time. She lives with her twin sister, who's taken care of her since she returned home, from cooking meals to taking her to doctors appointments.

She said the support from the outside world has been "overwhelming" and difficult to comprehend.

"We have tons of handmade cards, hand-written cards with people's stories," Zwerner said.

Zwerner believes she survived for a reason. If she could talk to her first-graders, she'd tell each one she loves them.

"I'm very grateful that they're all alive," she said. "And they're safe, and they're healthy. And I just miss them dearly."

Zwerner told Guthrie the bullet wounds have scarred over. But she said they're still a reminder that, "Hey, this happened to you. This is what your body's been through."

Zwerner intends to sue the district, according to a legal notice filed by her attorney.

Michelle Price, a spokeswoman for Newport News Public Schools, said in a statement that officials could not comment on Zwerner's NBC interview, "but we appreciate her sharing her story."

"As a school community, we continue to recover and support one another after the terrible event of January 6 at Richneck Elementary School," the statement said. "We have also been working in partnership with our community to address safety and security throughout the division ... (T)he safety and wellbeing of our students and staff is our most important priority."

Earlier this month, top Newport News prosecutor Howard Gwynn said his office will not criminally charge the boy because he wouldn't understand the legal system and what a charge means. Gwynn has yet to decide if any adults will be charged.

The boy had fired his mother's gun, which police said was legally purchased. An attorney for the boy's family has said that the firearm was secured on a closet shelf and had a lock on it.

During Tuesday's interview, Guthrie asked Zwerner what justice would mean for her.

"That's a tough question to answer," the teacher said.

Superbug fungus cases rose dramatically during pandemic

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. cases of a dangerous fungus tripled over just three years, and more than half of states have now reported it, according to a new study.

The COVID-19 pandemic likely drove part of the increase, researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention wrote in the paper published Monday by *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Hospital workers were strained by coronavirus patients, and that likely shifted their focus away from disinfecting some other kinds of germs, they said.

The fungus, *Candida auris*, is a form of yeast that is usually not harmful to healthy people but can be a deadly risk to fragile hospital and nursing home patients. It spreads easily and can infect wounds, ears and the bloodstream. Some strains are so-called superbugs that are resistant to all three classes of antibiotic drugs used to treat fungal infections.

It was first identified in Japan in 2009 and has been seen in more and more countries. The first U.S. case occurred in 2013, but it was not reported until 2016. That year, U.S. health officials reported 53 cases.

The new study found cases have continued to shoot up, rising to 476 in 2019, to 756 in 2020, and then to 1,471 in 2021. Doctors have also detected the fungus on the skin of thousands of other patients, making them a transmission risk to others.

Many of the first U.S. cases were infections that had been imported from abroad, but now most infections are spread within the U.S., the authors noted.

Man gets 4 years for attacking police at Jan. 6 Capitol riot

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

A Virginia man who assaulted police with a stolen baton and used a flashing strobe light to disorient officers trying to defend the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 was sentenced Tuesday to more than four years in prison.

Geoffrey Sills of Mechanicsville, Virginia, was convicted of assault with a dangerous weapon, obstruction of Congress and robbery for his role in the violence at the Capitol's Lower West Terrace tunnel, where police were beaten and crushed as they tried to beat back the angry mob of President Donald Trump supporters.

The 31-year-old has already served a year and a half behind bars since his June 2021 arrest.

In a separate case on Tuesday, a judge declared a mistrial after jurors failed to reach an agreement on whether a man described as the Oath Keepers "operations leader" for Jan. 6 was guilty of obstruction. Michael Greene was acquitted of all other felony charges on Monday, but convicted of a misdemeanor offense. Greene is the only defendant in three trials involving more than a dozen members and associates of the far-right extremist group to not be convicted of a felony charge.

Sills — who arrived at the Capitol with a gas mask and goggles — threw several pole-like objects at police, stole a police baton from an officer and hit at least two officers with it, according to prosecutors. He also pointed a strobe light at a line of officers in the tunnel.

Sills posted videos of his actions and others on social media that day before deleting his account, prosecutors say. In one post — showing officers in riot gear — Sills wrote: "Visited the Capitol today." In another post depicting rioters flooding into the tunnel, he wrote: "Took a tour."

U.S. District Judge Trevor McFadden found Sills guilty in August after a stipulated bench trial — an unusual legal proceeding in which defendants do not admit guilt to charges but agree with the government that certain facts are true.

Prosecutors had been seeking nine years behind bars, writing in court papers that Sills has "expressed little remorse and contrition." Prosecutors argued that his social media posts "were those of a man proud of his actions."

Sills' attorney wrote in court papers that his client didn't come to Washington on Jan. 6 with any intention to commit violence and had a gas mask and tactical gear only "because he feared a terrorist attack."

"He did not arrive that day planning or expecting to wreak violence. There is no evidence that he injured anyone. He went because his President asked him to. Once there, he stepped into a maelstrom not of his making," attorney John Kiyonaga wrote. An email seeking comment was sent to Kiyonaga after sentencing.

Sills is among roughly 1,000 people who have been charged with federal crimes in the riot that left

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dozens of police officers injured. More than 300 people have been charged with assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers, including more than 100 who have been charged with using a deadly or dangerous weapon or causing serious bodily injury.

More than half the Jan. 6 defendants have pleaded guilty, including more than 130 who have pleaded guilty to felony crimes. Of the 400 who have been sentenced, more than half have gotten terms of imprisonment ranging from seven days to 10 years, according to an Associated Press tally.

In the Oath Keepers case, jurors on Monday found four defendants guilty of conspiracy and obstruction: Sandra Parker, of Morrow, Ohio, Laura Steele, of Thomasville, North Carolina, William Isaacs, of Kissimmee, Florida, and Connie Meggs, of Dunnellon, Florida.

Sandra Parker's husband, Bennie Parker, was acquitted Monday of obstruction as well as one conspiracy charge, and Greene was acquitted of two conspiracy charges. The judge instructed jurors to keep deliberating after they said they couldn't reach a verdict on another conspiracy charge for Bennie Parker and the obstruction charge for Greene.

On Tuesday, the jury returned a guilty verdict for Bennie Parker on the other conspiracy charge, but deadlocked on the obstruction charge for Greene.

Greene, of Indianapolis, Indiana, said he wasn't a dues-paying member of the Oath Keepers but worked essentially as a contractor, providing security services. He took the witness stand during the seditious conspiracy trial of Oath Keepers leader Stewart Rhodes and told jurors that Rhodes asked him to come to Washington to help with security operations for events around the Capitol before the riot. Greene didn't go inside the Capitol and told jurors he never heard anyone discussing plans to do so.

Greene's attorney, William Shipley, said Tuesday that "the government's case was a farce," adding that "it made no sense and the jury saw it for what it was."

US speeds up Abrams tank delivery to Ukraine war zone

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon is speeding up its delivery of Abrams tanks to Ukraine, opting to send a refurbished older model that can be ready faster, with the aim of getting the 70-ton battle powerhouses to the war zone by the fall, the Pentagon said Tuesday.

The original plan was to send Ukraine 31 of the newer M1A2 Abrams, which could have taken a year or two to build and ship. But officials said the decision was made to send the older M1A1 version, which can be taken from Army stocks. Officials said the M1A1 also will be easier for Ukrainian forces to learn to use and maintain as they fight the invading Russian forces.

"This is about getting this important combat capability into the hands of the Ukrainians sooner rather than later," said Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary.

The Biden administration announced in January that it would send the tanks to Ukraine — after insisting for months that they were too complicated and too hard to maintain and repair. The decision was part of a broader political maneuver that opened the door for Germany to announce it would send its Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine and allow Poland and other allies to do the same.

Speaking at a Pentagon press conference, Ryder said the tanks will be refurbished and refitted to make them combat ready for Ukraine. He declined to say where that work will be done.

It's unclear how soon the U.S. would begin training Ukrainian forces on how to use, maintain and repair the tanks. The intention would be to have the training of the troops coincide with the refurbishment of the tanks, so that both would be ready for battle at the same time later this year, said U.S. officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details not publicly provided. The Pentagon will also have to ensure that Ukrainian forces have an adequate supply chain for all the parts needed to keep the tanks running.

The Russian and Ukrainian forces have been largely in a stalemate, trading small slices of land over the winter. The fiercest battles have been in the eastern Donetsk region, where Russia is struggling to encircle the city of Bakhmut in the face of dogged Ukrainian defense. But both sides are expected to launch more intensive offensives in the spring.

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Asked about the timing of the tanks' arrival, Ryder said the Abrams are part of the medium- and longer-term military support the U.S. is providing to Ukraine. He said that as Ukrainian forces take or retake territory, they will also need to sustain those gains and deter Russia from regaining any footholds.

During a visit to a tank plant in Lima, Ohio, in February, Army Secretary Christine Wormuth met with officials there at length to determine the best options for getting the tanks to Ukraine.

"Part of it is figuring out — among the different options — what's the best one that can allow us to get the Ukrainians tanks in as timely a fashion as we can," without disrupting foreign military sales, Wormuth said at the time.

Officials at the plant, which is owned by the Army and operated by Reston, Virginia-based General Dynamics, said production totals can vary, based on contract demands. And while they are currently building 15-20 armored vehicles per month, including tanks, they can easily boost that to 33 a month and could add another shift of workers and build even more if needed.

Development of tanks for Ukraine would have to be squeezed in between the current contracts for foreign sales, which include 250 of the newest versions for Poland and about 75 for Australia. During Wormuth's tour of the plant, workers were preparing to build an updated version of the vehicle for Poland.

Ukrainian leaders have persistently pressed for the Abrams, which first deployed to war in 1991 and has thick armor, a 120 mm main gun, armor-piercing capabilities and advanced targeting systems. It runs on thick tracked wheels and has a 1,500-horsepower turbine engine with a top speed of about 42 miles per hour (68 kilometers per hour).

Japan's PM offers Ukraine support as China's Xi backs Russia

By KARL RITTER Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Prime Minister Fumio Kishida made a surprise visit Tuesday to Kyiv, engaging in dueling diplomacy with Asian rival President Xi Jinping of China, who met in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin to promote Beijing's peace proposal for Ukraine that Western nations have all but dismissed as a non-starter.

