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## Groton Community Calendar

### 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

### Saturday, March 25

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

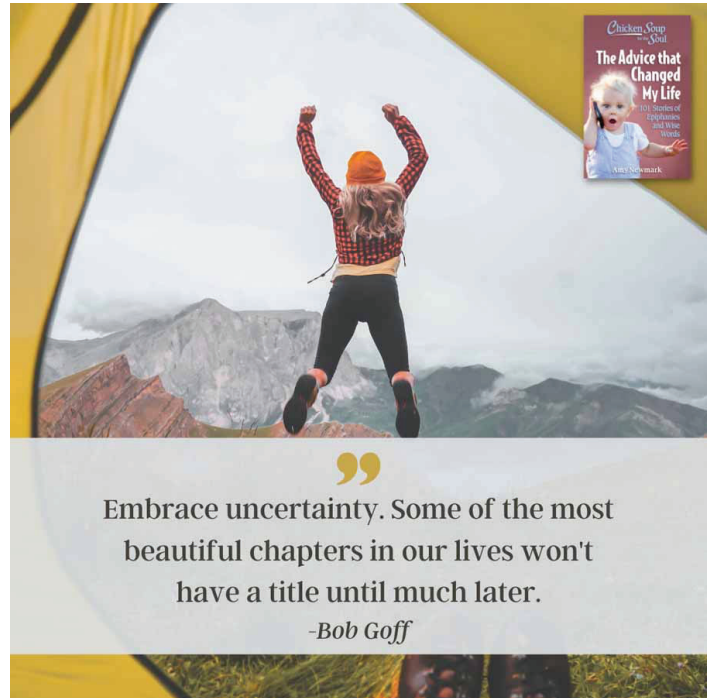
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

All State Band in Sioux Falls

Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center

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

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



### Sunday, March 26

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

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

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Milestone 4 yr olds and juniors; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday school after children's sermon in worship.

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## The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

### World in Brief

video website Rumble, after the cartoon's creator was dropped by news outlets for making controversial comments about Black people.

- Western scientists researching the origins of COVID-19 had their access to an international database suspended by the Chinese Center for Disease Control, despite supporting China's conclusion that the virus was not the result of a lab leak.

- Israel's parliament has approved a bill that makes it harder to remove PM Benjamin Netanyahu from office as protests escalate over his judicial overhaul.

- The 23-year-old Pennsylvania woman who bragged about stealing Nancy Pelosi's laptop and gavel during the Jan. 6 Capitol riot has been sentenced to three years in prison.

- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Kyiv's most senior ground forces commander Colonel Oleksandr Syrskiy claimed Ukraine would launch a counteroffensive "very soon" to reclaim lost territory.

- Former President Donald Trump has warned about the potential of "death and destruction" should he be charged as part of the Stormy Daniels hush money investigation. Meanwhile, a series of AI-generated images of Donald Trump being arrested in New York have gone viral online.

- Thousands of teachers and students returned to the classroom across the Los Angeles Unified School District after employees staged a three-day walkout, which ended with no resolution.

- The comic strip "Dilbert" has relocated to the right-wing

# GDILIVE.COM

## Groton City Council Special Meeting Agenda

March 24, 2023 – 9:00am

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.)

- Economic Development with SD Governor's Office of Economic Development
- Adjournment

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

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**MARCH 21-27**

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## Groton ARea State Youth Wrestling Qualifiers

Back row: Kyson Kucker, Bentley Ehresmann, Keegan Kucker, Keenan Moody and Braxten Sombke

Middle row: Elsy Hagen, Rosalyn Block, Henry Pharis, Huntley Overacker and Bennett Iverson

Front row: Ryker Herron, Landry Johnson and Brooks Sombke (Courtesy Photo)

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## **Northern Lights were out!**

**The Northern Lights were out in full force last night as these were seen north of Groton. The lights were seen throughout all parts of South Dakota last night in a brilliant display.**

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Noem vetoes bill that would increase THC limits for hemp processing

**Legislator argues veto could 'stifle' growth after SD's rise to No. 2 in hemp planting**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 23, 2023 6:40 PM**

Gov. Kristi Noem vetoed a bill Thursday that would increase the amount of THC that industrial hemp processors can have in their products.

THC is short for tetrahydrocannabinol, the compound in cannabis plants that produces a high when present in sufficient amounts. Hemp, unlike its cousin marijuana, is low in THC. Hemp plants can be used in a multitude of products.

Noem said the bill would "jeopardize the effectiveness and safety" of the state's industrial hemp industry "by creating conflict with federal law while also allowing marijuana products to be considered hemp products."

Legislators will return to Pierre on Monday to consider the hemp veto and other vetoes from Noem. It takes a two-thirds vote to override a veto. Earlier this winter, the House of Representatives passed the bill in a 44-26 vote while the Senate passed it in an 18-16 vote.

Under current state law, up to 1% of THC is allowed in a hemp "product in process," which is already over the federally recognized limit of 0.3%. The "product in process" definition includes hemp that's being transported from one place to another during processing.

The bill would increase the limit to 5%.

"If I allowed this bill to become law, it would jeopardize the clearly expressed will of the people," Noem said in a statement, referencing the failed 2022 ballot measure to legalize recreational marijuana. "Increasing the THC level to 5% would hinder our successful hemp program and undermine enforcement of our drug laws."

Noem also argued that the change would increase the THC level for crops in the field.

"That's absolutely a lie. That's not true," said Rep. Oren Lesmeister, D-Parade, the bill's prime sponsor in the House. "The only time we're allowing it above 0.3% is processor to processor. Crops are still under 0.3%, biomass is still under 0.3% and end products are still under 0.3%."

The higher THC levels are temporary, Lesmeister explained, and tied to the production of hemp-derived products. While hemp plants in the field have a THC below 0.3%, processors have concentrated levels of THC when extracting oils and CBD from the crops for products such as lip balms, oils and lotions.

Those higher levels of THC are all but unavoidable in the production of consumer hemp products, Lesmeister said. Processors themselves are not federally regulated, and other states with hemp processors "turn a blind eye" to processing-related concentrations over 0.3%, Lesmeister said. South Dakota would join two other states, Colorado and New York, were it to allow the 5% limit.

Lesmeister is not a hemp farmer but plans to plant the crop in the future. The 2023 legislative session is the second time he's introduced the bill.

The 1% level was a compromise when the hemp program started, Lesmeister said. But processors exceed 1% THC "pretty much every time" before THC levels are reduced again when processing is finished. Raising the limit to 5% would ensure processors are producing legally, and Lesmeister said this veto could "stifle the industry."

"If we could have zero THC in our hemp products, we'd love that," Lesmeister said. "It's a pain in our

butt. We don't want THC. We just want the CBD and the isolates and the oil. But when you extract, you concentrate the oil and that raises the THC level."

South Dakota had the second-most industrial hemp acres in the nation in 2022, following Montana, according to reporting citing the South Dakota Industrial Hemp Association. The state increased harvested yields in 2022 by 35% to 2,540 acres, up from 1,674 in 2021.

"There are people processing in the state who don't want to do anything wrong," Lesmeister said. "They can't get crop insurance on it yet. There's no safety nets like all the other crops."

*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.*

## State Supreme Court considers role of lie detectors in sentencing Inmate's request for new hearing sparks broader debate over admissibility

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 23, 2023 6:09 PM

BROOKINGS — A man who contends he was not the shooter in a 2020 robbery-turned-homicide in Sioux Falls wants the South Dakota Supreme Court to order a judge to consider the results of his polygraph test at a new sentence hearing.

Ray Banks is serving an 80-year sentence for manslaughter for his role in the shooting death of a pizza delivery driver. His co-defendant, Jahennessy Bryant, cut a plea deal to cap his prison time at 25 years.

Bryant told police that Banks hatched the robbery plan and fired the two shots that killed 30-year-old Casey Bonhorst on Feb. 26, 2020.

Prior to the plea deal, only Bryant had been charged with manslaughter. The plea deal put both men's names on the indictment for Bonhorst's death.

### Polygraph admissibility

During law enforcement interviews, Banks had maintained that Bryant was the shooter, and Banks took a polygraph test — sometimes referred to as a "lie detector test" — to bolster his case at sentencing. Banks also took a plea deal, and had hoped to use the polygraph results to push for a lighter sentence than the 80 years, with 20 suspended, outlined in that agreement.

The judge balked at the polygraph request.

Polygraph results are not admissible at a criminal trial in South Dakota, as there are questions about reliability. For that reason, Judge Robin Houwman denied Banks' request to have the polygraph examiner testify at the December 2021 sentencing hearing for both defendants.

In Banks' appeal to the South Dakota Supreme Court, his lawyers argue that Houwman's decision was a mistake. The rules of evidence that bar the consideration of things like polygraph results, hearsay evidence, or evidence of previous criminal behavior by a jury typically do not apply at a sentencing hearing.

Victims or the families of victims are allowed to offer victim impact statements without fear of objection or cross-examination from defense attorneys, for example, and defendants are offered similar latitude to explain the circumstances in their lives that led them down the path to criminal behavior.

Banks contends in his appeal that the application of a rules-of-evidence standard at a sentencing hearing presented a barrier to justice. His polygraph results showed no sign of an intent to deceive as he talked about Bryant's role in the shooting.

That should've been considered at sentencing, Banks' lawyers said during Thursday's oral arguments before the high court.

### Justices pose questions

Justices had pointed questions about his request. Several justices pointed out that Banks was allowed to make the argument that he wasn't the shooter and talk about the polygraph results. They also pointed out that while the rules of evidence do not apply at sentencing hearings, judges are not bound to admit every piece of potential evidence a lawyer might want to use.

Refusal to consider polygraph test information may be a matter of discretion and a recognition that the tests are considered too unreliable to bother with, Justice Scott Myren said.

Justice Janine Kern questioned whether there's evidence that the tests have improved.

"Has this technology advanced to such a degree that they are now generally accepted by the scientific community?" Kern said.

Appeals courts, Kern noted, often rule against the use of polygraph tests at sentencing hearings.

Attorney Kristi Jones, representing Banks, said the technology remains under suspicion. Even so, she argued, a judge ought to be obliged to consider them on a case-by-case basis after hearing from the person who conducted the test — not before.

"We were prohibited from submitting testimony from the person who took the lie detector test, and the lie detector test itself," Jones said.

Preliminary breath tests (PBT) collected in drunken driving cases are similarly frowned upon by the scientific community, Jones said, but are discussed at sentencing by prosecutors. The high court ruled in favor of prosecutors on the admission of PBTs at sentencing in a case titled State vs. Huettl.

Justice Mark Salter pressed Jones on the implications of a ruling in Banks' favor. What if the state, in a case involving drug possession, were to submit a police detective's report based on a person who heard from someone, who heard from someone else, that the defendant had dealt drugs at some point in the past?

Such a report might lead a judge to conclude that a defendant who'd otherwise get a probation sentence deserves jail or prison time, Salter said.

Would that be acceptable, he asked?

"I understand that it opens the door to a vast amount of information coming in at a sentencing hearing," Jones said. "I will submit to the court that that's why we trust judges to weigh that evidence appropriately."

### State responds

Assistant Attorney General Paul Swedlund, arguing on behalf of the state in the Banks case, told justices that judges aren't obligated to say yes to every request for testimony at sentencing simply because they can.

"Evidence at sentencing must be relevant and it must be probative," Swedlund said. "Polygraph evidence is neither."

When asked by Justice Kern if the polygraph could've made a difference for Banks, whose sentence was significantly longer than his co-defendant's, Swedlund said that the judge had far more to go on than Bryant's testimony alone.

Banks told his girlfriend that he was the shooter, Swedlund said, and there was a host of other information reported throughout the course of the investigation that suggested he was more than a lookout.

Swedlund told the justices that inmates who've killed someone sometimes get a teardrop tattoo to show they'd done so. At one point, Swedlund said, "Banks bragged about instead getting a tattoo of a pizza slice that would signify he had killed Bonhorst," who was a pizza delivery driver.

*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.*

## Sanford lawyer: Allow billionaire to review records in child porn investigation before release

**Media lawyers say second trip to state Supreme Court for philanthropist is 'superfluous'**

**BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 23, 2023 4:30 PM**

BROOKINGS — Billionaire philanthropist T. Denny Sanford wants the South Dakota Supreme Court to let him review court documents expected to outline the reasons the state launched a child pornography investigation involving him, which ultimately drew no criminal charges.

At the heart of the dispute is public access to the court records generated as part of the state's investigation.

The appearance by lawyer Stacy Hegge of Rapid City before the high court Thursday marks the second



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time Sanford's legal team has argued before the justices for a measure of secrecy in the investigation. Sanford was not in attendance Thursday.

The justices ruled in October of 2021 that search warrant information ought to be open, siding with the nonprofit news outlet ProPublica and the Argus Leader newspaper. Circuit Court Judge James Power, who had sealed the records initially, had ruled in 2020 that the warrants themselves and inventory of collected information should be released.

The high court agreed, and that information was released.

Power's 2020 ruling also noted that the five affidavits used to justify the search warrants ought to be released once the investigation is complete. Affidavits are sworn statements submitted to a judge by law enforcement, in this case written by an agent for the state Division of Criminal Investigation. The affidavits would offer an explanation as to why the investigation was launched.

After the South Dakota Attorney General's Office announced the completion of the state-level investigation in May of last year, Power ruled that the affidavits would soon be opened to the public. Power relied on the high court's reasoning in its earlier ruling against Sanford to make that 2022 decision.

Sanford appealed last summer, paving the way for Thursday's oral arguments. The Supreme Court will issue a written ruling later.

## Sanford's arguments

This time around, Hegge has not argued to keep the affidavits closed. Instead, she argued that Sanford and his legal team, not a judge alone, ought to be able to review and redact personally identifying information. All people who are not charged and later face the release of affidavits deserve the right to do that, Hegge said.

"Under the circuit court's ruling here, you have to sit back and watch others redact information that they think is necessary to protect your own interests," Hegge told the justices during Thursday's hearing at South Dakota State University, where justices are conducting their spring term of oral arguments.

This situation is different, Hegge contends, because Sanford's attorneys were allowed to review the documents that have already been released, which revealed that the state had searched cell phone and email records from Sanford. With regard to the affidavit, presumably a more revelatory document, Hegge cited a South Dakota law that allows an "interested party" to review records for redaction.

Under questioning from justices, Hegge conceded that the law does not explicitly create a right of review, but she said it is "implicit in the framework the Legislature has given us."

## Media's arguments

Lawyers for ProPublica and the Argus Leader oppose Sanford's request. Sioux Falls attorney Jon Arneson said the media organizations' second set of oral arguments is an unnecessary extension of a legal battle the billionaire lost the first time around.