The two visits, about 800 kilometers (500 miles) apart, highlighted how countries are lining up behind Moscow or Kyiv during the nearly 13-month-old war. Kishida, who will chair the Group of Seven summit in May, became the group's last member to visit Ukraine and meet President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, after paying tribute to those killed in Bucha, a town that became a symbol of Russian atrocities against civilians.

Xi and Putin announced no major progress toward implementing the Chinese peace deal, although the Russian leader said it could be a basis for ending the fighting when the West is ready. He added that Kyiv's Western allies have shown no interest in that.

U.S. officials have said any peace plan coming from the Putin-Xi meeting would be unacceptable because a cease-fire would only ratify Moscow's territorial conquests and give Russia time to plan for a renewed offensive.

"It looks like the West indeed intends to fight Russia until the last Ukrainian," Putin said, adding the latest threat is a British plan to give Ukraine tank rounds containing depleted uranium.

"If that happens, Russia will respond accordingly, given that the collective West is starting to use weapons with a nuclear component," he said, without elaborating. Putin has occasionally warned that Russia would use all available means, including possibly nuclear weapons, to defend itself, but also has sometimes backed off such threats.

Putin's comment referred to remarks Monday by U.K. junior Defense Minister Annabel Goldie, who wrote: "Alongside our granting of a squadron of Challenger 2 main battle tanks to Ukraine, we will be providing ammunition, including armor-piercing rounds which contain depleted uranium. Such rounds are highly effective in defeating modern tanks and armored vehicles."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the plan shows that the British "have lost the bearings," and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said "it marked another step, and there aren't so many of them left."

But weapons expert Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, former commander of Britain's Royal Tank Regiment, said it was "reckless" of Putin "to try and suggest Britain is sending nuclear material" to Ukraine. He said

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depleted uranium is a common component of tank rounds, possibly even used by Russia.

"Putin insinuating that they are some sort of nuclear weapon is bonkers," he told The Associated Press. "Depleted uranium is completely inert. There is no way that you could create a nuclear reaction or a nuclear explosion with depleted uranium."

Beijing insists it is a neutral broker in Ukraine, and Xi said after his talks with Putin: "We adhere to a principled and objective position on the Ukrainian crisis based on the goals and principles of the U.N. Charter." The Chinese plan seeks to "actively encourage peace and the resumption of talks," he said.

In a joint statement, Russia and China emphasized the need to "respect legitimate security concerns of all countries" to settle the conflict, echoing Moscow's argument that it sent in troops to prevent the U.S. and its NATO allies from turning the country into an anti-Russian bulwark.

"Russia welcomes China's readiness to play a positive role in the political and diplomatic settlement of the Ukrainian crisis" and the "constructive ideas" contained in Beijing's peace plan, the statement said. It added: "The parties underline that a responsible dialogue offers the best path for a lasting settlement ... and the international community should support constructive efforts in this regard."

After meeting Kishida, Zelenskyy told reporters his team had sent his own peace formula to China but hasn't heard back, adding that there were "some signals, but nothing concrete about the possibility of a dialogue."

Kishida called Russia's invasion a "disgrace that undermines the foundations of the international legal order" and pledged to "continue to support Ukraine until peace is back on the beautiful Ukrainian lands."

Hours before Xi and Putin dined at a state dinner in glittering Kremlin opulence, Kishida laid flowers at a church in Bucha for the town's victims.

"Upon this visit to Bucha, I feel a strong resentment against cruelty," he said. "I would like to represent the people in Japan, and express my deepest condolences to those who lost their loved ones, were injured as a result of this cruel act."

U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel noted the "two very different European-Pacific partnerships" that unfolded Tuesday.

"Kishida stands with freedom, and Xi stands with a war criminal," Emanuel tweeted, referring to Friday's decision by the International Criminal Court to issue an arrest warrant for Putin, saying it wanted to put him on trial for the abductions of thousands of children from Ukraine.

Kyiv's allies pledged more support. Washington is accelerating its delivery of Abrams tanks to Ukraine, sending a refurbished older version that can be ready faster, the Pentagon announced. The aim is to get the 70-ton behemoths to the war zone by fall.

The Russia-China front against the West was a prominent theme of Xi's visit. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov accused NATO of seeking to become the world's dominant military force. "That is why we are expanding our cooperation with China, including in the security sphere," he said.

Putin is keen to show he has a heavyweight ally and market for Russian energy products under Western sanctions. He and Xi signed agreements on economic cooperation, noting Russian-Chinese trade rose by 30% last year to \$185 billion and is expected to top \$200 billion this year.

Russia stands "ready to meet the Chinese economy's growing demand for energy resources" by boosting deliveries of oil and gas, he said, while listing other areas of cooperation, including aircraft and shipbuilding industries and other high-tech sectors.

Whether China will provide military support is a key question. Western officials "have seen some signs" Putin also wants lethal weapons from Beijing, though there is no evidence it has granted his request, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in Brussels.

Further contacts are planned. Xi said he invited Putin to China this year to discuss a regional initiative that seeks to extend Beijing's influence through economic cooperation.

Moscow and Beijing have both weathered international condemnation of their human rights records. The Chinese government is accused of atrocities against Uighur Muslims in its far western Xinjiang region. The allegations include genocide, forced sterilization and the mass detention of nearly 1 million Uighurs.

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Beijing has denied the allegations. Russia has been accused of war crimes in Ukraine, charges it denies.

Kishida rode a train from Poland to Kyiv just hours after he met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi and a week after a breakthrough summit with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yoel.

Both China and Japan have enjoyed recent diplomatic successes that emboldened their foreign policy.

Japan, which has engaged in territorial disputes over islands with both China and Russia, is particularly concerned about the Beijing-Moscow relationship. Both nations have conducted joint military exercises near Japan's coasts.

Beijing's diplomatic foray follows its recent success in brokering a deal between Iran and its chief Middle Eastern rival, Saudi Arabia, to restore relations after years of tensions. The move displayed China's influence in a region where Washington has long been the major foreign player.

Kishida became Japan's first postwar leader to enter a war zone.

Due to its pacifist principles, Japan's support for Ukraine has been limited to nonlethal equipment and humanitarian supplies. It has contributed more than \$7 billion to Ukraine and accepted more than 2,000 displaced Ukrainians, despite its strict immigration policy.

Tokyo joined the U.S. and European nations in sanctioning Russia over the invasion. By contrast, China has refused to condemn Moscow's aggression and criticized Western sanctions against Moscow, while accusing NATO and Washington of provoking Putin's military action.

Japan fears the possible impact of a war in East Asia, where China's military has grown increasingly assertive and has escalated tensions around self-ruled Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its territory.

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said of Kishida's trip: "We hope Japan could do more things to deescalate the situation instead of the opposite."

Review: John Wick gets even more stylish in fourth episode

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

A trip to Paris should be on everyone's bucket list, even John Wick. The Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre — what better way to refresh your soul, even as you kick everyone else's bucket?

The un-retired assassin does indeed dive into the City of Lights in the inventive and thrilling "John Wick: Chapter 4" a sequel which elevates and expands the franchise. The fourth installment is more stylish, more elegant and more bonkers — kind of like Paris itself.

When we last saw Wick, he was half dead in the gutter after being shot and tumbling several stories off the Hotel Continental in New York. He was on the blacklist with a \$14 million price on his head. (Inflation has even hit this franchise: The bounty swells to \$40 million by the end of part four.)

Wick, as always played with monosyllabic and brooding intensity by Keanu Reeves, leaves his customary trail of death, but there's a shift here. So often the prey in the previous movies, Wick is on the offense in the fourth, taking his demands directly to The High Table, the group of shadowy crime lords that keep order.

This time, the Table's sadistic frontman is a dandy called the Marquis, played with coiled menace by Bill Skarsgård, who spouts things like: "Second chances are the refuge of men who fail." But he's a secret coward, so feel free to boo loudly.

The nine-fingered Wick wants to end his nightmare, naturally, by killing everyone. His too-cool frenemy, Ian McShane's Winston, challenges him to think differently: "Have you learned nothing?" he asks the man who, to be honest, he shot in the last movie. "You'll run out of bullets before they run out of heads."

Returning writer Shay Hatten, along with co-writer Michael Finch, have come up with a possible solution for Wick: Win an old-fashioned duel with the Marquis. Win and be free, lose and be buried.

Not so fast, of course. Along the way, Wick must somehow handle the blind martial arts master Caine, played by Donnie Yen, bringing humor and verve to a fighter who is tasked with either slaying his one-time friend or have his daughter killed.

There's also Killa, a jumbo-sized card shark played by martial arts star Scott Adkins, and The Tracker, a very talented bounty hunter played by Shamier Anderson. Don't forget a swarm of Paris-based amateur bounty-hunters and armored ninjas who seem as plentiful as the city's baguettes.

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All the touches you expect from a Wick flick are here — a cool dog, hand-to-hand combat amid glass display cases, candles and Christian iconography, galloping horses, the screech of metal swords and a new way to hurt someone, in this case, a single playing card. We visit Germany, Japan and end in France, even going to a disused subway platform.

Returning director Chad Stahelski loves combining neon with gloom and now has the budget to rent out space in the Louvre. Of the 14 action sequences — yes, 14 — a few are truly mind-blowing, like a fight in the middle of the traffic circle around the Arc de Triomphe and a drone capturing a complicated set piece in a building involving what is being called a dragon's breath shotgun. Repeating that last bit: dragon's breath shotgun.

If there was a bit of a slog through would-be assassins in "John Wick: Chapter 3 — Parabellum" — you know, shoot, stab, repeat — there is none here. One sequence on a set of outdoor stairs in Paris is almost riotously funny as knives and guns blast away, while the filmmakers add water and fire to a nightclub rave scene that puts clueless dancers next to axe-throwing murderers.

A shout-out to costume designer Paco Delgado, who has outfitted the baddie gunmen in light-colored three-piece suits and combat boots, and the executive baddies in fitted elegance with extravagant cravat-style ties. One of the film's saddest parts is saying goodbye to Lance Reddick, who played Continental Hotel concierge Charon and died on the eve of the movie's debut.

How does this all end? Actually, on something of a deflating note. Earlier in the film, Wick's Japan-based friend Shimazu — played awesomely by Hiroyuki Sanada — had asked a question that eternally hangs over this franchise: "Have you given any thought to how this ends?"

This chapter ends in death, of course. But that's also how it lives.

"John Wick: Chapter 4," a Lionsgate release that hits theaters Friday, is rated R for "pervasive strong violence and some language." Running time: 169 minutes. Three and a half stars out of four. ___ MPA definition of R: Restricted. Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian. ___ Online: <https://johnwick.movie>

Trump waits out grand jury as New York braces for protests

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Facing the possibility of criminal charges, Donald Trump waited it out in Florida on Tuesday as New York braced for disruptions that could follow an indictment. Republican contenders in the 2024 race sized up the impact a prosecution could have on a campaign in which the former president is a leading contender.

Trump over the weekend claimed without evidence that he would be arrested on Tuesday, but there was no indication that prediction would come true. A Manhattan grand jury did appear to take an important step forward on Monday by hearing from a witness favorable to Trump, presumably so prosecutors could ensure the panel had a chance to consider any testimony supporting his version of events.

The next steps were unclear, and it was uncertain if additional witnesses might be summoned. But a city mindful of the riot by Trump loyalists at the U.S. Capitol more than two years ago took steps to protect itself from any violence that could accompany the unprecedented prosecution of a former president.

Monday's testimony from Robert Costello, a lawyer with close ties to numerous key Trump aides, appeared to be a final opportunity for allies to steer the grand jury away from an indictment. Costello was invited by prosecutors to appear after saying he had information to undercut the credibility of Michael Cohen, a former lawyer and fixer for Trump who later turned against him and then became a key witness in the Manhattan district attorney's investigation.

Costello had provided Cohen legal services several years ago after Cohen himself became entangled in the federal investigation into the hush money payments. In a news conference after his grand jury appearance, Costello told reporters he had come forward because he did not believe Cohen, who pleaded guilty to federal crimes and served time in prison.

"If they want to go after Donald Trump and they have solid evidence, then so be it," Costello said. "But

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Michael Cohen is far from solid evidence.”

Responding on MSNBC, Cohen said that Costello was never his lawyer and “he lacks any sense of veracity.”

There were no signs that Costello’s testimony had affected the course of the investigation. Cohen had been available for over two hours in case prosecutors wanted him to rebut Costello’s testimony but he was told he was not needed, his attorney said.

The testimony came two days after Trump said he expected to face criminal charges and urged supporters to protest his possible arrest. In social media posts through the weekend, he criticized the investigation, directing particularly hostile rhetoric toward Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, a Democrat.

New York officials have been monitoring online chatter of threats of varying specificity, but even as portable metal barricades were dropped off to safeguard streets and sidewalks, there were no immediate signs that Trump’s calls for protests were being heeded.

On Tuesday morning, Manhattan court proceedings were temporarily halted by a bomb threat called in via 911, according to a court spokesman. That delayed the start of a hearing in a separate case, the New York attorney general’s lawsuit accusing Trump and his company of a yearslong fraud scheme.

Costello briefly acted as a legal adviser to Cohen after the FBI raided Cohen’s home and apartment in 2018. At the time, Cohen was being investigated for both tax evasion and for payments he helped orchestrate in 2016 to buy the silence of two women who claimed to have had sexual encounters with Trump.

For several months, it was unclear whether Cohen, a longtime lawyer and fixer for the Trump Organization who once boasted that he would “take a bullet” for his boss, would remain loyal to the president.

Cohen ultimately decided to plead guilty in connection with the payments to porn actor Stormy Daniels and model Karen McDougal, which he said were directed by Trump. Since then, he has been a vociferous Trump critic, testifying before Congress and then to the grand jury.

Trump, who has denied having sex with either woman, has branded Cohen a liar.

As the New York investigation pushes toward conclusion, Trump faces other criminal probes in Atlanta and Washington that, taken together, pose significant legal peril and carry the prospect of upending his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination.

Some of his likely opponents have tried to strike a balance between condemning a potential prosecution as politically motivated while avoiding condoning the conduct at issue.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, an expected GOP presidential candidate, criticized the investigation but also jabbed at Trump.

“I don’t know what goes into paying hush money to a porn star to secure silence over some kind of alleged affair,” DeSantis said at a news conference in Panama City. “I can’t speak to that.”

Switching to criticism of the district attorney, he said, “What I can speak to is that if you have a prosecutor who is ignoring crimes happening every single day in his jurisdiction and he chooses to go back many, many years ago to try to use something about porn star hush money payments, that’s an example of pursuing a political agenda and weaponizing the office. And I think that’s fundamentally wrong.”

College hoops staffs specialize to meet roster, NIL demands

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

Kelvin Sampson has been around college basketball long enough to remember when preseason practices started in October following a true offseason, teams remained largely intact for multiple seasons and players weren’t permitted to pursue endorsement deals.

It might as well be a different planet now.

The way Houston’s coach sees it, the top-tier programs must evolve to better manage recruiting, the transfer portal and roster demands, and athlete compensation deals.

“Absolutely, you have to,” the 67-year-old Sampson said as March Madness headed to Sweet 16 weekend. “To (manage) those kinds of things, you’ve got to have specialization on your staff.”

That means bolstering support staffs, much like how analysts and quality control staffers have become common across college football. Specialized roles for recruiting, scouting or analytics. Adding special as-

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sistants to aid head coaches, general managers to navigate the new era of players profiting from use their name, image and likeness (NIL), even creative-content staffers to pump out videos or social media to promote the program's brand.

If anything, staffs are starting to resemble their counterparts in the pros.

"I've got three – I guess there are four of them now – former (graduate assistants) and managers that work in the front office at the (NBA's) Phoenix Suns," Kansas State first-year coach Jerome Tang said before clinching a Sweet 16 appearance. "Those guys told me that the four guys that are on the bench across the country are probably the same. It's the next level that separates you."

March Madness resumes Thursday, and there are examples of these increasingly specialized staffs on teams still chasing a national title.

Six teams — Houston, Xavier, Texas, Arkansas, San Diego State and Florida Atlantic — have an assistant or special assistant to the head coach, often designed as catch-all helpers who shoulder administrative duties while potentially taking on tasks such as breaking down film. Tang and Michigan State's Tom Izzo each has a chief of staff.

Top overall seed Alabama has a director of scouting and analytics. Fellow Southeastern Conference team Tennessee has someone overseeing analytics.

Titles vary. The goal doesn't.

"I have people on my staff in charge of something with one of our kids 24 hours a day," Sampson said. "And it's all built around relationships. You know, these kids can transfer today and not even have to tell the coach. They can just go to the compliance office. ... So in order to combat those kinds of things, it's more and more important that you're involved in their daily lives."

Kevin Sutton joined Kansas State's staff as director of strategies, working with game plans, scouting and film review. He is part of a broader effort to deal with roster management in the portal era, when rosters change dramatically from one year to the next.

"It's the college version of free agency and it's something that goes on all the time and it continues to grow on a daily basis," Sutton said. "We have to retain our players. ... So having a larger staff to be able to be involved in the current players' lives and then have an eye on what's happening outside of your program in terms of the transfer portal."

Juggling that with the core goal – winning games — isn't easy, either.

For Arkansas coach Eric Musselman, that meant stopping game-prep work last year for recruiting Zooms on the eve of beating No. 1 overall seed Gonzaga to reach a second straight regional final.

"I think it was five, maybe four (Zooms), before we played Gonzaga the night before, up until maybe 11:15, 11:30 at night doing Zooms when you are trying to make an Elite Eight, playing in a Sweet 16 game," he said.

Musselman, whose team is fresh off beating 1-seed and reigning national champion Kansas, has a 14-person support staff beyond his three assistants and the goal of being "at the forefront of analytics." That includes a director of internal operations, director of scouting, recruiting coordinator, assistant director of recruiting and scouting, and seven graduate assistants.

Consider it the trickle-down of NBA influence into college ranks.

"Players watch the NBA guys, they want to be like them, play like them, be in an offense like them," said Baylor coach Scott Drew, whose team reached the tournament's second round. "Then you look at staffs. And as universities try to keep up and provide the best for their student-athletes, then you're getting into analytics. You're getting into nutrition. You're getting into player development."

That has included the very-pro-sounding role of GM, arriving at Duke and DePaul as an NIL resource to players.

Daniel G. Marks fills a similar role as the first chief program strategist at Howard, which reached the NCAA tourney for the first time since 1992. He spent nine seasons with the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks, including the 2020-21 championship season.

Marks said he is coming with an open mind to work with coach Kenny Blakeney.

"Even when coming up with a title for my job, it's like: What's a title that other people are going to say,

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'Oh, that's interesting, what does he do?'" he said. "(Blakeney) wants programs across the country to look at Howard and say ... 'How can we learn that and emulate that?'"

Those were all things Duke's Jon Scheyer considered in building his first staff to replace retired Hall of Famer Mike Krzyzewski. Notably, the 35-year-old added former Elon head coach Mike Schrage as special assistant to provide experience, then hired former Nike and NBA staffer Rachel Baker as general manager.

Guard Jeremy Roach said the setup gave players "so many people who can help us out." And it helped Duke win an Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament title before falling in the NCAA second round.

The challenge for Scheyer and his peers? Be ready for whatever comes next.

"Communication's really important and just being current," Scheyer said. "I'm not even talking age. I'm talking current in terms of understanding what these guys are going through, their families.

"It's so much more than it used to be. ... We have the staff to do that. We've done an amazing job while still getting a feel for each other. So that's something where we have to be better next year, because it can be all different next year."

Supreme Court rules for deaf student in education case

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court ruled unanimously Tuesday for a deaf student who sued his public school system for providing an inadequate education. The case is significant for other disabled students who allege they were failed by school officials.