Sanford was not charged with a crime in South Dakota. The investigation by the South Dakota Attorney General's Office, which intervened to argue alongside the media during Thursday's hearing, is complete.

The notion that Sanford now deserves the right to request the scrubbing of additional information runs counter to the plain language of the law, Arneson said.

"It wasn't close then. It's less close now. These documents are public. Everything else is superfluous," Arneson said. "We shouldn't be here."

Justice David Gilbertson, a retired chief justice sitting in for recused Justice Mark Salter, asked Arneson if that precluded the redaction of information.

"I would agree to the point of personally identifying information," Arneson said, but he said the courts are capable of scrubbing non-public information and commonly do so. If the list of information protected from public view were to be expanded, he said, that would need to come from the South Dakota Legislature.

Assistant Attorney General Paul Swedlund, meanwhile, used his portion of oral arguments to point out that allowing Sanford to review the affidavit would result in an unnecessary delay in the release of public records.

The state believes, Swedlund said, that the Supreme Court's ruling in the case ought to err on the side

of public disclosure.

*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.*

## DOJ memo on threats to local school boards lambasted by Republicans at U.S. House hearing

**BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - MARCH 23, 2023 6:25 PM**

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans on Thursday continued to press accusations that a “woke agenda” is deteriorating parents’ rights in their local school districts.

The first hearing this Congress of the House Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on the Constitution and Limited Government convened to examine whether a 2021 Department of Justice memo played a role in “chilling” parents’ First Amendment rights at local public school board meetings.

The GOP has for roughly 18 months targeted an Oct. 4, 2021 memo issued by Attorney General Merrick Garland instructing federal law enforcement across the U.S. to “open dedicated lines of communication for threat reporting, assessment, and response” on possible criminal threats to local school board members over politically charged issues that flared up during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The single-page document by Garland directed the Federal Bureau of Investigation to be on alert for “a disturbing spike in harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence” aimed at local school officials and teachers.

Garland has defended the memo, including during appearances before Congress.

In the panel’s two-hour hearing — occurring two days after a separate House Judiciary subcommittee released a 21-page report about the memo — GOP lawmakers criticized the Biden administration for intimidating parents “into silence by siccing federal law enforcement on them.”

“That (First Amendment) right has been significantly stifled over the past few years because the leftists have decided they apparently know better than parents do,” said the panel’s chair, Rep. Mike Johnson of Louisiana, in his opening statement.

“That is an outrage and the American people are rising up to say that they will no longer tolerate it as the radical leftists push this woke agenda on America’s children,” he continued.

Democrats disagreed with the premise of Thursday’s hearing.

“Having served on school boards and having seen what’s been happening across the country in recent months, in recent years, I’d have to say that the real First Amendment threat that our schools, teachers, students and parents are facing is the attempt to turn classrooms into the epicenter of divisive culture wars,” said ranking member Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon of Pennsylvania.

But the witnesses invited by the majority echoed Johnson’s statements.

“One minute you’re making peanut butter and jelly, the next minute the FBI is calling you,” said Tiffany Justice, co-founder of Moms For Liberty, a group that says one of its members was contacted by federal authorities.

No parent or caretaker has been federally prosecuted since Garland issued the directive.

### **GOP report**

The report on the Garland memo released on March 21 by a separate House Judiciary subcommittee cited FBI data stating 25 inquiries under the threat tag “EDUOFFICIALS” had been opened since the bureau began tracking the incidents. Such tags are routine labeling used by federal law enforcement to organize reports and assess trends.

The report — published by the House Judiciary’s Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government — concluded that Biden officials “colluded” with school board association leaders “to create a justification to use federal law-enforcement and counterterrorism resources against parents.”

Correspondence between the National School Boards Association and administration officials occurred

in the days before Garland issued the memo.

The NSBA has since apologized for pressing for federal action during a wave of heated school board meeting interactions. A May report commissioned by the association documented the back-and-forth between its leaders and the White House.

The subcommittee cites the NSBA commissioned report and nearly 1,500 pages of documents from the Department of Justice and Department of Education it gained access to after issuing a subpoena to the agencies in February, according to the report.

Scanlon said there are different types of speech in question.

"There's a huge difference between attempts to suppress free speech based on content as we've been seeing in recent years, and addressing speech that may be criminal because it threatens violence, which we have seen directed toward educators and school board members across the country," she said. "Our Republican colleagues have tried to frame these potentially criminal acts to intimidate school board officials as examples of protected free speech by caring and involved parents. They are not."

The subcommittee's chairman, Johnson, promised that the hearing is "surely not going to be the last" on the topic.

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

## Members of Congress blast TikTok CEO as bipartisan support for U.S. ban looks possible

**BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 23, 2023 5:20 PM**

A U.S. House panel grilled TikTok's CEO for more than five hours Thursday over the social media giant's ties to China, and indicated there may be bipartisan consensus for a national ban on the platform.

Members of both parties showed an unusual level of agreement during tough questioning of TikTok CEO Shou Chew. Several members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, including Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a Washington Republican, said they supported banning the platform.

"Your platform should be banned," Rodgers said in the hearing's opening minutes.

"I agree with much of what you just said," ranking Democrat Frank Pallone of New Jersey told Rodgers moments later.

Pallone said in a Fox News interview Wednesday night that he hadn't decided if TikTok, a subsidiary of China-based ByteDance Ltd., should be banned but "it's certainly something we'd have to consider."

More than 150 million people in the United States use TikTok on a monthly basis, Chew said. That accounts for about 10% of the platform's global users and 25% of worldwide views.

Chew promotes migration to U.S. servers

In his first appearance before a congressional committee, Chew emphasized his international background, telling the panel he met his Virginia-born wife at business school in the U.S. and that he and his family live in his home country of Singapore.

Early in the hearing, Chew also promoted an initiative by TikTok to migrate its data storage from Chinese servers to the United States. Dubbed Project Texas because it uses Austin-based Oracle's servers, Chew repeatedly said U.S. user information would be stored on U.S. soil, overseen by U.S. personnel employed by a separate U.S.-based company.

TikTok itself is headquartered in Singapore and Los Angeles, Chew repeated throughout the hearing.

"All protected U.S. data will be under the protection of U.S. law and under the control of the U.S.-led security team," he said. "This eliminates the concern that some of you have shared with me that TikTok user data can be subject to Chinese law."

Chew said the company did not remove content at the behest of the Chinese Communist Party, even when asked specifically if TikTok had removed content related to China's treatment of its Muslim Uyghur population and the 1989 massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

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## Efforts to separate TikTok from China rejected

But lawmakers dismissed Chew's repeated attempts to distance the platform from China and its ruling Communist Party.

ByteDance, like all Chinese companies, is beholden to the Chinese government and must turn over records and data on command, they said. Those concerns separated TikTok from other, mostly U.S.-based, social media platforms that collect extensive data from users.

"I still believe that the Beijing Communist government will still control and have the ability to influence what you do," Pallone told Chew. "This idea, this Project Texas, is simply not acceptable."

The U.S. Senate sponsors of a bill to effectively ban TikTok, Virginia Democrat Mark Warner and South Dakota Republican John Thune, said in a statement shortly after the House hearing adjourned that they were unmoved by Chew's appearance.

"All Chinese companies, including TikTok, whose parent company is based in Beijing, are ultimately required to do the bidding of Chinese intelligence services," Warner and Thune said. "Nothing we heard from Mr. Chew today assuaged those concerns."

TikTok spokesperson Brooke Oberwetter criticized the panel's "political grandstanding" in a statement to States Newsroom after the hearing.

"Shou came prepared to answer questions from Congress, but, unfortunately, the day was dominated by political grandstanding that failed to acknowledge the real solutions already underway through Project Texas," she wrote.

## First Amendment concerns

Chew characterized TikTok as a platform that encouraged creativity and free expression.

"TikTok will remain a place for free expression and will not be manipulated by any government," Chew said.

Though none spoke up at the Energy and Commerce hearing, some progressive Democrats and outside groups have expressed uneasiness with a government ban of a private service, especially one used to share and consume media.

"Our First Amendment gives us the right to speak freely and communicate freely," New York progressive Democrat U.S. Rep. Jamaal Bowman said at a Wednesday press conference. "TikTok as a platform has created a community and a space for free speech for 150 million Americans and counting."

"This TikTok hearing is giving me major (McCarthyism)/Red scare vibes," American Civil Liberties Union senior policy counsel Jenna Leventoff tweeted Thursday. "I don't think history will look favorably upon this as a justification for violating the First Amendment."

## Content problems

Lawmakers also raised issues with the videos that appear on TikTok and the company's ability to control them. Members said the platform includes videos encouraging violence, suicide, eating disorders and other unhealthy behaviors, noting that ads are targeted to users as young as 13.

Chew said that many of the issues members raised were industry-wide challenges.

"The potential security, privacy, content manipulation concerns raised about TikTok are really not unique to us," Chew said. "The same issues apply to other companies."

Rep. Darren Soto, a Florida Democrat, agreed that the problems facing TikTok were also common on other platforms and proposed wider regulations across the industry.

"Violence, adult themes, drug and alcohol, sexualization, suicide — all major issues on TikTok," Soto said. "But also Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms. So the solution as I see it is to regulate TikTok and other social media platforms."

## Threatening video shown

But, with Chew the only witness before them, lawmakers focused at Wednesday's hearing on TikTok's shortcomings.

Florida Republican Kat Cammack played a video posted to TikTok weeks before the hearing — and well before the hearing was noticed to the public — showing a gun firing with the words "Me ... at the House Energy and Commerce on 3/23/2023" appearing next to it. A caption mentioned Rodgers by name.

"I think that is a blatant display of how vulnerable people who use TikTok are," she said.

"You couldn't take action after 41 days when a clear threat, a very violent threat to the chairwoman of this committee and the members of this committee, was posted on your platform," Cammack said, as her time to question Chew ran out. "You damn well know that you cannot protect the data and security ... of the 150 million users of your app."

In an exchange that was repeated among Chew and different members throughout the hearing, Chew asked to respond to Cammack, but Rodgers declined, saying the hearing had to move on.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle were aggressive in their questioning of Chew and unusually skeptical of his answers.

At least three members reminded him that it was a federal crime to make false or misleading statements to Congress. Others asked yes or no questions and took Chew's attempts to answer with more context as a negative.

As the hearing entered its fourth hour, Chew showed his own frustration in an exchange with Florida Republican Neal Dunn.

"You have not given us straightforward answers," Dunn said. "We don't find you credible on these things."

"Congressman, you have given me no time to answer your questions," Chew responded. "I reject the characterizations."

Another exchange with Dunn forced a clarification.

Dunn asked if ByteDance had spied on U.S. users on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party. Chew responded, "No."

But when Dunn repeated the question, Chew said, "I don't think spying is the right way to describe it."

Chew later said the correct answer was a simple "no" and that the pace of questioning had caused confusion.

TikTok's communications department posted a tweet that highlighted Chew's initial response.

*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.*

## Democratic report on U.S. debt default predicts disrupted benefits for seniors, veterans

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 23, 2023 1:45 PM

WASHINGTON — Congress' Joint Economic Committee released a report Thursday detailing the economic repercussions of defaulting on the nation's debt, adding fuel to the fire as Democrats pressed Republicans to address the nation's borrowing limit without tying action to spending cuts.

The report, from Democratic staff on the bipartisan Joint Economic Committee, says that a default on the debt would increase costs on everyday necessities, push up the unemployment rate, and disrupt payments on hundreds of federal programs including Social Security, Medicare and veterans' benefits.

If the federal government defaults, Treasury would only be able to pay debts using existing funds and incoming revenue, the report says. Most federal spending goes toward paying for Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, veterans' benefits and the military, it notes.

"Incoming tax revenue may not be sufficient to fund ongoing payments to support the military, veterans, and seniors, maintain other government programs, and service existing debt," it says.

Social Security pays out about \$100 billion each month to beneficiaries and "payments could be in jeopardy" unless the debt limit is lifted, the report says.

"This is not that complicated. Raising the debt ceiling simply means that we will fulfill our most fundamental responsibility — that we pay our bills," Minnesota Democratic Sen. Tina Smith said during a press conference on the report.

"Defaulting on the debt would cause a global financial crisis as bad as what we saw in 2008 or even more," Smith added. "And what that means for folks in Minnesota — jobs lost, interest rates skyrocketing,

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homes lost, farms in default and the global confidence in the full faith and credit of the United States of America gone.”

The federal government ran out of borrowing authority when it reached the \$31.385 trillion debt limit on Jan. 19. Since then the U.S. Treasury Department has been using extraordinary measures, which are essentially accounting maneuvers, to keep paying all of the country’s bills in full and on time.

That short-term work around will end as soon as mid-June, and at some point after that the nation would default on the debt for the first time ever, unless Congress takes action to raise or suspend the debt limit first.

While Democrats control the U.S. Senate and the White House, any legislation to raise or suspend the debt limit must move through the Republican-controlled U.S. House. There’s been little movement so far.

Speaker Kevin McCarthy, a California Republican, has repeatedly said the only way he’ll put a debt limit bill on the floor is if Democrats agree to spending cuts.

Democrats have insisted negotiations about future spending and addressing the debt limit, which allows borrowing to pay for the spending Congress has already approved, must remain on separate tracks.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Thursday that Democrats understand they need to negotiate spending levels as they have done for years through the annual appropriations process, but insisted those talks are not linked to addressing the debt limit.

“That should not be part of the debt ceiling debate,” Schumer said. “But, look, we’re going to have to come together — Democrats and Republicans — and hopefully pass a budget, not a (short-term bill) but an omnibus. We did it last year, and we will try to do it again.”

“First step is for them to put out a plan and there’s time for them to do it. They have to put out a plan,” Schumer added.

New Mexico Democratic Sen. Martin Heinrich noted that Congress voted on a bipartisan basis to raise the debt limit three times during the Trump administration.

“Republicans in Congress voted overwhelmingly to raise the debt limit when President Trump was in office, while he added \$7 trillion to the national debt,” Heinrich said.

“House Republicans are threatening to default unless they get their way, but they won’t even tell us what their way is,” he added. House Republicans haven’t released a budget resolution for the upcoming fiscal year or any of the dozen appropriations bills.

Virginia Democratic Rep. Don Beyer said that if the GOP wants to cut federal spending, there is a path to do that, but he pressed them to keep that separate from addressing the debt limit.

“If they want cuts, Congress has the purse strings — the appropriations process. They can pursue them constructively without hostage taking,” Beyer said. “But sadly they haven’t done that.”