The case the justices ruled in involves Miguel Luna Perez, who attended public school in Sturgis, Michigan. Perez's lawyers told the court that for 12 years the school system neglected the boy and lied to his parents about the progress he was making, permanently stunting his ability to communicate.

The justices ruled that after Perez and his family settled a complaint against the school system — with officials agreeing to pay for additional schooling and sign language instruction — they could pursue money damages under a different federal law. Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote in a eight-page opinion for the court that the case "holds consequences not just for Mr. Perez but for a great many children with disabilities and their parents."

It remains difficult for Perez, who emigrated to the United States from Mexico at age 9, to make himself understood. Perez's lawyers say the school system failed him by providing an aide who was not trained to work with deaf students, did not know sign language and in later years left him alone for hours at a time. After over a decade, Perez did not know any formal sign language and communicated through invented signs that anyone unfamiliar with his unique signing did not understand, his lawyers have said.

Meanwhile, the school awarded him inflated grades and his parents believed he was on track to earn his high school diploma. Just before graduation, however, his family was told he qualified only for a "certificate of completion."

His family responded by pursuing claims under two laws: the broad Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination against disabled people, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The latter guarantees children with disabilities a free public education that is tailored to their specific needs.

Perez's family and the school district ultimately settled the IDEA claims. The district agreed to pay for extra schooling and sign language instruction for Perez and his family, among other things, and he graduated from the Michigan School for the deaf in 2020. After the settlement, the family went to federal court and, under the ADA, sought monetary damages, which are not available under the IDEA.

Lower courts said Perez was barred from pursuing his ADA claims because of language in the IDEA, but the Supreme Court disagreed. Gorsuch wrote: "We clarify that nothing" in the IDEA "bars his way."

Perez's lawyer Roman Martinez said in an emailed statement: "We are thrilled with today's decision. The Court's ruling vindicates the rights of students with disabilities to obtain full relief when they suffer discrimination. Miguel and his family look forward to pursuing their legal claims under the Americans with Disabilities Act."

The superintendent of Sturgis Public Schools, Arthur Ebert, who joined the district after the settlement,

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said in an email that he was "not in a position to comment on the details or the outcome of the case." But he said that he believes "that every experience provides us with an opportunity to learn and grow."

"Through this too," he said, "we will gain knowledge, insight, and understanding that will help us maximize every student's true potential."

The Biden administration had also urged the court to side with Perez. The case is *Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools*, 21-887.

What to know about Alvin Bragg, Manhattan district attorney

By The Associated Press undefined

A New York grand jury investigating hush payments made on Donald Trump's behalf during the 2016 presidential campaign has refocused attention on the Manhattan district attorney steering the case. Alvin Bragg's decision to convene the grand jury early this year could lead to the first criminal charge against a former U.S. president.

Here's what you need to know about Bragg:

WHO IS THE MANHATTAN DISTRICT ATTORNEY?

Alvin Bragg became Manhattan's first Black district attorney in 2022, following his election in November 2021.

AS DISTRICT ATTORNEY, WHAT IS BRAGG'S JOB?

The office prosecutes nearly all criminal cases in Manhattan, staffed by about 500 lawyers. The district attorney also is a key political figure, overseeing cases that often involve defendants with immense wealth, fame and influence.

Manhattan district attorney is one of the most high-profile prosecution jobs in the world, dramatized on TV shows like "Law & Order" and "Blue Bloods." Robert M. Morgenthau, who held the job for 35 years, was the model for the fictional character Adam Schiff on "Law & Order," one of the series' original leads played by actor Steven Hill.

The office has a budget of about \$150 million and has used a separate \$800 million forfeiture fund bankrolled by Wall Street settlements for grants to criminal justice and community organizations and big initiatives, such as testing backlogged rape kits.

ARE DISTRICT ATTORNEYS ELECTED?

Bragg is one of five elected district attorneys in New York City — one for each of the city's five boroughs. Bragg won a tough Democratic primary and then the general election to become Manhattan's district attorney. He took over for retiring District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr.

Bragg is just the fourth elected district attorney in Manhattan in the last eight decades. Frank Hogan served for 31 years. Robert Morgenthau was in office for 34 years, until he was 90. Vance retired at the end of 2021 after 12 years.

WHAT IS BRAGG'S LEGAL BACKGROUND?

Bragg's career includes time as a federal prosecutor, an assistant attorney general for the state of New York and a civil rights attorney who represented Eric Garner's mother as she pressured New York City officials for more accountability against the officers and commanders involved in her son's 2014 death by a police chokehold.

Bragg's campaign included promises to change the culture of the office and allied him with other progressive prosecutors aiming to eliminate cash bail. Shortly after taking office, he released a public memo promising the district attorney would no longer prosecute some low-level misdemeanor crimes.

Bragg, who grew up in Harlem, graduated from Harvard Law School.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT BRAGG'S INVOLVEMENT WITH A POSSIBLE TRUMP INDICTMENT?

Bragg inherited a yearslong grand jury investigation into hush money paid on Trump's behalf during his 2016 presidential campaign.

After taking office, Bragg slowed down his office's move toward an indictment against Trump and said he had concerns about the strength of the case. That sparked a public protest by two prosecutors who

were leading the investigation and resigned.

But Bragg convened a new grand jury early this year after successfully convicting Trump's family company for tax fraud. He called that result a "strong demarcation line" for proceeding with other parts of the probe.

In general, the grand jury process is seen as extremely favorable to prosecutors.

Proceedings are closed to the public and there is no judge. Prosecutors call and question witnesses and grand jurors — people drawn from the community — can ask questions. Grand jurors can either agree there is enough evidence to issue an indictment, find there is not enough evidence or tell the prosecutor to file lesser charges.

Itching to start spring garden cleanup? Not so fast!

By JESSICA DAMIANO Associated Press

When the blare of the year's first leaf blower awakened me one morning last week, I realized spring cleanup had commenced -- no matter that March could still roar like a lion here in my Long Island, New York, neighborhood.

It stands to reason that professional landscapers cannot logistically clear all of their clients' properties at the same time -- the right time -- so they start early. That's good for them but bad for our gardens.

In mine, I forgo the fall cleanup, opting instead to allow leaf litter, ornamental grasses and spent perennials to remain standing to serve as shelter for pollinators and other insects over winter. Those insects are still hibernating, and removing the debris before they resume their life cycles would mean removing them from my garden.

That would result in less food for birds and fewer flowers and tomatoes for me.

The jury is out among experts on the exact timing, but there is consensus around waiting until temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees, which is when dormant insects "wake up." Some define "consistently" as a minimum of five days. I typically wait until after seven consecutive 50-degree-plus nights have passed.

Even then, it's advisable to relocate plant matter to a corner of the yard for another week or so before removing it from your property, just in case any sleepyheads hit the snooze button.

Like clockwork, premature cleaning will be followed by premature mulching. Applying mulch makes the garden look tidy, but remember that soil and plants are not furniture. They're part of a living ecosystem. Mulching before the soil has warmed sufficiently will trap in the cold and slow the reawakening of perennial, shrub and tree roots. That inhibits plant growth.

And if the soil is wet, early applications can encourage mold, mildew and fungal diseases.

Mulch is an important component of a healthy garden. It retains soil moisture, suppresses weeds and helps keep soil temperatures even. But timing is crucial. Wait until it's safe to plant annuals and warm-season vegetables in your region before applying mulch. For me, that means holding off until the end of May.

Likewise, resist the urge to fertilize the lawn until mid to late spring, after it has emerged from dormancy and begins active growth. Doing so earlier is illegal in some municipalities and won't help the grass anyway. In fact, it can hurt.

Lawns that are fertilized in early spring cannot properly make use of those applied nutrients. They may start growing when they should be spending their energy on root development, which is what sustains turfgrasses and helps them survive summer droughts. That premature growth is often discolored and results in yellow spots in the lawn.

Excess fertilizer that cannot be used by a dormant or partially dormant lawn threatens the environment and groundwater as it leaches through the soil. And since it doesn't benefit the lawn, it's also a waste of money.

Cleaning up tulips and daffodils is another exercise in patience. After any spring bulb has bloomed, its leaves continue to produce energy for the following year's show. Go ahead and remove stems if you'd like, but don't clear away foliage until it has turned yellow and withered.

Finally, something you really can do now: If you're itching to get your hands dirty, it's a good time to repot houseplants. Move them into the next-size pot — no more than 2 inches wider than their current

container — and give them a dose of fertilizer as the season's longer daylengths stimulate them to resume active growth.

Trump legal woes force another moment of choosing for GOP

By STEVE PEOPLES, FARNOUSH AMIRI and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — From the moment he rode down the Trump Tower escalator to announce his first presidential campaign, a searing question has hung over the Republican Party: Is this the moment to break from Donald Trump?

Elected Republicans have wavered at times — whether it was Trump's condemnation of John McCain's war record, his racist attack against a Mexican-American judge, his sexually predatory language caught on video, his alleged extramarital affairs, his decision to side with Russian President Vladimir Putin over U.S. intelligence, his promotion of false allegations of election fraud and his incitement of a violent mob that threatened the lives of lawmakers in both parties.

But after almost eight years of near-constant scandal, Republicans have ultimately rallied behind Trump over and over and over again.

Now, on the eve of a new presidential campaign season, that loyalty is being tested anew as Trump prepares for the possibility that he may soon become the first former U.S. president charged with a crime. New York prosecutors are wrapping up their probe into whether Trump engaged in an illegal hush money scheme involving a porn actress.

"This is another moment — not just this indictment, but the others likely to follow — where Republicans have the opportunity to break with Trump," said Sarah Longwell, a vocal Republican Trump critic and founder of the Republican Accountability Project. "If they fail to do so, they'll have no one to blame but themselves when Trump is the nominee again."

So far, at least, the vast majority of the Republican Party appears to have made its choice.

As charges loom, many party leaders have begun to defend the former president — even as other Republicans with far less baggage line up against him in the nascent 2024 Republican presidential primary.

Former Vice President Mike Pence, a likely presidential contender, said over the weekend that Americans don't want to see Trump indicted. Another 2024 Republican prospect, New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu, said there is a sense that the former president is being unfairly attacked. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a frequent Trump critic also eyeing a White House bid, also said New York prosecutors may be unfairly prosecuting Trump.

There are cracks in such support, however.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, Trump's strongest prospective rival, offered a mixed assessment when asked to address the potential indictment on Monday.

"I don't know what goes into paying hush money to a porn star to secure silence over some type of alleged affair," DeSantis said as some in the audience laughed uncomfortably. "But what I can speak to is that if you have a prosecutor who is ignoring crimes happening every single day in his jurisdiction and he chooses to go back many many years ago to try to use something about porn star hush money payments, that's an example of pursuing a political agenda and weaponizing the office. And I think that's fundamentally wrong."

The ordeal has pushed Republicans back into an uncomfortably familiar place -- playing defense for Trump as he grapples with another scandal. The situation dominated the conversation at the House GOP conference in Orlando, where dozens of congressional Republicans gathered this week.

Many hoped to focus on the party's legislative priorities and achievements three months into the House majority. Instead, they faced repeated questions about the implications of Trump's latest legal woes.

Republican lawmakers eager to highlight the party's gain with Hispanic voters were cornered -- in Spanish and English -- by questions about Trump's legal troubles and whether he's still the leader of the party.

"Obviously I have great respect for the former president of the United States," Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Fla., told The Associated Press. "But as far as who the leader of the party is, I will tell you right now, I

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think the leader of the party is the speaker of the House. It's the highest ranking elected."

But Speaker Kevin McCarthy is making clear that he has Trump's back.

The California Republican called the potential indictment "pure politics" and slammed New York prosecutors for New York City's rising crime rates. Like DeSantis in Tallahassee, Republican lawmakers in Orlando repeatedly attacked Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, calling him a "George Soros-backed" prosecutor.

And instead of using their new clout to advance conservative policy, Republican leaders on Monday announced plans to investigate and interrogate the entities involved in the case against Trump, including the many federal and local prosecutors probing Trump's actions in various jurisdictions. Beyond the New York hush money case, Trump is facing active criminal investigation in Georgia for his efforts to overturn the 2020 election and by federal prosecutors probing his handling of classified documents, among other issues.

In a letter to Bragg on Monday, House Republicans demanded communications, documents, and testimony relating to the "unprecedented abuse of prosecutorial authority and the potential indictment" of Trump.

Trump's legal baggage could prove a political liability in the 2024 general election, but his team has long believed that an indictment could give him a political advantage in the primary by forcing his Republican rivals to come to his defense or risk alienating his fierce political base. They point to the Republican response to the federal raid on Trump's Florida estate, when virtually the entire GOP, including DeSantis, ultimately defended him.

Some of Trump's 2024 rivals have privately acknowledged the political risks should they break from the former president at such a critical moment.

To that end, Trump and his allies seized on DeSantis' approach to Trump's potential arrest as an affront to his MAGA base. The Florida governor said he hoped to stay out of what he called a "manufactured circus." Donald Trump Jr. condemned DeSantis' response as "pure weakness."

Trump himself attacked DeSantis using his pet nickname for him, "Ron DeSanctimonious" and promoted a decades-old picture of DeSantis posing with young women when he was a high school teacher.

In a message accompanying the photo, Trump mocked DeSantis, going so far as to question his sexuality. The governor, Trump wrote, "will probably find out about FALSE ACCUSATIONS & FAKE STORIES sometime in the future, as he gets older, wiser, and better known, when he's unfairly and illegally attacked by a woman, even classmates that are 'underage' (or possibly a man!). I'm sure he will want to fight these misfits just like I do!"

As his party largely lined up behind Trump, some also tried to draw boundaries — especially as he called for large-scale protests. The message evoked similarities with Trump's rhetoric that sparked the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol.

"I don't think people should protest this," McCarthy said. Despite Trump's repeated calls for protests, he added: "I think President Trump, when you talk to him, he doesn't think that either."

Meanwhile, all but a few Republican members of Congress have so far declined to endorse Trump's 2024 presidential bid. And it's unclear if statements of support in the spring of 2023 will translate into formal endorsements when the primary season takes off in the spring of 2024.

Still, Trump's biggest supporters were oozing confidence.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, one of just eight House Republicans who have formally endorsed Trump's third presidential bid, said Americans should be outraged by the so-called political persecution of a former president.

If Trump is indicted, she predicted, Trump will win in a landslide.

House Republican conference chair, Rep. Elise Stefanik, remains one of Trump's strongest supporters in Congress. She said she spoke to the former president earlier Monday.

"I think you'll see his poll numbers go up," predicted Stefanik, who has also signed onto Trump's 2024 bid. "He's never been in a stronger position."

US announces sanctions on Iran drone procurement network

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States said Tuesday it is imposing a new round of sanctions on Iranian

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firms and people accused of procuring equipment used for Iranian drones.

Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control coordinated with the FBI to designate four firms and three people in Iran and Turkey for allegedly buying equipment, including European-made engines, to be used for Iran's drone and weapons programs.

Those targeted for sanctions include the Iran-based Defense Technology and Science Research Center, its procurement firm Farazan Industrial Engineering Inc. and two other firms along with purchasing agents from the companies.

"Iran's well-documented proliferation of UAVs and conventional weapons to its proxies continues to undermine both regional security and global stability," said Brian Nelson, Treasury's undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence. Nelson was referring to unmanned aerial vehicles.

"The United States will continue to expose foreign procurement networks in any jurisdiction that supports Iran's military industrial complex," he said.

American defense officials say Iran is supplying Russia with unmanned drones to use on civilians as the Kremlin presses its invasion of Ukraine, which has entered its second year.

Among other things, sanctions deny the people and firms access to any property or financial assets held in the United States and prevent American firms and companies from doing business with them.

Tensions between the U.S. and Iran have worsened after months of antigovernment protests.

French protests drag on after Macron's pension plan push

By SYLVIE CORBET The Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French garbage collectors, refinery workers and others were striking again on Tuesday against President Emmanuel Macron's decision to force the divisive bill raising the retirement age from 62 to 64 through without a vote in parliament.

Macron's move infuriated many in the country.

Paris police said Tuesday that 234 people were arrested overnight in the capital mostly for setting fire to garbage in the streets.

Mostly small, scattered protests were held in cities around France, some degenerating into violence late Monday. In Paris, small groups took to the streets to set fire to piles of trash that have formed because of a strike by garbage collectors in the capital that is in its 16th day.

Paris police prefect Laurent Nunez said the violence was caused by groups of up to 300 people quickly moving through the capital.

Nunez news broadcaster BFM TV that he ordered an internal investigation after an officer was filmed punching a man who was walking backwards, making him fall to the ground. The video has been widely shared on French social media.

Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne expressed the government's "solidarity" towards 400 police officers who have been injured in recent days, including 42 overnight.

Macron has planned a series of political meetings on Tuesday with the prime minister, parliamentary leaders and lawmakers from his centrist alliance, one day after the government survived to two no-confidence motions.

The 45-year-old French president, who made the pension plan a centerpiece of his second term, will speak Wednesday on national television — the first time since he made the decision last week to use a government's special constitutional power to force the bill through parliament. He's expected to back his government.

Speaking at the lower chamber of parliament Tuesday, Borne vowed to continue to work "in the coming months to seek the best responses to the concerns of the French" including through "compromises and work with lawmakers."

But leftist lawmaker Mathilde Panot warned Borne that "you will yield."

"There are not many options left to Emmanuel Macron," Panot added, demanding that the pension bill be withdrawn or new legislative elections be called.

The bill still faces a review by the Constitutional Council before it can be formally signed into law. Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne is going to refer the issue to the body to accelerate the process, her office said. Some opposition lawmakers from the far right also have filed a request, and leftists are expected to do the same.

The Constitutional Council can reject articles within the measure if they aren't in line with the constitution. Opponents argue that the text as a whole should be rejected.

Paris police authorities said in a statement Tuesday that they ordered garbage employees to work in order to ensure a "minimum service." It said that 674 staff have been covered by the orders, allowing 206 garbage trucks to operate since last week.

Meanwhile, oil shipments in the country were partially disrupted amid strikes at several refineries in western and southern France.

The Energy Transition Ministry said Tuesday that it would require some employees who are "indispensable to the functioning" of the Fos-sur-Mer oil depot, in southern France, to return to work. The move led some protesters to head to the site to support strikers.

Some tensions have erupted between protesters trying to block access to the site, some throwing stones, and police using tear gas to move them away.

The Fos-sur-Mer depot supplies fuel for gas stations in the southeast of France, which currently are the most affected by shortages. French government spokesperson Olivier Veran warned that more orders may follow in the coming days for other sites.

Unions have called for new nationwide protests on Thursday to demand the government simply withdraw the retirement bill.

Army of lobbyists helped water down banking regulations

By BRIAN SLODYSKO and KEN SWEET Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It seemed like a good idea at the time: Red-state Democrats facing grim reelection prospects would join forces with Republicans to slash bank regulations — demonstrating a willingness to work with President Donald Trump while bucking many in their party.

That unlikely coalition voted in 2018 to roll back portions of a far-reaching 2010 law intended to prevent a future financial crisis. But those changes are now being blamed for contributing to the recent collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank that prompted a federal rescue and has stoked anxiety about a broader banking contagion.

The rollback was leveraged with a lobbying campaign that cost tens of millions of dollars that drew an army of hundreds of lobbyists and it was seeded with ample campaign contributions.

The episode offers a fresh reminder of the power that bankers wield in Washington, where the industry spends prodigiously to fight regulation and often hires former members of Congress and their staff to make the case that they are not a source of risk to the economy.

"The bottom line is that these banks would have faced a tougher supervisory framework under the original ... law, but Congress and the Trump regulators took an ax to it," said Carter Dougherty, a spokesman for Americans for Financial Reform, a left-leaning financial sector watchdog group. "We can draw a direct line between the deregulation of the Trump period, driven by the bank lobby, and the chaos of the last few weeks."