“In fact, the only thing they’ve done in the House so far is advance a bill in Ways and Means ... that would take us into default,” Beyer added. “This is their so-called debt prioritization bill, which would pay Chinese bondholders before they pay American troops and veterans.”

U.S. House Republicans advanced a bill out of the Ways and Means Committee earlier this month that would prioritize certain payments in the event Congress doesn’t take action to raise or suspend the debt limit. It hasn’t yet gone to the floor and wouldn’t stand a chance of passing the U.S. Senate.

Wisconsin Democratic Rep. Gwen Moore compared the way Republicans are behaving on the debt limit to how her great-granddaughter acts when she doesn’t get what she wants.

“I have a great-granddaughter that falls out and rolls on the floor and screams when she can’t have her way,” Moore said. “You know what I tell her, ‘Get up off of the floor because you’re not going to get it.’”

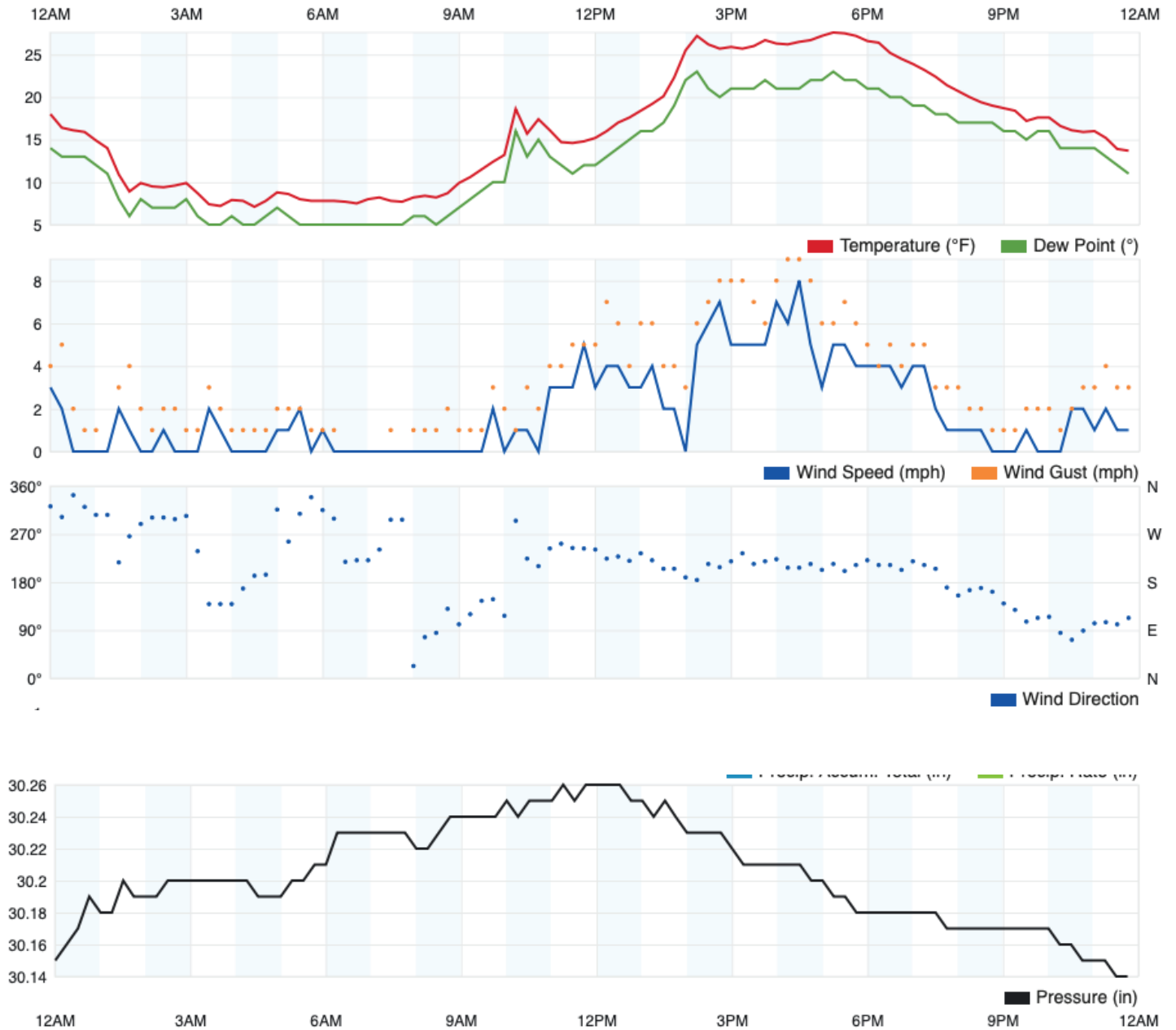
“We’re not going to sell our seniors down the road, we’re not going to sell our children down the road and we’re not going to send the world’s standard, our bond rating, we are not putting it up for sale,” Moore added. “Get up off the ground and pass this debt ceiling.”

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

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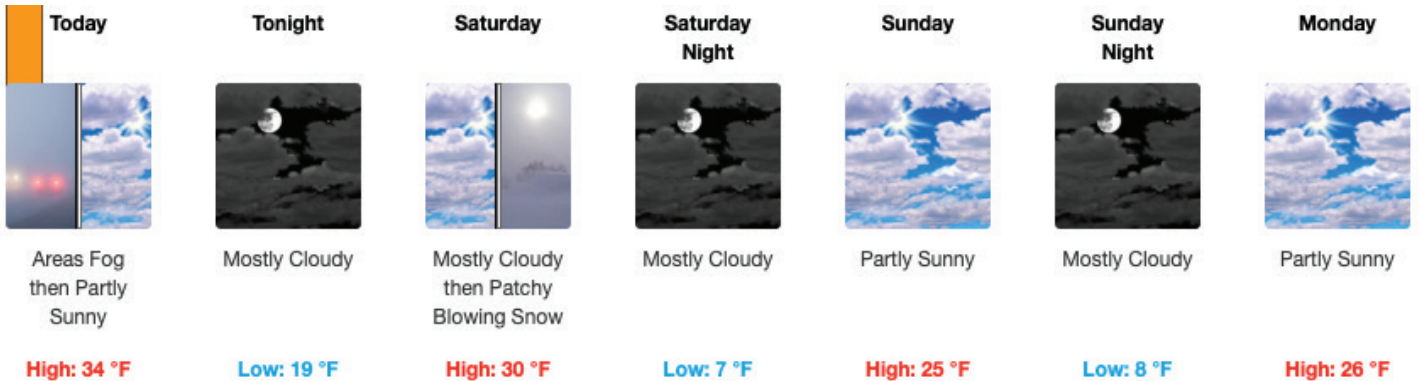
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

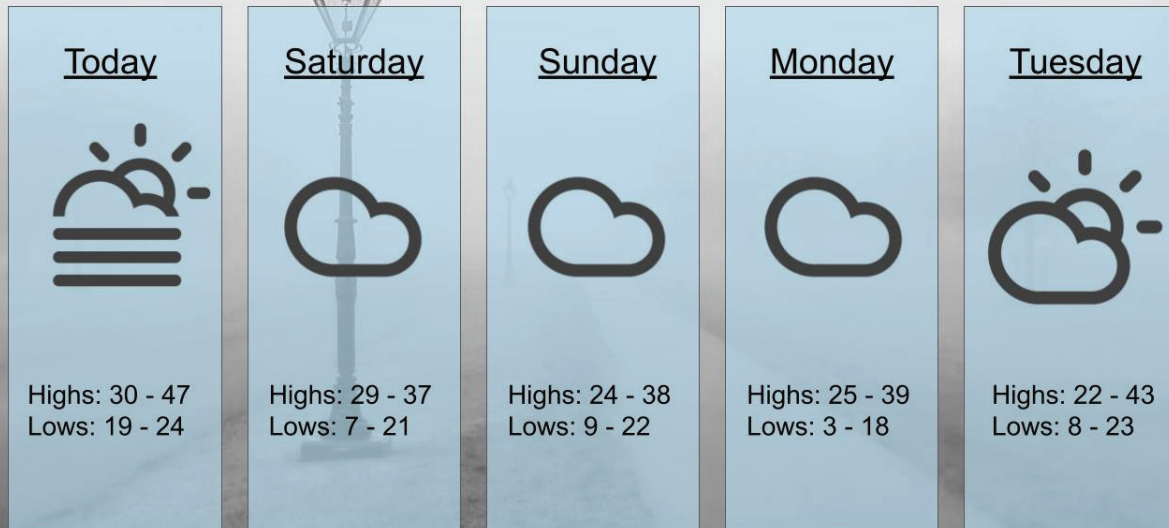


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## 5 Day Forecast...



Areas of dense fog will reduce visibilities this morning mostly between the Missouri and James Rivers. This is expected to last through mid morning. This afternoon is expected to be mostly cloudy with temperatures a little warmer than they have been so far this week. The weekend is looking cloudy and cooler than today, but dry.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 28 °F at 5:13 PM

Low Temp: 7 °F at 4:32 AM

Wind: 9 mph at 3:46 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 25 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 80 in 1939

Record Low: -10 in 1893

Average High: 46

Average Low: 23

Average Precip in March.: 0.64

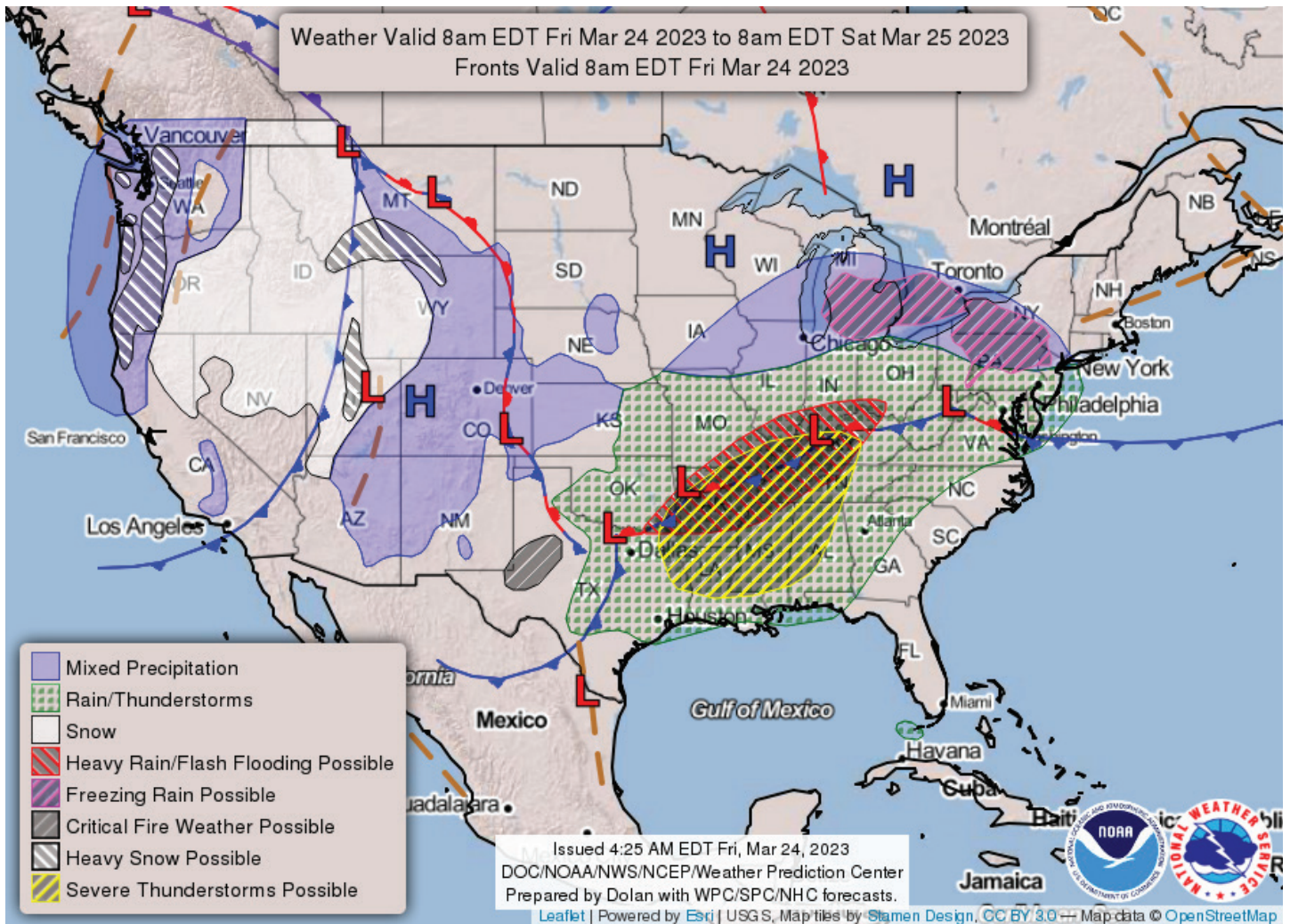
Precip to date in March.: 1.60

Average Precip to date: 1.81

Precip Year to Date: 3.18

Sunset Tonight: 7:51:11 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:24:13 AM



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## Today in Weather History

March 24, 1996: North winds of 30 to 40 mph, gusting to 55 mph, combined with the falling snow and the previous day's snowfall to create blizzard conditions. Travel became extremely difficult. Several cars went into ditches, and flights out of Aberdeen were canceled. Schools and activities were either delayed or canceled. Some of the more significant two-day snowfall amounts include 6 inches at Sisseton and Aberdeen, 7 inches at Sand Lake NWR, 8 inches near Veblen, 9 inches at Britton, and 10 inches near Victor.

March 24, 2009: An area of low pressure moved out of the Rockies and into the Northern Plains producing snow and widespread blizzard conditions across central and north central South Dakota. Winds gusting to over 60 mph along with several inches of snow caused hazardous travel conditions. Interstate 90 was closed for a time across much of Jones and part of Lyman County. Power was also out in parts of Pierre and Mobridge for a short period. Some snowfall amounts included; 2 inches at Pierre; 5 inches in Hayes and Timber Lake; 6 inches in Murdo, McLaughlin, and 6 miles southeast of McIntosh; 7 inches 14 miles northeast of Isabel; 8 inches in Eagle Butte; and 12 inches 8 miles southwest of Keldron.

1912: Residents of Kansas City began to dig out from a storm that produced 25 inches of snow in 24 hours. The snowfall total was nearly twice that of any other storm of modern record in Kansas City before or since that time. A record 40 inches of snow fell during March that year, and the total for the winter season of 67 inches was also a record. By late February of that year, Kansas City had received just six inches of snow. Olathe, Kansas received 37 inches of snow in the snowstorm, establishing a single storm record for the state of Kansas. (23rd-24th)

1929: St. Louis, Missouri soared to 92 degrees; their all-time record high for March.

1975: "The Governor's Tornado" hop-scotched a 13-mile path across the western part of Atlanta, GA during the early morning hours, causing considerable damage to the Governor's mansion. Hundreds of expensive homes, businesses and apartment complexes were damaged. Total losses were estimated at \$56 million. Three people lost their lives, and the F3 tornado injured another 152.

1987 - A winter-like storm in the central U.S. produced blizzard conditions from South Dakota to western Kansas. Snowfall totals ranged up to 24 inches at Neligh NE, with 19 inches at Winner SD. Winds gusting to 60 mph created twelve foot snow drifts in Nebraska stranding thousands on the highways. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather from Minnesota to north-eastern Texas. The thunderstorms spawned ten tornadoes, including one which injured five persons near Raymondville MO. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Low pressure off the coast of Virginia brought heavy rain to the Middle Atlantic Coast States, and heavy snow to the Northern Appalachians. Cape Hatteras NC was soaked with 5.20 inches of rain in 24 hours, and snowfall totals in Vermont ranged up to 12 inches. Winds gusted to 52 mph at New York City. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - The storm system which produced heavy snow in the Lower Missouri Valley the previous day, spread heavy snow across parts of the Upper Ohio Valley and the Middle Atlantic Coast Region. Snowfall totals of 2.2 inches at Philadelphia PA and 2.4 inches at Atlantic City NJ were records for the date. Up to six inches of snow blanketed southern Ohio. In the Middle Atlantic Coast Region, snow coated the blossoms of cherry trees which had bloomed in 80 degree weather the previous week. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### **DISMOUNT!**

Stories of the Knights of the Round Table are fascinating - often intriguing. There are many hidden messages in the way they did things.

For example, when they were fully dressed, they would ride a large, strong horse to bear the weight of their armor. When they went hunting, they would ride a small, swift horse that could run fast to catch up with the prey. When in a parade, they would ride a tall, high horse. This made them appear bigger than the poor peasant who had no horse at all and was forced to look up to them.

In fact, the expression "Get off your high horse" originated from their exploits. It meant to the onlookers, "Stop acting as if you are above us! Remember, you're on a horse."

Wise Solomon had some advice for those who act as if they are above others. He said, "Haughty eyes, a proud heart, and evil actions are all sin."

God wants us to develop talents carefully and use wisely the skills, talents, and gifts that He has given us. We are to be thankful for all that we can do in His name to bring Him glory and honor. We must never have an inflated opinion of our value or importance. We have what we have because of His grace. We are what we are and what we can be because of Him. We must realize at all times that we are His and are obligated to serve Him faithfully each day.

Prayer: Father, may we be ever thankful for all of the gifts You have given us and use them to honor You. May we set ourselves aside at all times and exalt only You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Haughty eyes, a proud heart, and evil actions are all sin. Proverbs 21:4



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

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## 2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.21.23

1 21 25 27 40 11

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$302,000,000**

NEXT 15 Hrs 43 Mins 56  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

14 18 21 50 51 3

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$39,880,000**

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 43  
DRAW: Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.23.23

3 7 24 26 48 12

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

NEXT 15 Hrs 13 Mins 56  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

4 9 12 22 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$20,000**

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 43  
DRAW: Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

3 32 58 59 61 15

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

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 42  
DRAW: Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

27 28 37 50 57 5

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$112,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 42  
DRAW: Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Indigenous artists help skateboarding earn stamp of approval

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Years ago, skateboarding was branded as a hobby for rebels or stoners in city streets, schoolyards and back alleys. Those days are long gone.

Skateboarding, which has Native Hawaiian roots connected to surfing, no longer is on the fringes. It became an Olympic sport in 2020. There are numerous amateur and professional skateboarding competitions in the U.S. And on Friday, the U.S. Postal Service is issuing stamps that laud the sport — and what Indigenous groups have brought to the skating culture.

Di'Orr Greenwood, 27, an artist born and raised on the Navajo Nation in Arizona whose work is featured on the new stamps, says it's a long way from when she was a kid and people always kicked her out of certain spots just for skating.

"Now it's like being accepted on a global scale," Greenwood said. "There's so many skateboarders I know that are extremely proud of it."

The postal agency is debuting the "Art of the Skateboard" stamps at a Phoenix skate park. The stamps feature skateboard artists from around the country, including Greenwood and Crystal Worl, who is Tlingit Athabascan. William James Taylor Jr., an artist from Virginia, and Federico "MasPaz" Frum, a Colombian-born muralist in Washington, D.C., round out the quartet of featured artists.

The stamps underscore the prevalence of skateboarding, especially in Indian Country where the demand for skate parks is growing.

The artists see the stamp as a small canvas, a functional art piece that will be seen across the U.S. and beyond.

"Maybe I'll get a letter in the mail that someone sent me with my stamp on it," said Worl, 35, who lives in Juneau, Alaska. "I think that's when it will really hit home with the excitement of that."

Antonio Alcalá, USPS art director, led the search for artists to paint skate decks for the project. After settling on a final design, each artist received a skateboard from Alcalá to work on. He then photographed the maple skate decks and incorporated them into an illustration of a young person holding up a skateboard for display. The person is seen in muted colors to draw attention to the skate deck.

Alcalá used social media to seek out artists who, besides being talented, were knowledgeable about skateboarding culture. Worl was already on his radar because her brother, Rico, designed the Raven Story stamp in 2021, which honored a central figure in Indigenous stories along the coast in the Pacific Northwest.

The Worl siblings run an online shop called Trickster Company with fashions, home goods and other merchandise with Indigenous and modern twists. For her skate deck, Crystal Worl paid homage to her clan and her love of the water with a Sockeye salmon against a blue and indigo background.

She was careful about choosing what to highlight.

"There are certain designs, patterns and stories that belong to certain clans and you have to have permission even as an Indigenous person to share certain stories or designs," Worl said.

The only times Navajo culture has been featured in stamps is with rugs or necklaces. Greenwood, who tried out for the U.S. Women's Olympic skateboarding team, knew immediately she wanted to incorporate her heritage in a modern way. Her nods to the Navajo culture include a turquoise inlay and a depiction of eagle feathers, which are used to give blessings.

"I was born and raised with my great-grandmother, who looked at a stamp kind of like how a young kid would look at an iPhone 13," Greenwood said. "She entrusted every important news and every important document and everything to a stamp to send it and trust that it got there."

Skateboarding has become a staple across Indian Country. A skate park opened in August on the Hopi reservation. Skateboarders on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in eastern Arizona recently got funding for one from pro skateboarder Tony Hawk's nonprofit, The Skatepark Project. Youth-organized competi-

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tions take place on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

Dustinn Craig, a White Mountain Apache filmmaker and "lifer" skateboarder in Arizona, has made documentaries and short films on the sport. The 47-year-old remembers how skateboarding was seen as dorky and anti-establishment when he was a kid hiding "a useless wooden toy" in his locker. At the same time, Craig credits skateboarding culture as "my arts and humanities education."

So he is wary of the mainstream's embrace, as well as the sometimes clique-ish nature, of today's skateboarding world.

"For those of us who have been in it for a very long time, it's kind of insulting because I think a lot of the popularity has been due to the proliferation of access to the visuals of the youth culture skateboarding through the internet and social media," Craig said. "So, I feel like it really sort of trivializes and sort of robs Native youth of authenticity of the older skateboard culture that I was raised on."

He acknowledges that he may come off as the "grumpy old man" to younger Indigenous skateboarders who are open to collaborating with outsiders.

The four skateboards designed by the artists will eventually be transferred to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, said Jonathan Castillo, USPS spokesperson.

The stamps, which will have a printing of 18 million, will be available at post offices and on the USPS website beginning Friday. For the artists, being part of a project that feels low-tech in this age of social media is exciting.

"It's like the physical thing is special because you go out of your way to go to the post office, buy the stamps and write something," Worl said.

Terry Tang is a member of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/ttangAP>

## NC approves Medicaid expansion, reversing long opposition

By GARY D. ROBERTSON Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — A Medicaid expansion deal in North Carolina received final legislative approval on Thursday, capping a decade of debate over whether the closely politically divided state should accept the federal government's coverage for hundreds of thousands of low-income adults.

North Carolina is among states with Republican leaders that are considering expanding Medicaid after years of steadfast opposition. Voters in South Dakota approved expansion in a referendum in November. And in Alabama, advocates are urging lawmakers to take advantage of federal incentives to expand Medicaid in order to provide health insurance to more working people.

When Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, a longtime expansion advocate, signs the bill, it should leave 10 states in the U.S. that haven't adopted expansion. North Carolina has 2.9 million enrollees in traditional Medicaid coverage. Advocates have estimated that expansion could help 600,000 adults.

"Medicaid Expansion is a once in a generation investment that will make all North Carolina families healthier while strengthening our economy, and I look forward to signing this legislation soon," Cooper tweeted.

There's no set start date in the final bill for expansion under the legislation, but it still comes with one caveat: It can't happen until after a state budget is approved. This usually happens in the early summer. Cooper panned that provision, which could give GOP leaders leverage to include unrelated items he may strongly oppose.

The House voted 87-24 in favor of the deal, after little debate and a preliminary vote on Wednesday. Many Democratic members on the floor stood and clapped after it passed, which is usually not permitted under chamber rules. Almost two-thirds of the House Republicans also voted yes. The Senate already approved the legislation last week in near-unanimous votes.

The final agreement also included provisions scaling back or eliminating regulations that require state health officials to sign off before medical providers open certain new beds or use equipment. Senate Republicans demanded the "certificate of need" changes in any deal.



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Republicans in charge of the General Assembly for years had been skeptical about expansion, which originated from the federal Affordable Care Act signed into law by President Barack Obama 13 years ago Thursday.

GOP legislators passed a law in 2013 specifically preventing a governor's administration from seeking expansion without express approval by the General Assembly. But interest in expansion grew over the past year as lawmakers concluded that Congress was neither likely to repeal the law nor raise the low state match that coverage requires.

A financial sweetener contained in a COVID-19 recovery law means North Carolina also would get an estimated extra \$1.75 billion in cash over two years if it expands Medicaid. Legislators hope to use much of that money on mental health services.

A turning point came last May when Senate leader Phil Berger, a longtime expansion opponent, publicly explained his reversal, which was based largely on fiscal terms.

In a news conference, Berger also described the situation faced by a single mother who didn't make enough money to cover insurance for both her and her children, which he said meant that she would either end up in the emergency room or not get care. Expansion covers people who make too much money for conventional Medicaid but not enough to benefit from heavily subsidized private insurance.

"We need coverage in North Carolina for the working poor," Berger said at the time.

The Senate and House approved competing measures in 2022 but negotiations stalled over certificate of need changes. Berger and House Speaker Tim Moore announced an agreement three weeks ago.

In 2019, Cooper's insistence on advancing expansion contributed to a state budget impasse with GOP legislators that never got fully resolved.

House Minority Leader Robert Reives of Chatham County wished the budget passage requirement was left out of the expansion measure but remained celebratory.

"I'm just really happy because health care means everything," Reives said. "Now the onus is on all of us to put together a budgetary document that everybody can live with."

The state's 10% share of expenses for Medicaid expansion recipients would be paid through hospital assessments. Hospitals also are expected to receive larger reimbursements for treating Medicaid patients through a federal program that the legislation tells the state to participate in.

The program's proceeds should help shore up rural hospitals in a state where several have closed.

"This landmark legislation will have lasting benefits for our state by helping hardworking North Carolina families, stabilizing rural health providers and improving the overall health of our communities," said Steve Lawler with the North Carolina Healthcare Association, which represents hospitals and hospital systems.

In a news release, Moore called Thursday's passage a "historic step forward to increase access to health-care for our rural communities" and he said he looked forward to passing "a strong conservative budget" so expansion can begin.

## Nebraska trans health bill advances, despite filibuster vow

By MARGERY A. BECK Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The Nebraska Legislature voted Thursday to advance a contentious bill that would ban gender-affirming care for minors, despite threats from some lawmakers that they would filibuster the rest of the session.

The vote came on the third day of debate, in which lawmakers angrily accused one another of hypocrisy and a lack of collegiality early on. By Thursday, the chamber had turned somber as some lawmakers opposed to the bill broke down in tears and pleaded with their Republican colleagues to reconsider their support for the bill.

"I can't stop thinking about the parents," Sen. John Fredrickson said through sobs before reading a letter from a constituent who said her son would have likely taken his own life if he had not been able to get gender-affirming care as a teen.

Fredrickson, the first openly gay man elected to the Nebraska Legislature, expressed his heartbreak at

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not being able to change the outcome of the vote.

"To my LGBTQ family ... regardless of what happens today, heads up. Chins up. We're survivors," he said.

Members of the LGBTQ community who had gathered in the Capitol to protest the bill showed their displeasure with the outcome, booing and cursing lawmakers who voted to advance it as they left the legislative floor.

"I am a ball of rage," said Wrenn Jacobson, 29, of Lincoln, after the vote. "I've had to go back to therapy when this bill was introduced. I know so many people — so many kids — who will be hurt by this."

"They come for the kids first," Jacobson said. "Then they'll come for the adults."

With the bill's advancement, Omaha Sens. Megan Hunt and Machaela Cavanaugh promised to filibuster every bill that comes before lawmakers for the rest of the 90-day session. By the end of Thursday's debate, other lawmakers had vowed to join that effort, including Omaha Sen. Jen Day and Lincoln Sen. Danielle Conrad.

Hunt took to the floor of the Legislature on Wednesday to confess that the debate is deeply personal for her, because her teenage son is transgender. She called the bill an affront to her as a parent and called out by name lawmakers she would hold accountable if they vote to advance it.

"If this bill passes, all your bills are on the chopping block, and the bridge is burned," she said. "I'm not doing anything for you. Because this is fake. This has nothing to do with real life. This is all of you playing government."

The proposal had caused tumult in the legislative session long before debate began on it earlier this week. It was cited as the genesis of a nearly three-week, uninterrupted filibuster carried by Cavanaugh, who 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 which lawmakers would "legislate hate against children."

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 sex 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 several other Republican-led states, including Arizona, 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 a bill that would ban most gender-affirming surgeries and hormone replacement therapies for transgender minors to the governor Tuesday. In Kansas, Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly last week vetoed a similar bill. The attorney general in Missouri issued an order earlier this week to limit access to gender-affirming care for minors.