President Joe Biden has asked Congress for the authority to impose tougher penalties on failed banks. The Justice Department and the Securities and Exchange Commission have started investigations. And congressional Democrats are calling for new restrictions on financial institutions.

But so far there is no indication that another bipartisan coalition will form in Congress to put tougher regulations back in place, underscoring the banking industry's continued clout.

That influence was on full display when the banking lobby worked for two years to water down aspects of the 2010 Dodd-Frank law that had placed weighty regulations on banks designed to reduce consumer risk and force the institutions to adopt safer lending and investing practices.

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Republicans had long looked to blunt the impact of Dodd-Frank. But rather than push for sweeping deregulation, Sen. Mike Crapo, an Idaho Republican who led the Senate banking committee, hoped a narrowed focus could draw enough support from moderate Democrats to clear the Senate's 60-vote filibuster threshold.

Crapo broached the idea with Democratic Sens. Jon Tester of Montana, Joe Donnelly of Indiana and Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota — all on the ballot in 2018 — as well as Mark Warner of Virginia. By the fall of that year, the bipartisan group met regularly, according to a copy of Tester's office schedule posted to his Senate website.

A lobbying strategy also emerged, with companies and trade groups that specifically mention Crapo's legislation spending more than \$400 million in 2017 and 2018, according to an Associated Press analysis of the public lobbying disclosures.

The bill was sold to the public as a form of regulatory relief for overburdened community banks, which serviced farmers and smaller businesses. Community bankers from across the U.S. flew in to Washington to meet repeatedly with lawmakers, including Tester, who had 32 meetings with Montana bank officials. Local bank leaders pushed members of their congressional delegation when they returned home.

But the measure also included provisions sought by midsize banks that drastically curtailed oversight once the Trump Fed finished writing new regulations necessitated by the bill's passage.

Specifically, the legislation lifted the threshold for banks that faced a strict regimen of oversight, including mandatory financial stress testing.

That component, which effectively carved large midsize banks out of more stringent regulation, has come under new scrutiny in light of the failure of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, whose executives lobbied on behalf of the 2018 rollback.

"The lobbyists were everywhere. You couldn't throw an elbow without running into one," Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a Massachusetts Democrat who vehemently opposed the bill, told reporters last week.

Campaign checks were written. Ads were cut. Mailers went out.

As a reward for their work, Heitkamp (\$357,953), Tester (\$302,770) and Donnelly (\$265,349) became the top Senate recipients of money from the banking industry during the 2018 campaign season, according to OpenSecrets, a nonpartisan group tracking money in politics.

Democratic Senate leader Chuck Schumer freed members to vote for the bill, a move intended to bolster the standing of vulnerable moderate incumbents. But the move also bitterly divided the Democratic caucus, with Warren singling out the moderates as doing Wall Street's bidding.

In the hours before the bill passed the Senate with 17 Democratic votes, Heitkamp took to the chamber floor to inveigh against the "diatribe," "hyperbole" and "overstatement" from opponents of the bill.

Tester, meanwhile, huddled with executives from Bank of America, Citigroup, Discover and Wells Fargo, who were there on behalf of the American Bankers Association, according to his publicly available office schedule.

The American Bankers Association, which helped lead the push, later paid \$125,000 for an ad campaign thanking Tester for his role in the bill's passage, records show.

Less than a month after the bill was passed out of the Senate, Tester met Greg Becker, the CEO for the now-collapsed Silicon Valley Bank, according to his schedule. Becker specifically lobbied Congress and the Federal Reserve to take a light regulatory approach with banks of his size. Lobbyists with the firm the Franklin Square Group, which had been retained by Silicon Valley Bank, donated \$10,800 to Tester's campaign, record show.

Heitkamp was the only member of the group invited to the bill signing ceremony, beaming alongside Trump. Later, Americans for Prosperity, the grassroots conservative group funded by the billionaire industrialist Koch brothers, ran an online ad commending Heitkamp for taking a stand against her party.

In an interview, Heitkamp pushed back against suggestions that the legislation was directly responsible for the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank. She acknowledged, however, that there was an open question about whether new rules put in place by the Fed after the measure was signed into law could have played a role.

"I'm willing to look at the argument that this had something to do with it," Heitkamp said, adding: "I

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think you will find that (the Fed) was engaged in some level of some supervision. Why that didn't work? That's the question that needs to be resolved."

In a statement issued last week, Tester did not directly address his role in the legislation, but he pledged to "take on anyone in Washington to ensure that the executives at these banks and regulators are held accountable."

Cam Fine, who led the Independent Community Bankers of America trade group during the legislative push, said the overall the bill was a good piece of legislation that offered much needed relief to struggling community banks.

But like any major piece of legislation that moves through Congress, final passage hinged on support from a broad coalition of interests — including those of Wall Street and midsize banks.

"Was it a perfect piece of legislation? No. But there's an old saying in Washington: You can't let the perfect be the enemy of the good," said Fine.

Many of the moderate Democrats who supported the measure did not fare as well.

Of the core group who wrote the bill, only Tester won reelection. Others from red states who supported it, including Claire McCaskill of Missouri and Bill Nelson of Florida, lost.

Tester will be on the ballot again in 2024. Last week he was in Silicon Valley for a fundraiser.

One of the event's sponsors was a partner at a law firm for Silicon Valley Bank.

TikTok updates rules; CEO on charm offensive for US hearing

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — TikTok went on a counteroffensive Tuesday amid increasing Western pressure over cybersecurity and misinformation concerns, rolling out updated rules and standards for content as its CEO warned against a possible U.S. ban on the Chinese-owned video sharing app.

CEO Shou Zi Chew is scheduled to appear Thursday before U.S. congressional lawmakers, who will grill him about the company's privacy and data-security practices and relationship with the Chinese government.

Chew said in a TikTok video that the hearing "comes at a pivotal moment" for the company, after lawmakers introduced measures that would expand the Biden administration's authority to enact a U.S. ban on the app, which the CEO said more than 150 million Americans use.

"Some politicians have started talking about banning TikTok. Now this could take TikTok away from all 150 million of you," said Chew, who was dressed casually in jeans and blue hoodie, with the dome of the U.S. Capitol in Washington in the background.

"I'll be testifying before Congress this week to share all that we're are doing to protect Americans using the app," he said.

TikTok app has come under fire in the U.S., Europe and Asia-Pacific, where a growing number of governments have banned TikTok from devices used for official business over worries it poses risks to cybersecurity and data privacy or could be used to push pro-Beijing narratives and misinformation.

So far, there is no evidence to suggest this has happened or that TikTok has turned over user data to the Chinese government, as some of its critics have argued it would do.

Norway and the Netherlands on Tuesday warned apps like TikTok should not be installed on phones issued to government employees, both citing security or intelligence agencies.

There's a "high risk" if TikTok or Telegram are installed on devices that have access to "internal digital infrastructure or services," Norway's justice ministry said, without providing further details.

TikTok also rolled out updated rules and standards for content and users in a reorganized set of community guidelines that include eight principles to guide content moderation decisions.

"These principles are based on our commitment to uphold human rights and aligned with international legal frameworks," said Julie de Bailliencourt, TikTok's global head of product policy.

She said TikTok strives to be fair, protect human dignity and balance freedom of expression with preventing harm.

The guidelines, which take effect April 21, were repackaged from TikTok's existing rules with extra details

and explanations.

Among the more significant changes are additional details about its restrictions on deepfakes, also known as synthetic media created by artificial intelligence technology. TikTok more clearly spells out its policy, saying all deepfakes or manipulated content that show realistic scenes must be labeled to indicate they're fake or altered in some way.

TikTok had previously banned deepfakes that mislead viewers about real-world events and cause harm. Its updated guidelines say deepfakes of private figures and young people are also not allowed.

Deepfakes of public figures are OK in certain contexts, such as for artistic or educational content, but not for political or commercial endorsements.

Google's artificially intelligent 'Bard' set for next stage

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

Google announced Tuesday it's allowing more people to interact with "Bard," the artificially intelligent chatbot the company is building to counter Microsoft's early lead in a pivotal battleground of technology.

In Bard's next stage, Google is opening a waitlist to use an AI tool that's similar to the ChatGPT technology Microsoft began deploying in its Bing search engine to much fanfare last month. And last week, Microsoft embedded more AI-powered technology in its word processing, spreadsheet and slide presentation programs with a new feature called Copilot.

Until now, Bard had only been available to a small group of "trusted testers" hand-picked by Google. The Mountain View, California, company, which is owned by Alphabet Inc., isn't saying how many people will be given access to Bard in the next step of the technology's development. Initial applicants will be limited to the U.S. and the U.K. before Google offers Bard in more countries.

Google is treading carefully with the rollout of its AI tools, in part because it has more to lose if the technology spits out inaccurate information or takes its users down dark corridors. That's because Google's dominant search engine has become a de facto gateway to the internet for billions of people, raising the risk of a massive backlash that could tarnish its image and undercut its ad-driven business if the technology behaves badly.

Despite the technology's pitfalls, Bard still offers "incredible benefits" such as "jumpstarting human productivity, creativity and curiosity," Google said in a blog post that two of its vice presidents — Sissie Hsiao and Eli Collins — wrote with assistance from Bard.

As a precautionary measure, Google is limiting the amount of interaction that can occur between Bard and its users — a tactic Microsoft has imposed with ChatGPT after media coverage detailed instances when the technology likened an Associated Press reporter to Hitler and tried to persuade a New York Times reporter to divorce his wife.

Google also is providing access to Bard through a separate site from its search engine, which serves as the foundation for the digital ads that generate most of its profits. In a tacit acknowledgement that Bard may be prone to straying into manufacturing falsehoods, which are being called "hallucinations" in technology circles, Google is providing a query box connected to its search engine to make it easier for users to check on the accuracy of the information being displayed by the AI.

Bard made an embarrassing blunder shortly after Google unveiled the tool by prominently displaying a wrong answer about a scientific milestone during a presentation that was supposed to show how smart the technology could be. The gaffe contributed to a nearly 8% drop in Alphabet's stock in a single day, wiping out about \$100 billion in shareholder wealth and underscoring how closely investors are watching how Google handles the transition to AI.