The Nebraska bill, introduced by freshman Republican Sen. Kathleen Kauth, would outlaw gender-affirming therapies such as hormone treatments, puberty blockers and gender reassignment surgery for those 18 and younger. The purpose of the bill, she has said, 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.

That position overlooks the damage taking away the option of treatments will have on teens, said 17-year-old Elliott Braatz, of Lincoln. Braatz, a transgender boy, took a day off from school to hold signs protesting the bill. He said lawmakers supporting the bill aren't taking into account that "the trans suicide rate is horrifying."

"I'm very scared," he said. "This bill says to people like me: 'You're trans, and that's not OK.'"

That fear was echoed by several lawmakers, including Day, who wept as she read from an email sent Wednesday to all lawmakers by a clinical psychologist in Lincoln who said calls to the clinic from trans teens reporting feeling suicidal have jumped significantly in the past week. The psychologist warned that

voting to advance the bill “will result in the deaths of transgender and gender diverse adolescents, likely before the end of the school year.”

“I want all of you to go into the rotunda and look into the eyes of those parents and tell them that you’re voting for this bill knowing that it could potentially kill their child,” Day said through sobs.

The bill advanced on a 30-17 vote, with two lawmakers not voting. Although bills can advance with a simple majority, it takes 33 votes to end debate to overcome a filibuster. The Nebraska Legislature is currently made up of 32 registered Republicans and 17 registered Democrats — just enough for the minority to block bills they don’t like if they stick together.

In this case, Democratic Sen. Mike McDonnell voted with Republicans to end debate and later voted to advance the bill.

“There’s a world of difference between 9 and 19,” he said. “I think adult decisions should be made by adults.”

The bill will have to survive two more rounds of debate to pass in the unique one-house, officially non-partisan Legislature. Republican Gov. Jim Pillen has said he will sign the bill into law if it reaches his desk.

## **Court weighs release of records in Sanford child porn probe**

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Attorneys took their fight over whether to unseal more documents in the 2019 child pornography investigation of billionaire banker and philanthropist T. Denny Sanford to the South Dakota Supreme Court on Thursday.

Sanford is seeking to bar the release of affidavits used to issue search warrants in the case. But the Argus Leader and ProPublica contend they should be public. Also at issue is what should be redacted if the affidavits are released.

The two news outlets were the first to report on the investigation into Sanford that began in 2019. That’s when state investigators began searching Sanford’s email account, as well as his cellular and internet service providers, for possible possession of child pornography after his accounts were flagged by a technology firm.

The South Dakota attorney general’s office declined to file charges against Sanford after the probe, saying it found no prosecutable offenses within the state’s jurisdiction.

Court documents in the case initially were sealed and referred only to “an implicated individual,” leading the Argus Leader and ProPublica to go to court seeking access to the records.

The search warrants were unsealed in 2021, identifying Sanford by name for the first time, but the affidavits remained sealed.

Jon Arneson and Jeff Beck, lawyers for the Argus Leader and ProPublica, said they should be allowed to determine what personal identifying information should be redacted in the affidavits.

“We’re not asking this court to craft some redaction statute or to interpret state statute,” he said. “The statute is clear, that is an open document for public access. Now, if there’s something in there they don’t want, then they can follow the statute.”

Such redacted information typically includes phone numbers, names of minors, Social Security numbers and addresses. Sanford’s attorney, Stacey Hegge, argued Sanford should be able to see if there’s any disclosure of trade secrets in the affidavits.

Sanford, who is in his 80s, is worth an estimated \$3.4 billion. He made a fortune as the founder of First Premier Bank in South Dakota, which is known for issuing high-interest credit cards to those with poor credit.

He has donated greatly to the hospital that carries his name, Sanford Health, which is based in Sioux Falls and has major medical centers in Fargo and Bismarck, North Dakota, and Bemidji, Minnesota.

Judges will make their determination on the request to unseal the affidavits in later months.

## **Suspected Iran drone kills US worker in Syria; US retaliates**

By LOU KESTEN, BASSEM MROUE and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A strike Thursday by a suspected Iranian-made drone killed a U.S. contractor and wounded five American troops and another contractor in northeast Syria, the Pentagon said. American forces said they retaliated soon after with “precision airstrikes” in Syria targeting facilities used by groups affiliated with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, with one activist group reporting the U.S. strikes killed fighters on the ground.

The attack and the U.S. response threaten to upend recent efforts to deescalate tensions across the wider Middle East, whose rival powers have made steps toward détente in recent days, after years of turmoil.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement that the American intelligence community had determined the drone was of Iranian origin, but offered no other immediate evidence to support the claim.

“The airstrikes were conducted in response to today’s attack as well as a series of recent attacks against coalition forces in Syria” by groups affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard, Austin said.

Iran relies on a network of proxy forces through the Mideast to counter the U.S. and Israel, its arch regional enemy.

The Pentagon said two of the wounded service members were treated on-site, while three others and the injured contractor were transported to medical facilities in Iraq.

Overnight, videos on social media purported to show explosions in Syria’s Deir el-Zour, a strategic province that borders Iraq and contains oil fields. Iran-backed militia groups and Syrian forces control the area, which also has seen suspected airstrikes by Israel in recent months allegedly targeting Iranian supply routes.

Iran and Syria did not immediately acknowledge the strikes, nor did their officials at the United Nations in New York respond to requests for comment from The Associated Press.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, reported that the American strikes killed six Iranian-backed fighters at an arms depot in the Harabesh neighborhood in the city of Deir el-Zour. The Observatory, which relies on a network of local contacts in Syria, said U.S. bombing at a post near the town of Mayadeen killed two fighters.

A separate American strike hit a military post near the town of Boukamal along the border with Iraq, killing another three fighters, the Observatory said. The AP could not immediately independently confirm the report.

Iran’s paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, which answers only to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has been suspected of carrying out attacks with bomb-carrying drones across the wider Middle East.

In recent months, Russia has begun using Iranian drones in its attacks on sites across Ukraine as part of its war on Kyiv. Iran has issued a series of conflicting denials about its drones being used in the war, though Western nations and experts have tied components in the drones back to Tehran.

The exchange of strikes came as Saudi Arabia and Iran have been working toward reopening embassies in each other’s countries. The kingdom also acknowledged efforts to reopen a Saudi embassy in Syria, whose embattled President Bashar Assad has been backed by Iran in his country’s long war.

U.S. Army Gen. Michael “Erik” Kurilla, the head of the American military’s Central Command, warned that American forces could carry out additional strikes if needed. “We are postured for scalable options in the face of any additional Iranian attacks,” Kurilla said in a statement.

Addressing the U.S. House Armed Services Committee on Thursday, Kurilla warned lawmakers that the “Iran of today is exponentially more militarily capable than it was even five years ago.” He pointed to Iran’s arsenal of ballistic missiles and bomb-carrying drones.

Kurilla also alleged that Iran had launched some 78 attacks on U.S. positions in Syria since January 2021. “What Iran does to hide its hand is they use Iranian proxies,” Kurilla said.

Diplomacy to deescalate the crisis appeared to begin immediately around the strikes. Qatar’s state-run news agency reported a call between its foreign minister and Jake Sullivan, the U.S. national security adviser. Doha has been an interlocutor between Iran and the U.S. recently amid tensions over Tehran’s nuclear program.

Qatar’s foreign minister also spoke around the same time with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian.

Austin said he authorized the retaliatory strikes at the direction of President Joe Biden.

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"As President Biden has made clear, we will take all necessary measures to defend our people and will always respond at a time and place of our choosing," Austin said. "No group will strike our troops with impunity."

The U.S. under Biden has struck Syria previously over tensions with Iran. In February and June of 2021, as well as August 2022, Biden launched attacks there.

Dareen Khalifa, a senior Syria analyst with the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, said that while Thursday's exchange of strikes comes at a sensitive political moment due to the "overall deterioration of US-Iran relations and the stalling of the nuclear talks," she does not expect a significant escalation.

"These tit-for-tat strikes have been ongoing for a long time," Khalifa said, although she noted that they usually do not result in casualties.

While "the risk of an escalatory cycle is there," she said, "I think the Biden administration won't be eager to escalate in Syria now and will instead have a relatively measured response."

U.S. forces entered Syria in 2015, backing allied forces in their fight against the Islamic State group. The U.S. still maintains the base near Hasakah in northeast Syria where Thursday's drone strike happened. There are roughly 900 U.S. troops, and even more contractors, in Syria, including in the north and farther south and east.

Since the U.S. drone strike that killed Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani in 2020, Iran has sought "to make life difficult for U.S. forces stationed east of the Euphrates," said Hamidreza Azizi, an expert with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

"Iran increased its support for local proxies in Deir el-Zour while trying to ally with the tribal forces in the area," Azizi wrote in a recent analysis. "Due to the geographical proximity, Iraqi groups also intensified their activities in the border strip with Syria and in the Deir el-Zour province."

The strikes come during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Syria's war began with the 2011 Arab Spring protests that roiled the wider Middle East and toppled governments in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen. It later morphed into a regional proxy conflict that has seen Russia and Iran back Assad. The United Nations estimates over 300,000 civilians have been killed in the war. Those figures do not include soldiers and insurgents killed in the conflict; their numbers are believed to be in the tens of thousands.

Gambrell reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Associated Press writer Abby Sewell in Beirut contributed to this report.

## Protests continue in France; British king's visit postponed

PARIS (AP) — Protesters angry at French President Emmanuel Macron's pension reforms continued with scattered actions on Friday, as the unrest across the country led officials to postpone a planned state visit by Britain's King Charles III.

Although no major protests were planned on Friday, train traffic was slowed, rows of trucks blocked access to Marseille's commercial port and debris still littered the Paris streets following the previous day's mass demonstrations.

Over 450 protesters were arrested in Paris and beyond on Thursday as some 300 demonstrations drew more than a million people nationwide to protest against unpopular pension reforms.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said Friday that some 441 police and gendarmes were injured as violence marred some marches.

He added that 1,000 trash bins were set on fire in the French capital during the previous day's action. Amid a weeks-long refuse collectors strike, trash bins have become a symbol of the protest.

Macron's office announced that a state visit by the British king was postponed. He had been scheduled to arrive in France on Sunday on his first state visit as monarch, before heading to Germany on Wednesday. The German part of the trip was still going ahead.

Polls say most French oppose Macron's bill to increase the retirement age from 62 to 64, which he says

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is necessary to keep the system afloat.

The supply of fuel to Paris by the large Gonfreville-L'Orcher refinery in Normandy resumed Friday after police intervened, according to Energy Transition Minister Agnès Pannier-Runacher. At the Fos-sur-mer oil terminal near Marseille, however, protesters were meeting to plan future oil refinery blockades.

Fearing disruptions in coming days as actions continue, France's Civil Aviation Authority has requested that a third of flights be canceled Sunday at Paris' second airport, Orly, with 20% to be canceled Monday.

Unions have called for new protests and strikes on Tuesday, the day King Charles III had been scheduled to visit Bordeaux. The heavy wooden door of the elegant Bordeaux City Hall was destroyed by fire Thursday night by people taking part in an unauthorized demonstration.

The mayor of Bordeaux, Pierre Hurmic, said Friday he had "difficulty understanding the interest of such acts of vandalism."

The protests have drawn support from beyond France's borders. In Greece, hundreds of protesters gathered outside the French Embassy in Athens on Thursday to show solidarity.

Protesters chanted slogans and held placards that read "Macron, your democracy hangs on nine votes" and "From Greece: victory for the workers of France."

## Elderly Ukrainian helicopters pummel Russians from afar

DONETSK REGION, Ukraine (AP) — Skimming the treetops, three Soviet-era attack helicopters bank and swoop down on a field after an early-morning mission to the front lines in the fight against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Each day, they might fly three or four sorties, says the commander, whose two-crew Mi-24 helicopter, built about 40 years ago, is older than he is.

"We are carrying out combat tasks to destroy enemy vehicles, enemy personnel, we are working with pitch-up attacks from a distance from where the enemy can't get us with their air defense system," said the commander, who spoke on condition of anonymity for operational security reasons, in line with military regulations.

The conflict in Ukraine is largely an artillery war, with territory being fought for inch by inch under a barrage of shells and missiles. But Ukraine's aviation capabilities play a significant role in the fight, the pilot said.

"The importance of the helicopters is huge," said the commander, who is part of Ukraine's 12th Army Aviation Brigade.

Footage from a camera attached to the helicopter during a recent combat mission shows it flying over fields pockmarked with craters from artillery bombing, and firing missiles at Russian trenches that cut through the landscape.

"We are shooting from the big distance and hit the target clearly, like there's a cross on the target and (the missiles) go by themselves where they should go," the commander said.

He would, however, like to fly a newer model.

"We need to master something new, something from abroad," the commander said. "It has better characteristics. You can maneuver more on it, there are more rockets on it and the weapons are more powerful. We can do more tasks with better quality and with less risk for us."

Several countries, including the United States and Britain, have pledged to send, or have already sent, helicopters to Ukraine as part of military aid since the start of the war sparked by Russia's invasion in Feb 2022.

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

## Unwelcome spotlight falls on NHL team Pride night events

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Hockey Writer

Pride nights, held annually for several years by National Hockey League teams to show support for the LGBTQ community, are in the spotlight following several high-profile incidents this season.

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A handful of players have objected to participating in pregame warmups that included Pride-themed jerseys, most recently Florida's Eric and Marc Staal on Thursday night. On Wednesday, the Chicago Blackhawks decided against having players wear Pride-themed warmup jerseys for their upcoming Pride night, citing an anti-gay law in Russia.

## WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIONS?

The Staal brothers and San Jose's James Reimer — who are Canadian — and Philadelphia's Ivan Provorov, who is Russian, all pointed to their religious beliefs for refusing to take part in warmups.

"We carry no judgement on how people choose to live their lives, and believe that all people should be welcome in all aspects of the game of hockey," Eric and Marc Staal said in a statement. "Having said that, we feel that by us wearing a Pride jersey, it goes against our Christian beliefs."

The Blackhawks said they acted out of concern that the safety of their Russian player and two others with connections to Russia could be jeopardized by the law when they return home because it expands restrictions on supporting LGBTQ rights.

Chicago coach Luke Richardson said he and his players were disappointed.

"It's an unfortunate situation," Richardson said. "I don't think we can control the world issues, so that takes it out of our hands."

The New York Rangers and Minnesota Wild decided not wear Pride-themed jerseys during warmups after advertising that they would. While each team has at least one star Russian player on its roster, neither specified the reason for the change.

## IS THIS RELATED TO RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE?

Somewhat. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the anti-gay law signed by President Vladimir Putin in December have combined to pose some problems for the NHL and its 32 teams.

No North American professional sports league has as many Russian players as the NHL. The Russian contingent includes some of the league's best athletes.

There are currently 45 Russia-born players spread across 28 teams, or about 6.4% of all players. They include No. 2 career goal-scorer Alex Ovechkin of the Washington Capitals, Tampa Bay's two-time Stanley Cup-winning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy, Lightning teammate and 2019 MVP Nikita Kucherov and reigning Vezina Trophy winner Igor Shesterkin of the New York Rangers.

The top five highest-earning Russian players receive an average annual salary of \$11.1 million this season.

Russian players almost never discuss the war, in part out of concern for the safety of their loved ones at home. It was not clear if there was any credible threat behind the Blackhawks' decision.

## WHAT'S THE NHL'S HISTORY WITH PRIDE?

The Stanley Cup first appeared at a Pride parade in 2010 when then-Blackhawks defenseman Brent Sopel brought it to the celebration in Chicago. A few years later, in 2013, the league partnered with the You Can Play Project, which advocates for LGBTQ participation in sports. The NHL added team Pride ambassadors in 2016-17.

Rainbow Pride stick tape debuted with the Edmonton Oilers in 2016. Now all 32 teams hold a Pride night, though many do so without themed jerseys. The Boston Bruins and Columbus Blue Jackets call theirs "Hockey Is For Everyone" night.

Pride nights, like other themed events, are planned and staged by individual teams, not the NHL.

## WHAT HAS BEEN THE REACTION?

The You Can Play Project responded to Reimer's decision by saying it was disappointed.

"Religion and respect are not in conflict with each other, and we are certainly disappointed when religion is used as a reason to not support our community," the organization said.

Nashville Predators prospect Luke Prokop, who in 2021 made history as the first player signed to an NHL contract to come out as gay, called the Pride night incidents a "step back" for hockey.

## WHAT DID LEAGUE OFFICIALS SAY?

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said the boycotts were not about accepting bigotry.

"Whether or not you choose to embrace and make a statement on behalf of a cause affirmatively, if you

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choose not to do that, it doesn't necessarily make you a bigot," Bettman said last month. "I'm sure you don't endorse every single charity that solicits you, and you don't participate in every social cause. You pick and choose the ones that are important to you."

The league declined to comment on the Blackhawks' decision.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Teams with Pride nights coming up have some decisions to make. The Buffalo Sabres are set to host their event on Monday, and the Vancouver Canucks on March 31. Each team has at least one Russian player.

It was not clear if players would wear Pride jerseys in warmups, as the teams have done in the past.

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

## GOP sets vote on parents' rights in clash over schools

By STEPHEN R. GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans will press forward Friday with a midterm campaign promise by voting on legislation to give parents greater say in what is taught in public schools, even as critics decry the "parents' rights" bill as a burdensome proposal that would fuel a far-right movement that has resulted in book bans, rewrites of history curricula and raucous school board meetings across the country.

Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has made the bill — labeled the Parents' Bill of Rights Act — a top priority during the early weeks of his tenure atop the House. It will be an early test of unity for the chamber's 222 Republicans, who have a thin majority.

Even as House Republicans returned this week from a retreat where they insisted they are unified, lawmakers have proposed a score of potential changes to the bill, adding a degree of uncertainty to Friday's vote.

It showed how the adoption of an open amendment process in the House — a concession McCarthy made to win hardline conservatives' support for his speakership — holds the potential to send legislation down unpredictable twists and turns. House Freedom Caucus members attempted to add amendments to the bill that amounted to a far-reaching dream list: a call to abolish the Department of Education, a requirement that schools report transgender athletes who participate in women's sports and an endorsement of vouchers that would send public funds to private schools.

"Some of this stuff will sink the bill," said Republican Rep. Don Bacon of Nebraska on Thursday evening, adding, "You're taking a bill that is generally unifying and you're making it more partisan than it needed to be and that's what I worry about."

Even if the House passes the legislation, it has little chance in the Democratic-held Senate, where it would need 60 votes to pass. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer promised it faced a "dead end" in his chamber and skewered it as evidence that the House GOP has been overtaken by "hard right MAGA ideologues" — referencing former President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan.

In the wake of the pandemic and racial justice protests, conservatives' intense focus on parental control over public school classrooms has migrated from local school board fights to Republican-held statehouses and now to the floor of the U.S. House.

"Parents want schools focused on reading, writing and math, not woke politics," Rep. Mary Miller, an Illinois Republican, said during House debate Thursday.

Public school education in the U.S. has long invited concern among some parents — usually conservative — over what children are taught. Historically, the term "parents' rights" has been used in schoolhouse debates over homeschooling, sex education and even the teaching of languages other than English.

Recently, Republicans have tapped into frustrations over remote learning and mask mandates in schools, as well as social conservatives' opposition to certain teachings on race that are broadly labeled as "critical race theory." Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, a Republican, won election in 2021 on the slogan "Parents matter," and other political action committees poured millions of dollars into school board races nationwide.

McCarthy made the "parents' bill of rights" a plank in his midterm election pitch to voters to give Republicans a House majority. But the GOP's expectation of a sweeping victory never materialized, and even



in school board races, conservative groups' goal of electing hundreds of "parents' rights" activists largely fell short.

But McCarthy pressed ahead with the bill as a priority, making a public appeal earlier this month at an event that featured a chalkboard, schoolchildren and parents who have been on the frontlines of the cause.

McCarthy chose the bill's number, H.R. 5, because children enter kindergarten at age five, and the legislation is built on five pillars: parents' right to examine curricula and school library books, meet with educators at least twice each school year, review school budgets and spending, be notified of violent events in their child's school and have elementary and middle schools to get their consent to change a child's gender designation, pronouns or name.

"It's about every parent, mom and dad, but most importantly about the students in America," McCarthy said at the introduction event.

Democrats like Oregon's Rep. Suzanne Bonamici labeled the bill as the "Politics over Parents Act," arguing it would seed enmity between parents and educators and empower conservative activists who want to weed out books that delve into teachings on race and sexuality. Bonamici offered alternative legislation that she argued would foster parental involvement, encourage collaboration with educators and make schools welcoming places to families, including those with LGBTQ students.

"We want parents to be involved — peacefully," Bonamici said.

Democrats also raised alarm that the bill as written would force schools to out LGBTQ students to their families, which can sometimes lead to abuse or abandonment.

"We'll fight against this legislation. We'll fight against the banning of books, fight against the bullying of children from any community, and certainly from the LGBTQ+ community," House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries said.

Attempted book bans and restrictions at school and public libraries surged to their highest number in 2022 since the American Library Association began keeping data 20 years ago, according to a new report the organization released this week.

The bill's supporters described it as common-sense legislation to foster opportunities for schoolchildren by encouraging parents to have greater input into what their children learn in school. They also insisted it does not ban any books, even though conservative activists have used similar legislation from state legislatures to press school boards to remove books that teach about the country's racist history or LGBTQ sexuality.

Republican Rep. Virginia Foxx said, "Our bill is meant to give parents their God-given rights to be involved with their children's education."

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Associated Press writer Kevin Freking contributed reporting.

## Sex trafficking plea deal unending 'nightmare' for Texas mom

By JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Irma Reyes changed clothes in the back seat of the pickup: skirt, tights, turtle-neck, leather jacket. All black. She brushed her hair and pulled on heels as her husband drove their Chevy through predawn darkness toward a courthouse hundreds of miles from home.

She wanted to look confident — poised but hellbent. The outfit was meant to let Texas prosecutors know just what kind of formidable mother they'd be crossing that morning.

Weeks earlier, Reyes learned about the plea deal. State lawyers planned to let the two men charged with sex trafficking her daughter walk free.

She'd barely been able to eat or brush her teeth since, her mind racing: Why are they doing this? Can I get the judge to stop it? Don't they know my daughter matters?

Reyes' daughter was 16 in 2017, when men she knew only as "Rocky" and "Blue" kept her and another girl at a San Antonio motel where men paid to have sex with them. Now, the cases against Rakim Sharkey and Elijah Teel — the men police identified as the traffickers — have seen years of delay, a parade of prosecutors, an aborted trial and, ultimately, a stark retreat by the government.

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They are among thousands of cases under a cloud of dysfunction at the office of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, whose legal troubles include a criminal investigation by Justice Department officials in Washington. Trafficking cases in particular have come under scrutiny and cast doubt on how the agency, which fights court battles affecting people far beyond Texas, uses millions of state tax dollars on an issue that Republican leaders trumpet as a priority while attacking Democrats' approach to border security.

For Reyes, her daughter, and other victims and families, the politics take a backseat to their pain. To them, the plea deal is a case study in how the agency's troubles are undercutting justice for vulnerable victims.

A spokeswoman for the attorney general's office, Kristen House, declined to answer questions about the deal, the actions of prosecutors, and other details of the case involving Reyes' daughter.

"It's like a nightmare that I can't wake up from," Reyes told The Associated Press.

The case was ready for trial years before that January day Reyes and her husband made their way to the San Antonio courthouse, said Kirsta Leeburg Melton.

"You will not find a stronger corroborated case," said Melton, who oversaw the attorney general's human trafficking unit until late 2019 and now runs the Institute to Combat Trafficking. "And I'm sick. It's wrong."

In the courthouse, Reyes' stomach churned as she thought of the deal for the two men: five years of probation. The original charges carried potential sentences of decades in prison.

"I need to puke," said Reyes, 45, her heels clicking down the hallway to the bathroom.

Inside the crowded courtroom, she waited on a back bench for hours, watching people charged with drug crimes and drunken driving draw harsher sentences.

One of the defendants walked in and sat for a while on the same bench. Just one person separated them, but he seemed not to recognize Reyes. She squeezed her husband's hand.

When the judge got to their case, she summarized its twists and turns: years lost to the pandemic, delays due to "turnover in the attorney general's office," days of testimony last year only for several people to catch COVID-19 and prompt a mistrial.

A defense attorney for Sharkey said his client was in a "strong position" for acquittal but would accept the deal to put the case behind him. Reyes listened in disbelief as the new prosecutor told the judge that Reyes' daughter — now a 22-year-old with whom she keeps up a steady stream of text messages — was "on the run."

Sharkey and Teel pleaded "no contest" to aggravated promotion of prostitution. The judge, Velia Meza, sentenced the men to seven years of probation, despite prosecutors recommending five, adding that they'd be strictly supervised but wouldn't have to register as sex offenders.

Then, it was Reyes' turn. Meza would allow a victim impact statement.

Reyes walked slowly to the front of the court, clutching her handwritten statement. She thought of her daughter: a beautiful soul who blasts Beyoncé and loves her dogs, a fighter who overcame a lifetime of struggles to get sober, a woman who took the witness stand just months earlier against the man charged with trafficking her.

Reyes reached the waiting bailiff. She took the microphone.

Reyes' daughter lost a brother when she was young. Then her estranged father died. She was bullied at school.

The AP is withholding the young woman's name, in keeping with its policy to avoid identifying victims of sexual assault and other such crimes. Reyes told AP she spoke about this story with her daughter, who did not want to comment or be interviewed directly.

Reyes said that as a girl, her daughter would run away from the large family's South Texas home. By her teens, she started using drugs and getting psychological care through the juvenile justice system. In September 2017, she was sent to a rehabilitation center.

Court records show it was only days after Reyes' daughter and another girl ran away from rehab that their photos were advertised online for "dates" out of a motel room off the interstate. They met "Blue"

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outside a motel, where they couldn't afford a night's stay. He introduced them to "Rocky." The pair rented the girls a room, helped set up meetings with men who'd pay for sex, and collected half the money at the end of each day, according to the records.

Reyes' daughter later testified that when one of the men hit her, she got scared and called her mom. Reyes found the phone number advertised on Backpages.com, a classifieds website later shut down by law enforcement. She called police; officers found the girls at the motel that night.

Ten days after running away, Reyes' daughter was in a juvenile lockup talking to a detective who would spend months tracking down the men.

"We're able to get the surveillance video. We were able to get room receipts. We were able to get cell-phones, which were extracted for data," detective Manuel Anguiano told AP. "I don't think I've ever worked a case that had more evidence."

Several people who worked on the case told AP they were outraged by the attorney general's office's final resolution.

"It's absolutely an unfortunate outcome," said Cara Pierce, who oversaw the agency's human trafficking unit until August 2022. "This was a triable case when I left."

Sharkey's lawyer, Jason Goss, maintains the jury would have acquitted his client but told AP he had no choice but to plead no contest to the reduced charge because the potential sentence of 25 years to life was too risky. Teel's attorney, Brian Powers, didn't respond to phone messages and emails seeking comment.

After getting out of the detention facility, Reyes' daughter lived away from home for a while, then returned to her mother's house on a quiet, residential block.

She barely left her spartan bedroom, Reyes said, and couldn't talk about what had happened. Reyes in turn got anxious when her daughter was around men. They avoided crowds.

Reyes coaxed her back into the world. She brought her treats – Flamin' Hot Cheetos and Limón Lays – and the book "Women Who Run with the Wolves."

Gradually, they ventured out, taking morning walks in a nature preserve, watching the birds while eating lunch in Reyes' car. But the young woman still had panic attacks, sometimes shutting herself in the bathroom.

That's where she was when Connie Spence, a prosecutor who signed on to the case in summer 2020, arrived to talk, Reyes said. Spence got down on the floor, speaking calmly as the young woman hyperventilated.

After that, Reyes said, her daughter began weekly counseling. She started volunteering at a library and museum. She reenrolled in school and, last June, mother and daughter drove together to San Antonio to testify.

"They built a bond somehow," Reyes said. "Connie gave her hope."

On the witness stand, Reyes' daughter struggled to breathe and had difficulty recalling details from years before. But over hours of testimony she recounted how she came to be having sex to at the motel to pay "Rocky." She testified that he got mad after she spoke to other men there, taking her into a room and hitting her across the face.

Asked to identify "Rocky," the young woman pointed across the courtroom at Sharkey.

Four days later, Reyes and her daughter were relaxing in the summer heat on their patio when Spence called to tell them the judge had declared a mistrial because four people in the courtroom caught COVID-19.

They told themselves testifying would be easier the second time. All three women agreed to go back to court as many times as needed.

But it would be the last time they spoke to Spence.

She left the attorney general's office the following month, according to personnel files obtained under public records laws. Spence's resignation letter gives no reason. She didn't respond to calls and messages seeking comment.

Spence left amid a wave of seasoned prosecutors quitting over practices they said were meant to slant

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legal work, reward loyalists and drum out dissent. The next month, the office dropped a separate series of trafficking and child sexual assault cases after losing track of one of the victims.