Cavinder twins reach March Madness Sweet 16 after transfer

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

CORAL GABLES, Fla. (AP) — Women's basketball practice at Miami had been over for 30 minutes. Most

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of the coaches were gone. Almost all the players were gone. The scoreboard had long been turned off.

The Cavinder twins were still working.

Haley and Hanna Cavinder made their way around the 3-point arc, one shooting, then the other, over and over with a couple male practice players rebounding. The guys didn't have to do much, since most every shot went through the net with a soft swish.

"What nobody knows about the twins," Miami coach Katie Meier said, "is that they're gym rats."

Sweet 16 bound gym rats, that is, after ninth-seeded Miami upset No. 1 seed Indiana in the second round of the NCAA Tournament on Monday. The Hurricanes face No. 4 seed Villanova on Friday.

The twins are major influencers with 4.4 million followers on TikTok alone, two of the bigger stars of the NIL era in college athletics, a pair of 22-year-olds who didn't set out to get famous through short videos. They're as serious about basketball as they are just about anything else, though that isn't always noticed by those in the comment section.

"I'm not going to sit here and say that it hasn't frustrated me. It has," said Haley Cavinder, the older twin by two minutes. "I feel like coming in, you have to prove that. But that comes with it. I think people will paint you how they want to paint you. And if I'm known as an influencer and being successful, then that's fine with me."

Haley Cavinder leads the Hurricanes in scoring, averaging 12.6 points per game. Hanna Cavinder plays off the bench, averaging 4.0 points and is fourth on the team in 3-pointers made.

They came to Miami after playing three seasons at Fresno State, making the decision to transfer last spring with the goal of making the NCAA Tournament. When the NIL era started on July 1, 2021, and NCAA rules began allowing athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness, the Cavinders were among the first stars: Boost Mobile signed them immediately, touting the deal with a giant advertisement in New York's Times Square, and many other deals followed.

Put bluntly, they were millionaires before coming to Miami. Success had already found them, and would have kept finding them no matter where they played. And they freely acknowledge that Miami had obvious advantages when they were transferring: phenomenal weather, family ties to the area and they immediately loved the campus.

"I'm not going to sit here and lie. Haley and I were perfectly fine at Fresno with NIL," Hanna Cavinder said. "Perfectly fine. I didn't transfer for NIL. We didn't need to. I'm just going to put that out there and I'm trying to say that in the most humble way possible. Does the marketplace in Miami help? Yes. I'm not going to sit here and deny that either. I'm not stupid. But at the end of the day, I came here for basketball, came here to play on Saturday and be in March Madness. That was our goal. That's why we trained so hard in the gym."

The year at Miami has not always been easy.

Their recruitment was instantly scrutinized and led to Meier missing the first three games of this season through a university-imposed suspension that was handed down in anticipation of NCAA sanctions. Last month, Miami was placed one year of probation after the school and the NCAA agreed that coaches arranged impermissible contact between a booster and the Cavinders.

The twins did nothing wrong. Their eligibility was not jeopardized. But they were in the headlines anyway.

"I was in archaeology class and got a nice notification (on Twitter)," Haley Cavinder said. "I try not to react based off of emotion. We both knew we never did anything wrong. In that instance, when that happened, I was like, 'Here we go.'"

Added Hanna Cavinder: "If you really know what happened and you actually read different articles and understand the basketball world, nothing was done that was wrong. It's right there in front of you. But it's the people that don't really understand and just see the story and it's like, 'Oh my gosh, they're in trouble.'"

After the NCAA ruling, the Cavinders responded — fittingly — on TikTok with a 15-second statement that asked "dear NCAA, scared that female athletes have value?"

It got 2.2 million views and more than 100,000 likes. That's an average day for the twins: Their TikToks alone have been liked more than 130 million times.

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"The thing is, NIL, it's a controversial topic to begin with," Haley Cavinder said. "It's new. A lot of people don't understand it. A lot of older people don't understand it. So with that, there's already opinions. Hanna and I are trailblazers of it and that's what comes with it."

Their rise to fame started during the pandemic, out of boredom. Their TikTok videos, mostly dancing, went viral. They became stars, the timing was right with NIL about to happen, and they've reaped the benefits.

What makes Meier and teammates appreciate them is the work. They might have photo shoots or interviews or other responsibilities outside of class, but basketball never gets cheated. Haley has the better stats on the court; "nobody will outwork her," Hanna said. And Hanna has the better mindset when it comes to taking advantage of the 24 hours in a day; "it's like she's my manager. My twinager," Haley said.

They have been inseparable. That may soon end in the basketball sense. Haley Cavinder will play at Miami next season and take advantage of an extra year of eligibility; Hanna Cavinder isn't sure if she will continue playing.

"There's nobody closer to me than Haley in the world," Hanna Cavinder said. "I love basketball. I ride or die basketball. I've given basketball so much of my life. And sometimes I'm like, I just want to breathe. I have to go back and weigh out my pros and cons."

No matter what happens with basketball, the TikToks will continue. Their work together will continue. Their shared entrepreneurship will continue.

"I'm going to do what's best for me," Haley Cavinder said, "and I want what's best for her."

And with that, they were off. The Sweet 16 awaits. The Cavinder twins have more work to do.

Reborn Ringling Bros. circus to leap on tour — minus animals

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus has been reimagined and reborn without animals as a high-octane family event with highwire tricks, soaring trapeze artists and bicycles leaping on trampolines.

Feld Entertainment, which owns the "Greatest Show on Earth," revealed to The Associated Press what audiences can expect during the show's upcoming 2023 North American tour kicking off this fall.

The 75 performers from 18 countries will include performers on a triangular high wire 25 feet off the ground, crisscrossing flying trapeze artists, a spinning double wheel powered by acrobats and BMX trail bikes, unicycle riders and skateboarders doing flips and tricks.

The tour kicks off in Bossier City, Louisiana, from Sept 29-Oct. 1 and then goes to Ohio, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, Maryland, Michigan, Indiana and ends the year in Oklahoma. It re-starts in 2024 in Florida, home to Feld Entertainment.

The show is a complete rethink of a modern circus. Feld Entertainment has been working on everything from how to integrate clowns, the branding and the merchandise over the past four years.

"We knew we were going to come back. We didn't know exactly how," says Kenneth Feld, chair and chief executive officer of Feld Entertainment. "It took us a long time to really delve in and take a look at Ringling in different ways. It became a re-imagination, a rethinking of how we were going to do it."

The circus took down its tents after years of declining ticket sales as customers became conflicted about the treatment of circus animals. Costly court battles led to the end of elephant acts in 2016. People for Ethical Treatment of Animals have praised the "animal-free revamp."

The rebirth extends the circus' long run that dates back to a time before automobiles, airplanes or movies, when Ulysses S. Grant was president and minstrel shows were popular entertainment.

"There is no substitute for live entertainment. You cannot get an emotional response from people looking at a two-dimensional screen as you can when they are experiencing 'The Greatest Show on Earth' or any kind of live entertainment," says Feld.

The new production design includes moveable staircases and two main stages. Audiences will have a 360-degree view with live camera feeds and virtual reality, and lighting and sound design that tracks the

performer.

"The technology in the show is about enhancing experience, not just technology," said Juliette Feld Grossman, chief operating officer of Feld Entertainment. "We have so much activity and action so we want to make sure that we never miss the biggest moments in the show."

Grossman said that when she and her team were rethinking what the circus could be, they landed on the concept of fun and a sense of play being critical. She promises to "give the audience something that they haven't seen or that they didn't even know to anticipate."

The Feld family, which bought the circus in 1967, has branched out, buying and creating other large-scale touring shows, such as Disney on Ice, Marvel Live and Monster Jam. Feld said that there is something about the circus that people hold dear.

"Why there is a circus and a form of circus literally every place on the planet is that people emotionally are basically the same," he said.

"When you're on a high wire and you're doing a backward somersault on the wire or you're doing something really extraordinary, I don't care where you are. You appreciate that. You understand the danger of it, the thrill of it."

Last call: Dodge unveils last super-fast gasoline muscle car

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — The last gas-powered muscle car from Dodge isn't leaving the road without some squeals, thunder and crazy-fast speed.

The 2023 Challenger SRT Demon 170 will deliver 1,025 horsepower from its 6.2-liter supercharged V-8, and the automaker says it will be the quickest production car made.

Stellantis, formed in 2021 by combining Fiat Chrysler and France's PSA Peugeot, says it can go from zero to 60 miles per hour (97 kilometers per hour) in a scary 1.66 seconds, making it faster than even electric supercars from Tesla and Lucid.

It's what the performance brand from Stellantis is calling the last of the rumbling cars that for decades were a fixture of American culture on Saturday night cruises all over the country.

Stellantis will stop making gas versions of the Dodge Challenger and Charger and the Chrysler 300 big sedan by the end of this year, squeezed out by stricter government fuel-economy regulations and an accelerating shift to electric vehicles to fight climate change.

The Canadian factory that makes all three cars will be retooled to make electric versions of larger cars starting next year. Stellantis hasn't said whether all three models will survive, but it did show off a Charger Daytona SRT electric concept muscle car back in August.

Tim Kuniskis, CEO of the Dodge brand and the unofficial spokesman for America's gas-powered rubber-burners, said that, while he'll miss the traditional muscle, he's excited about making electric performance vehicles.

"It's the end of an era, for sure," he said Monday. "Electric products, they're very fast. Muscle cars, one of the primary ingredients is to be a fast accelerating car. So I've automatically got the power. Now I've just got to figure out ways to bring all the other elements in of the excitement of the driving experience."

Since last summer, Dodge has been rolling out powerful special-edition "Last Call" versions of its gas powered muscle cars, culminating with an event Monday night to show the Challenger Demon 170 at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway drag strip.

The new Challenger Demon, a descendant of a car that first went on sale in 1969, also produces 945 pound-feet of torque, or rotational force — so much power that the company had to strengthen the rear drive shaft and differential with aerospace-grade metals.