In October, Reyes was introduced to new lead lawyer James Winters — the last of eight prosecutors to handle the case for the attorney general's office, court records show. Reyes said her daughter told Winters she would testify again.

The lawyer later asked that the case be postponed again, but the judge refused. Reyes didn't hear from prosecutors again until early January, when Winters called about the plea deal. It was a couple weeks after her daughter had left home.

In the silence, she'd grown pessimistic about the case. They had a fight, Reyes said. The young woman went to stay with a friend's family.

Reyes worried about her daughter and whether she might turn to old habits. She spent Christmas with the family, but left soon after.

Still, a victim's advocate told prosecutors that Reyes could get her daughter to court, internal office messages obtained by AP show. Reyes doesn't understand why Winters later told the judge her daughter was "on the run."

Winters, who referred emailed questions to an attorney general's spokesman, submitted his resignation letter three weeks after appearing in court for the plea deal, which was first reported by Texas Public Radio.

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In San Antonio, Reyes clutched her jacket around her shoulders as she reached the front of the courtroom and took the microphone for her victim impact statement.

She'd spent lunch writing out what she wanted to say, but rage got the better of her planning. She looked at the men accused of trafficking her daughter and two other girls, at the lawyers flanking their clients, at men who'd also gotten probation on charges of soliciting and paying the girls for sex.

Reyes began speaking quietly, the statement still crumpled under her jacket.

"Rakim, can you look at me?" she said, as Sharkey examined his hands. "You have daughters. Going on your third. Exactly the number of victims."

She told one of the men who'd paid for sex that she's glad his family left him.

And she gestured at Winters, the prosecutor. "He doesn't represent me. I represent myself right now. I'm not afraid of you."

Reyes spoke for nearly five minutes, her voice rising as she turned to face the courtroom and beseeched people who were being trafficked to come forward.

"There are victims out there that this minute are being pimped by these types of guys, this type of trash," she said. "And the trash is supposed to be disposed. But they're lucky today."

Reyes' voice broke.

"What these people do to their victims — nothing will ever fix that," she said. "We just try to hold on."

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Reyes cried on the way home, but the drive otherwise passed in silence. Her husband, who doesn't speak much English, hadn't followed everything in court. Reyes didn't know how to explain.

She also didn't know how to tell her daughter, who'd already lost hope the men would go to prison.

Reyes wanted her to come home, to talk in person. But her daughter's bedroom was empty.

Reyes felt isolated and got little rest, with violent nightmares. She kept the blinds drawn. She struggled to breathe and fantasized about feeling nothing.

Two days after the hearing, Reyes sat alone in her bedroom, where crosses line the walls. She felt abandoned by the prosecutors, by the judge, by her family, by God. She thought about how she would take her own life. The idea seemed soothing. Her thoughts grew specific. But then she thought of her children and called a crisis hotline.

"I just swim into my thoughts," she said. "It's like a big ocean once you let your mind wander. But pulling yourself back up, that's where I have to be aware that I don't dive too deep."

Reyes turned 46 the next week. She spent her birthday at the doctor's office. She cried uncontrollably. The doctor prescribed anti-anxiety medicine.

Reyes is in therapy. She's signed up for dance classes and walks her dogs in the nature preserve, hoping her daughter will join them soon.

She's still grasping for closure. Reyes filed complaints with the attorney general's office, the state bar association and the U.S. Department of Justice, although none will reopen the criminal case. Perhaps her best hope from the legal system is a civil lawsuit that she hopes her daughter will one day be ready to bring.

She and her daughter talk more lately. Their texts are filled with worry but also jokes and photos.

One day, Reyes' son shook her awake at 3 a.m. A sheriff's deputy was on the phone and said her daughter had called 911 having a panic attack; she said she wanted to go home.

I've lived this before, Reyes thought. She asked the deputy to wait with her daughter.

Then she pulled on shoes, climbed into the pickup and drove out into the night.

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EDITOR'S NOTE — This story includes discussion of suicide. If you or someone you know needs help, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

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Associated Press photographer Eric Gay and videojournalist Lekan Oyekanmi contributed to this report.

## North Korea claims 'radioactive tsunami' weapon test at sea

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea claimed Friday to have tested a nuclear-capable underwater drone designed to generate a gigantic "radioactive tsunami" that would destroy naval strike groups and ports. Analysts were skeptical that the device presents a major new threat, but the test underlines the North's commitment to raising nuclear threats.

The test this week came as the United States reportedly planned to deploy aircraft carrier strike groups and other advanced assets to waters off the Korean Peninsula. Military tensions are at a high point as the pace of both North Korean weapons tests and U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises has accelerated in the past year in a cycle of tit-for-tat responses.

Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency said the new weapon, which can be deployed from the coast or towed by surface ships, is built to "stealthily infiltrate into operational waters and make a super-scale radioactive tsunami through an underwater explosion" to destroy enemy naval strike groups and ports.

The report came hours before South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol pledged to make North Korea pay for its "reckless provocations" as he attended a remembrance service honoring 55 South Korean troops killed during major clashes with the North near their western sea border in past years.

The testing of the purported "nuclear underwater attack drone" was part of a three-day exercise that simulated nuclear attacks on unspecified South Korean targets, which also included cruise missile launches Wednesday.

KCNA said the North's latest tests were aimed at alerting the United States and South Korea of a brewing "nuclear crisis" as they continue with their "intentional, persistent and provocative war drills." It said the tests were supervised by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who vowed to make his rivals "plunge into despair."

The U.S. and South Korea completed an 11-day exercise Thursday that included their biggest field training in years, and are preparing another round of joint naval drills that will reportedly involve a U.S. aircraft carrier.

Hours after the North Korean report, South Korea's air force released details of a five-day joint aerial drill with the United States that began Monday and concluded Friday above waters off South Korea's western coast, which included live-fire demonstrations of air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons.

The air force said the exercise, which involved various South Korean fighter jets and at least one U.S. A-10 attack plane, was aimed at verifying precision strike capabilities and reaffirming the credibility of Seoul's "three-axis" strategy against North Korean nuclear threats — preemptively striking sources of

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attacks, intercepting incoming missiles and neutralizing the North's leadership and key military facilities.

The North Korean drone is named "Haeil," a Korean word meaning tidal waves or tsunamis. The North's Rodong Sinmun newspaper published photos of Kim smiling next to a large, torpedo-shaped object at an unspecified indoor facility, but didn't identify it.

Other photos published with the same article showed sea-surface tracks supposedly caused by the drone's underwater trajectory and a pillar of water exploding up into the air, possibly caused by what state media described as an underwater detonation of a mock nuclear weapon carried by the drone.

KCNA said the drone was deployed Tuesday off the North's eastern coast, traveled underwater for nearly 60 hours, and detonated a test warhead at a target standing for an enemy port. It said the test verified the operational reliability of the drone, which it said the North has been developing since 2012 and tested more 50 times in the past two years, although the weapon was never mentioned before in state media until Friday.

Kim Dong-yub, a professor at Seoul's University of North Korean Studies, said that it's impossible to verify North Korea's claims about the drone's capabilities or that it had tested the system dozens of times. But, he said, the North is intending to communicate that the weapon has enough range to reach all South Korean ports.

Ankit Panda, a senior analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, questioned the wisdom of North Korea devoting resources to the drone system as a means of delivery versus its ballistic missiles when it has limited amounts of nuclear materials suitable for weapons.

"This un-crewed underwater vehicle will be vulnerable to anti-submarine warfare capabilities if it were to deploy beyond North Korea's coastal waters. It will also be susceptible to preemptive strikes when in port," said Panda.

"Indeed, the U.S. and South Korea would have incentives in a crisis to preempt any such systems before they could deploy."

North Korea is believed to have dozens of nuclear warheads and may be capable of fitting them on older weapons systems, such as Scuds or Rodong missiles. However, there are different assessments on how far it has advanced in engineering those warheads to fit on the new weapons it has developed at a rapid pace, which might require further technological upgrades and nuclear tests.

Speaking to lawmakers on Thursday, South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-Sup said the North probably hasn't yet mastered the technology to place nuclear arms on its most advanced weapons, but acknowledged the country was making "significant progress."

On Wednesday, North Korea also test-fired cruise missiles in launches that were detected and publicized by South Korea's military. It also staged another nuclear attack simulation with a short-range ballistic missile on Sunday and flight-tested an intercontinental ballistic missile last week that may be able to reach the continental United States.

KCNA said Wednesday's tests were of four cruise missiles and two different types. The missiles flew for more than two hours in patterns over the sea while demonstrating an ability to strike targets 1,500 kilometers (932 miles) and 1,800 kilometers (1,118 miles) away. It said the missiles' mock nuclear warheads were detonated 600 meters (1,968 feet) above their targets, which supposedly verified the reliability of their nuclear explosion control devices and warhead detonators.

KCNA said Kim Jong Un was satisfied with the three-day drills and directed unspecified additional tasks to counter the "reckless military provocations" of his rivals, indicating North Korea will further ramp up its military displays.

He "expressed his will to make the U.S. imperialists and the (South) Korean puppet regime plunge into despair" with powerful demonstrations of his military nuclear program to make his rivals understand "they are bound to lose more than they get" with the expansion of their joint drills.

Kim issued similar language Sunday after a test-firing of a short-range ballistic missile from what was possibly a silo dug into the ground. The North's media said a mock nuclear warhead placed on the missile detonated 800 meters (2,624 feet) above water, an altitude that would maximize damage.

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The North has fired over 20 ballistic and cruise missiles across 10 launch events this year as it tries to diversify its delivery systems and display the ability to conduct nuclear strikes on both South Korea and the U.S. mainland.

North Korea already is coming off a record year in testing activity, with more than 70 missiles fired in 2022, as Kim accelerated a campaign aimed at negotiating badly needed sanctions relief from a position of strength and forcing the United States to accept the idea of the North as a nuclear power.

Find more AP Asia-Pacific coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/asia-pacific>

## Scandal-plagued China soccer hit by new corruption probes

BEIJING (AP) — China's scandal-plagued football association has been rocked by new corruption probes into its chiefs of discipline and competition.

The sports ministry on Friday said Wang Xiaoping, director the CFA's Disciplinary Committee, and Huang Song, were both "suspected of serious violations" of law and discipline — the government's usual bywords for graft.

Huang was being investigated by the ruling Communist Party's corruption watchdog, the sports ministry's anti-graft body and by authorities in Hebei province outside Beijing where the national soccer team maintains a training camp, the notice said.

The single-sentence announcements said Wang and Huang were cooperating with investigators but gave no details about the charges against them. Chinese prosecutors have wide powers to hold suspects for lengthy interrogations if state secrets are believed to be involved.

The announcements come barely a month after the head of China's national soccer body Chen Xuyuan was arrested on corruption charges.

Chen was head of the Chinese Football Association and vice chair of its party committee, underscoring the government's heavy hand in attempting to direct success in the game.

China's increasingly autocratic president and Communist Party leader Xi Jinping declared a plan to make China a football superpower, but funding and enthusiasm have appeared to dwindle. Xi has also made fighting corruption a signature policy, taking down political rivals in the process and further embedding strict policies governing freedom of speech and civil society organizations outside party control.

Sports falls under the same yoke of state control and the national team has seen a revolving door of foreign and domestic managers cut loose for their failure to produce results.

One of China's most decorated past football leaders, former Everton and Sheffield United midfielder Li Tie, has been jailed amid a graft investigation.

Despite its success in Olympic sports such as table tennis and shooting, China has only qualified for one soccer World Cup, more than two decades ago. The men's national team is currently ranked 80th by FIFA, just behind countries such as Uzbekistan, Georgia and Gabon.

China's top division clubs once paid big salaries to attract foreign talent, but the league has virtually collapsed under the now-abandoned "zero-COVID" policy and lingering economic malaise. Top sponsors have gone bankrupt and efforts to fight match-fixing and other forms of cheating have received little attention of late.

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

## Why are firing squads for US executions being debated?

By MICHAEL TARM AP Legal Affairs Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — The image of gunmen in a row firing in unison into the chest of a condemned prisoner may conjure up a bygone, less enlightened era.

But the idea of using firing squads is making a comeback. Idaho lawmakers passed a bill this week seeking to add the state to the list of those authorizing firing squads, currently Mississippi, Utah, Oklahoma

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and South Carolina.

Fresh interest comes as states scramble for alternatives to lethal injections after pharmaceuticals barred the use of their drugs.

Some, including a few Supreme Court justices, view firing squads as less cruel than lethal injections despite the violence involved in riddling bodies with bullets. Others say it's not cut-and-dry, or that there are other factors to consider.

Here is a look at the status of firing squads in the United States:

**WHEN WAS THE LAST EXECUTION BY FIRING SQUAD?**

Ronnie Lee Gardner was executed at Utah State Prison on June 18, 2010, for killing an attorney during a courthouse escape attempt.

Gardner sat in a chair, sandbags around him and a target pinned over his heart. Five prison staffers drawn from a pool of volunteers fired from 25 feet (about 8 meters) away with .30-caliber rifles. Gardner was pronounced dead two minutes later.

A blank cartridge was loaded into one rifle without anyone knowing which. That's partly done to enable those bothered later by their participation to believe they may not have fired a fatal bullet.

Utah is the only state to have used firing squads in the last 50 years, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Death Penalty Information Center.

**WHAT HAS CAUSED THE LETHAL DRUG SCARCITY?**

Under Idaho's bill, firing squads would be used only if executioners can't obtain the drugs required for lethal injections.

As lethal injection became the primary execution method in the 2000s, drug companies began barring use of their drugs, saying they were meant to save lives, not take them.

States have found it difficult to obtain the cocktail of drugs they long relied on, such as sodium thiopental, pancuronium bromide and potassium chloride.

Some states have switched to more accessible drugs such as pentobarbital or midazolam, both of which, critics say, can cause excruciating pain.

Other states have turned to alternatives, with some either reauthorizing the use of electric chairs and gas chambers or at least considering doing so. That's where firing squads come in.

**ARE THEY MORE HUMANE?**

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor is among those who say they probably are.

That idea is based on expectations that bullets will strike the heart, rupturing it and causing immediate unconsciousness as the inmate quickly bleeds to death.

"In addition to being near instant, death by shooting may also be comparatively painless," Sotomayor wrote in a 2017 dissent.

Her comments were in the case of an Alabama inmate who asked to be executed by firing squad. A Supreme Court majority refused to hear his appeal.

Sotomayor agreed in her dissent that lethal drugs can mask intense pain by paralyzing inmates while they are still sentient.