According to Stellantis, the car will be the first production vehicle to run a quarter-mile (0.40 kilometers) in under nine seconds — 8.91 to be exact. To do that, it hits a speed of just over 151 mph (243 kilometers per hour). Horsepower and speed depends on how much ethanol is in the fuel.

It gets only 13 miles per gallon in the city and 21 on the highway, but it's doubtful anyone buying one

will care even as the world deals with climate change.

Kuniskis says it's a relatively small number of cars, and he says the ethanol they burn is cleaner than gasoline. Dodge, he said, will have built 2 million muscle cars by the time production of gas versions ends Dec. 31. Dodge's followers, he said, deserve a celebration.

"After all these years, we owed it as much to them as to ourselves to celebrate this end, and give them something that produces a lot of pride in the brand that they love," he said.

The Demon 170 is street legal, even though it comes with wide racing tires. To make it a daily driver, the company is offering a package of smaller, more street friendly wheels and tires.

At a devilish \$96,666, the car comes standard with only a driver's seat and a basic radio. But it has air conditioning. Front passenger and back seats are optional for \$1 each. You can also get leather, a sunroof and a better sound system.

Stellantis will make only up to 3,300 of them, and Kuniskis isn't sure if they'll hit that number due to potential parts shortages and a limited production time.

If previous limited-edition models are any indication, the Demon 170 should become an instant classic collector's car, Kuniskis said.

"If you look at some of the cars that we've had in our past, it's pretty easy to tell which ones people want to collect," he said. "A lot of times it's the lower (sales) volume, extreme examples, whether its extreme looks or extreme performance. Well, this one happens to have both."

Garbage: In Paris streets, heaps of it become protest symbol

By ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Garbage. Heaps, mounds and piles of it are growing daily — and in some places standing higher than a human being.

A strike by Paris garbage collectors, which begins its 16th day on Tuesday, is taking a toll on the renowned aesthetics of the French capital, a veritable blight on the City of Light.

"I prefer Chanel to the stink," joked Vincent Salazar, a 62-year-old artistic consultant who lives in a tony Left Bank neighborhood. A pile of garbage sits at the corner of his building overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens.

"I've seen rats," he said.

But like many nonchalant and strike-hardened Parisians, Salazar doesn't mind.

"I'm fortunate to live here, but I'm 200% behind these guys," Salazar said. "They're smelling it all day long," he said, though "it" wasn't the word he used. "They should get early retirement."

He is among the majority of French who, polls show, oppose President Emmanuel Macron's decision to raise the retirement age by two years, from 62 to 64 for most and from 57 to 59 for garbage collectors.

Macron rammed the showcase legislation of his second term through Parliament last week — without a vote, thanks to a special constitutional article. On Monday, the government won two no-confidence motions put forth by angry lawmakers. The bill is now considered adopted.

But garbage got wrapped up in the politics. And neither unions organizing protests nor some citizens are prepared to back down.

Posters showing a digitally altered images of Macron atop a garbage heap — or collecting garbage himself — have made the rounds on social networks.

The Socialist mayor of Paris, who supports the strikers, found herself in a bind. City Hall refused orders to get the trucks out, saying it's not their job. Police Chief Laurent Nunez then ordered garages unblocked and ordered 674 sanitation personnel and 206 garbage trucks back to work to provide a minimal service, police tweeted Tuesday.

Sure enough, a green Paris garbage truck was seen collecting a long, high pile of rubbish Tuesday outside a school on a Left Bank street — although the truck was full long before all the refuse could be cleaned up. With incinerators blocked, the garbage was being taken to a storage site outside Paris.

City Hall said that as of Monday, 9,300 tons of rubbish remained on the streets.

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Workers in numerous sectors, from transportation to energy, have been holding intermittent strikes since January. But it is the garbage in the French capital that has made garbage collectors, long taken for granted, visible — and their anger obvious.

The city's vibrant outdoor culture is feeling the effects. Some of Paris' fabled narrow streets are more choked than usual, forcing people on foot to pass through garbage heaps single file. The scent of rancid, rotting garbage increasingly wafts through the air as spring arrives and the weather grows milder. Seats at some sidewalk cafes located near heaps of rubbish are empty.

A server for the past 26 years at Le Bistro du Dome specializing in fish, adjacent to the famed restaurant Le Dome, said some 50% of diners had disappeared in the past 10 days. Other restaurants are suffering the same fate, said Guillaume, who would identify himself only by his first name.

"It doesn't bother me because it's for a good cause," said Franck Jacquot, 51, standing outside a small bar he runs. Nearby, heaps of garbage loomed. "If we're obliged to go this route — well, we're here," he said.

However, garbage bags and bins have served as fuel for troublemakers.

Two spontaneous protests last week at the huge Place de la Concorde, facing the National Assembly, degenerated when police started evacuating thousands with tear gas and water cannons. Some of those forced out began setting fires to garbage piles along their path through high-end Paris.

That scenario was repeated Monday night when hundreds of young people demonstrated near the gold-domed Invalides monument, site of Napoleon's tomb. As night fell, small, mobile groups of troublemakers combed the city, burning trash bags, lamp posts and other objects. Nunez, the police chief, speaking on TV news station BFM, said 234 people were detained.

More is ahead: Unions are planning nationwide marches and strikes for Thursday to pressure the government to withdraw the retirement measure.

"Garbage is a good way to protest. It has a big impact," said Tony Gibierge, 36, who is opening a restaurant in several months on a street in southern Paris — a street currently heaped with garbage.

He was among those who have peacefully demonstrated through Paris, and other cities, with song and dance in recent weeks. "Now we have to send out the fire, stop dancing," he said. The message: Nothing is over, and much of the garbage isn't going anywhere quite yet.

Today in History: March 22, First Stanley Cup game played

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 22, the 81st day of 2023. There are 284 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On March 22, 1894, hockey's first Stanley Cup championship game was played; home team Montreal defeated Ottawa, 3-1.

On this date:

In 1765, the British Parliament passed the Stamp Act to raise money from the American colonies, which fiercely resisted the tax. (The Stamp Act was repealed a year later.)

In 1882, President Chester Alan Arthur signed a measure outlawing polygamy.

In 1941, the Grand Coulee hydroelectric dam in Washington state officially went into operation.

In 1945, the Arab League was formed with the adoption of a charter in Cairo, Egypt.

In 1963, The Beatles' debut album, "Please Please Me," was released in the United Kingdom by Parlophone.

In 1978, Karl Wallenda, the 73-year-old patriarch of "The Flying Wallendas" high-wire act, fell to his death while attempting to walk a cable strung between two hotel towers in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

In 1988, both houses of Congress overrode President Ronald Reagan's veto of the Civil Rights Restoration Act.

In 1993, Intel Corp. unveiled the original Pentium computer chip.

In 1997, Tara Lipinski, at age 14 years and 10 months, became the youngest ladies' world figure skating champion in Lausanne, Switzerland.

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In 2010, Google Inc. stopped censoring the internet for China by shifting its search engine off the mainland to Hong Kong.

In 2019, special counsel Robert Mueller closed his Russia investigation with no new charges, delivering his final report to Justice Department officials. Former President Jimmy Carter became the longest-living chief executive in American history; at 94 years and 172 days, he exceeded the lifespan of the late former President George H.W. Bush.

In 2020, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo ordered all nonessential businesses in the state to close and nonessential workers to stay home. Kentucky Republican Rand Paul became the first member of the U.S. Senate to report testing positive for the coronavirus; his announcement led Utah senators Mike Lee and Mitt Romney to place themselves in quarantine.

Ten years ago: Anxious to keep Syria's civil war from spiraling into even worse problems, President Barack Obama said during a visit to Jordan that he worried about the country becoming a haven for extremists when — not if — President Bashar Assad was ousted from power. The Internal Revenue Service said it was a mistake for employees to have made a \$60,000 six-minute training video spoofing "Star Trek" and "Gilligan's Island."

Five years ago: President Donald Trump announced that he would replace national security adviser H.R. McMaster with former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton; McMaster became the sixth close Trump adviser or aide to depart in a turbulent six weeks. Trump set in motion tariffs on as much as \$60 billion in Chinese imports, and China threatened retaliation; the heightening trade tensions brought a selloff on Wall Street, where the Dow industrials plunged more than 700 points. H. Wayne Huizenga, a college dropout who built a business empire that included Blockbuster Entertainment and three professional sports franchises, died at his Florida home at the age of 80.

One year ago: Ukrainian forces fought off continuing Russian efforts to occupy Mariupol and claimed to have retaken a strategic suburb of Kyiv, mounting a defense so dogged that stoked fears Russia's Vladimir Putin would escalate the war to new heights. Facing Republican senators' pointed questions in her confirmation hearings, Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson forcefully defended her record as a federal judge and declared she would rule "from a position of neutrality" if confirmed as the first Black woman on the high court. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party reached an agreement with the leftist opposition New Democratic Party to keep his party in power until 2025. Actor Amanda Bynes was released from a court conservatorship that put her life and financial decisions in her parents' control for nearly nine years.

Today's Birthdays: Evangelist broadcaster Pat Robertson is 93. Actor William Shatner is 92. Actor M. Emmet Walsh is 88. Actor-singer Jeremy Clyde is 82. Singer-guitarist George Benson is 80. Writer James Patterson is 76. CNN newscaster Wolf Blitzer is 75. Composer Andrew Lloyd Webber is 75. Actor Fanny Ardant is 74. Sportscaster Bob Costas is 71. Country singer James House is 68. Actor Lena Olin is 68. Singer-actor Stephanie Mills is 66. Actor Matthew Modine is 64. Actor-comedian Keegan-Michael Key is 52. Actor Will Yun Lee is 52. Olympic silver medal figure skater Elvis Stojko (STOY'-koh) is 51. Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Calif., is 50. Actor Guillermo Diaz is 48. Actor Anne Dudek is 47. Actor Cole Hauser is 48. Actor Kellie Williams is 47. Actor Reese Witherspoon is 47. Rock musician John Otto (Limp Bizkit) is 46. Actor Tiffany Dupont is 42. Rapper Mims is 42. Actor Constance Wu is 41. Actor James Wolk is 38.