"What cruel irony that the method that appears most humane may turn out to be our most cruel experiment yet," she wrote.

**IS THERE A COUNTER-ARGUMENT TO THAT?**

In a 2019 federal case, prosecutors submitted statements from anesthesiologist Joseph Antognini, who said painless deaths by firing squads are not guaranteed.

Inmates could remain conscious for up to 10 seconds after being shot depending on where bullets strike, Antognini said, and those seconds could be "severely painful, especially related to shattering of bone and damage to the spinal cord."

Others note that killings by firing squad are visibly violent and bloody compared with lethal injections, potentially traumatizing victims' relatives and other witnesses as well as executioners and staffers who clean up afterward.

**ARE FIRING SQUADS MORE RELIABLE?**



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If reliability means the condemned are more likely to die as intended, then one could make that argument. An Amherst College political science and law professor, Austin Sarat, studied 8,776 executions in the U.S. between 1890 and 2010 and found that 276 of them were botched, or 3.15% of the time.

The executions that went wrong included 7.12% of all lethal injections — in one notorious 2014 case in Oklahoma, Clayton Lockett writhed and clenched his teeth after midazolam was administered — as well as 3.12% of hangings and 1.92% of electrocutions.

By contrast, not a single one of the 34 firing squad executions was found to have been botched, according to Sarat, who has called for an end to capital punishment.

The Death Penalty Information Center, however, has identified at least one firing squad execution that reportedly went awry: In 1879, in Utah territory, riflemen missed Wallace Wilkerson's heart and it took 27 minutes for him to die.

## WERE FIRING SQUADS EVER IN WIDE USE?

They have never been a predominant method of carrying out civilian death sentences and are more closely associated with the military, including the execution of Civil War deserters.

From colonial days through 2002, more than 15,000 people were put to death, according to data compiled by death penalty researchers M. Watt Espy and John Ortiz Smykla. Just 143 were by firing squad, compared with 9,322 by hanging and 4,426 by electrocution.

## HAS THE SUPREME COURT WEIGHED IN?

High court rulings have required inmates who oppose an existing execution method to offer an alternative. They must prove both that the alternative is "significantly" less painful and that the infrastructure exists to implement the alternative method in practice.

That has led to the incongruous spectacle of inmate attorneys bringing multiple cases in which they argue the merits of firing squads.

In 2019 the Supreme Court ruled in *Bucklew v. Precythe* that some pain does not automatically mean a method of execution constitutes "cruel and unusual" punishment, which is prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.

The Constitution "does not guarantee a prisoner a painless death — something that, of course, isn't guaranteed to many people," Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote for the 5-4 majority.

Key factors in deciding whether a method is "cruel and unusual" include whether it adds extra pain "beyond what's needed to effectuate a death sentence," Gorsuch said.

\_\_\_ Follow Michael Tarm on Twitter at @mtarm.

## Corruption, deep disparity mark Iraq's oil legacy post-2003

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

NAHRAN OMAR, Iraq (AP) — The oil is pumped 24 hours a day several meters from Raghed Jasim's home in Iraq's crude-rich southern heartland. Gas flares from the field light the night sky bright orange, spewing acrid smoke; when the wind picks up, the 40-year old's clothes are coated black.

For Iraq's poorest, evidence of the country's monumental oil wealth is inescapable. So is the knowledge that very little of it trickles down to them.

Jasim's savings were depleted when he was diagnosed with cancer last year, a disease he is convinced was caused by the toxic plumes. Twenty years since the U.S.-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein and remade Iraq's political order with the promise of democracy and freedom, he has one wish: To find a way to leave.

"There is no future here for my children," he said.

Basra province, which boasts most of Iraq's oil reserves, is symbolic of the deep disparities that have endured since the 2003 invasion. Basra continually bewilders experts, envoys and residents: How can a relatively stable province so rich in resources rank among the poorest and most under-developed in the country?

"Of course, I blame the corrupt Iraqi government," said Jasim, a policeman, echoing a widespread view

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in the region. "But I blame the Americans too. They replaced our leaders with thieves."

Local leaders in Basra talk of the oil reserves as both a blessing and a curse. They say resources bring affluence but have also given rise to vicious competition between political elites and armed groups at the expense of the Iraqi people.

The power-sharing system in place since 2003, which divides the state and its institutions along ethnic and sectarian lines, sucks oil wealth into a pool of corruption and patronage. The higher the oil price, the more entrenched this system becomes as sectarian-based parties claim lucrative ministry portfolios, appoint loyalists in key positions and dole out public jobs to ensure support. According to the International Monetary Fund, public sector employment tripled from 2004 to 2013, but service delivery in health, education and power sectors remained inadequate.

The result is that elections keep establishment parties in power. Voter turnout has dropped to record lows.

Apart from institutional failures, air pollution is extensive in Basra, and salinity levels arising from a severe fresh water crisis are leading causes of illness, according to local researchers. Unemployment is rampant, with more than half the population below the age of 25.

Public anger gave rise to violent protests in 2018, the precursor to mass anti-government protests in the capital a year later. But a swift crackdown by security forces and assassinations by armed groups have created a climate of fear.

"The killings silenced many activists," said Basra activist Ammar Sarhan. "Business continues as usual."

The 2003 toppling of Saddam propelled the oil-rich country into the global economy, opening the doors to foreign investment. In pre-invasion planning, U.S. advisors and their Iraqi opposition allies in exile had envisioned a shock system of reforms that would revamp Iraq's oil industry and fund post-war reconstruction.

Instead, violence hobbled oil production for years. A charm offensive by then-Oil Minister Hussein al-Shahrestani paved the way for major oil contracts to be awarded in 2007 and 2009. Today exports reach over 3 million barrels a day, double the rate in the early 2000s. The state budget, which in 2021 reached up to \$90 billion, is financed almost entirely by oil revenues. Still, the government fails to deliver essential services, including water and electricity.

In Basra, conditions rank amongst the worst in the country. Unemployment stands at 21%, above the national average of 16% according to a 2022 study by the International Labor Organization. Statistics for poverty rates vary from 10-20% according to various studies and local economists. Meanwhile, the province boasts around 70% of the country's oil production capacity.

The road leading to Jasim's humble home is rocky and unpaved.

In 2003, he was a young man bewitched by the Bush administration's rhetoric of building a democratic Iraq, he said. "We were full of hope," he recalled. Twenty years on, he is middle-aged, tired of rampant government corruption and recovering from cancer.

The loan he had taken out to build a home was used up to pay for \$30,000 in private medical bills. Basra's decrepit public hospitals were overwhelmed and unable to provide treatment, he said.

His is a common story in Nahran Omar, a village of fewer than 2,000 people adjacent to a state-run oil field where cancer rates are disproportionately high. Every family here has a story of illness and debt, said Bashir Jabir, the mayor.

"After 2003, more and more oil was exported, and we expected to benefit from this," he said. "Instead, it hurt us."

The government long played down the link between cancer rates in the south and oil production activity, saying cases are only marginally higher than the rest of the country. This changed in 2022, when then-Environment Minister Jassim al-Falahi acknowledged that pollution from the fields was the main reason for the rise in sickness.

Nahran Omar highlights a tragic irony: The natural gas burned from the oil fields, if captured, could solve Iraq's perennial electricity shortages and reduce pollution. But securing investment to do this has been set back by protracted contract negotiations, a common headache for most major foreign investors.

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The entry of foreign investors also exacerbated competition between tribes, said Sheikh Muhammed al-Zaidawi, who leads an assembly of southern tribal elders. Tribes, which often wield more influence than government institutions in the south, pressure foreign companies for jobs, compensation, training for youth and development of their villages.

"Most of the problems between tribes today are caused by the presence of oil companies," he said, "All of them want to benefit." Tribal disputes often turn into deadly gun battles.

Reliance on the oil industry has stifled private sector development. Nearly every prime minister since the invasion has repeated calls to diversify the economy and boost incentives for Iraqi businesses.

Nidhal Musa is one success story.

She grew up in a poor suburb of Basra city and was 35 when the U.S. invaded Iraq. She spent subsequent years taking care of her sick and disabled husband. Desperate to earn money, she began sewing clothes to sell in the local market.

By 2013, she had gathered a group of women just like herself, beleaguered and in need of money to support their families. She pooled together enough funds to open a garment factory and became known for employing the poor.

But not everyone welcomed her success.

In 2022, Musa received a slew of death threats. "Be very careful," one message read. She believes she is being targeted because she refused to use her local fame to back a powerful political party that asked her to promote their campaign in 2021 elections.

"They try to keep us weak," she said. "They know perfectly well, if the people are hungry, they will be preoccupied only by their hunger."

## Utah social media law means kids need approval from parents

By SAM METZ and BARBARA ORTUTAY Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Children and teens in Utah would lose access to social media apps such as TikTok if they don't have parental consent and face other restrictions under a first-in-the-nation law designed to shield young people from the addictive platforms.

Two laws signed by Republican Gov. Spencer Cox Thursday prohibit kids under 18 from using social media between the hours of 10:30 p.m. and 6:30 a.m., require age verification for anyone who wants to use social media in the state and open the door to lawsuits on behalf of children claiming social media harmed them. Collectively, they seek to prevent children from being lured to apps by addictive features and from having ads promoted to them.

The companies are expected to sue before the laws take effect in March 2024.

The crusade against social media in Utah's Republican-supermajority Legislature is the latest reflection of how politicians' perceptions of technology companies has changed, including among typically pro-business Republicans.

Tech giants like Facebook and Google have enjoyed unbridled growth for over a decade, but amid concerns over user privacy, hate speech, misinformation and harmful effects on teens' mental health, lawmakers have made Big Tech attacks a rallying cry on the campaign trail and begun trying to rein them in once in office. Utah's law was signed on the same day TikTok's CEO testified before Congress about, among other things, the platform's effects on teenagers' mental health.

But legislation has stalled on the federal level, pushing states to step in.

Outside of Utah, lawmakers in red states including Arkansas, Texas, Ohio and Louisiana and blue states including New Jersey are advancing similar proposals. California, meanwhile, enacted a law last year requiring tech companies to put kids' safety first by barring them from profiling children or using personal information in ways that could harm children physically or mentally.

The new Utah laws also require that parents be given access to their child's accounts. They outline rules for people who want to sue over harms they claim the apps cause. If implemented, lawsuits against social media companies involving kids under 16 will shift the burden of proof and require social media companies

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show their products weren't harmful — not the other way around.

Social media companies could have to design new features to comply with parts of the laws that prohibit promoting ads to minors and showing them in search results. Tech companies like TikTok, Snapchat and Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, make most of their money by targeting advertising to their users.

The wave of legislation and its focus on age verification has garnered pushback from technology companies as well as digital privacy groups known for blasting their data collection practices.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation earlier this month demanded Cox veto the Utah legislation, saying time limits and age verification would infringe on teens' rights to free speech and privacy. Moreover, verifying every users' age would empower social media platforms with more data, like the government-issued identification required, they said.

If the law is implemented, the digital privacy advocacy group said in a statement, "the majority of young Utahns will find themselves effectively locked out of much of the web."

Tech industry lobbyists decried the laws as unconstitutional, saying they infringe on people's right to exercise the First Amendment online.

"Utah will soon require online services to collect sensitive information about teens and families, not only to verify ages, but to verify parental relationships, like government-issued IDs and birth certificates, putting their private data at risk of breach," said Nicole Saad Bembridge, an associate director at NetChoice, a tech lobby group.

What's not clear in Utah's new law and those under consideration elsewhere is how states plan to enforce the new regulations. Companies are already prohibited from collecting data on children under 13 without parental consent under the federal Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. To comply, social media companies already ban kids under 13 from signing up to their platforms — but children have been shown to easily get around the bans, both with and without their parents' consent.

Cox said studies have shown that time spent on social media leads to "poor mental health outcomes" for children.

"We remain very optimistic that we will be able to pass not just here in the state of Utah but across the country legislation that significantly changes the relationship of our children with these very destructive social media apps," he said.

The set of laws won support from parents groups and child advocates, who generally welcomed them, with some caveats. Common Sense Media, a nonprofit focused on kids and technology, hailed the effort to rein in social media's addictive features and set rules for litigation, with its CEO saying it "adds momentum for other states to hold social media companies accountable to ensure kids across the country are protected online."

However, Jim Steyer, the CEO and founder of Common Sense, said giving parents access to children's social media posts would "deprive kids of the online privacy protections we advocate for." Age verification and parental consent may hamper kids who want to create accounts on certain platforms, but does little to stop companies from harvesting their data once they're on, Steyer said.

The laws are the latest effort from Utah lawmakers focused on the fragility of children in the digital age. Two years ago, Cox signed legislation that called on tech companies to automatically block porn on cellphones and tablets sold in the state, after arguments about the dangers it posed to children found resonance among Utah lawmakers, the majority of whom are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Amid concerns about enforcement, lawmakers ultimately revised that legislation to prevent it from taking effect unless five other states passed similar laws.

The regulations come as parents and lawmakers are growing increasingly concerned about kids and teenagers' social media use and how platforms like TikTok, Instagram and others are affecting young people's mental health. The dangers of social media to children is also emerging as a focus for trial lawyers, with addiction lawsuits being filed throughout the country.

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Ortutay reported from Oakland, California.

## Nowell has record 19 assists as Kansas State reaches Elite 8

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Markquis Nowell broke the NCAA Tournament record for assists in a game with 19, his last two on spectacular passes in the final minute of overtime, and Kansas State beat Michigan State 98-93 on Thursday night in a Sweet 16 thriller at Madison Square Garden.

Playing in his hometown and fighting through a second-half ankle injury, Nowell found Keyontae Johnson for a reverse alley-oop with 52 seconds left in OT to give the Wildcats (26-9) the lead for good in this back-and-forth East Region semifinal. He then threw an inbound pass to Ismael Massoud, who knocked down a jumper with 17 seconds left for a 96-93 lead.

With Michigan State needing a 3 to tie, Nowell stole the ball from the Spartans' Tyson Walker and drove for a clinching layup at the buzzer. The 5-foot-8, Harlem-raised Nowell finished with 20 points and five steals in a signature performance at basketball's most famous arena.

Johnson scored 22 points for the No. 3 seed Wildcats, who will face ninth-seeded Florida Atlantic on Saturday as they seek the program's first Final Four berth since 1964.

A.J. Hoggard scored a career-high 25 points for seventh-seeded Michigan State (21-13). Joey Hauser added 18 points and Walker had 16, including a layup with 5 seconds left in regulation that forced the first overtime of this year's NCAA Tournament.

UNLV's Mark Wade had the previous NCAA tourney assists record with 18 during the Runnin' Rebels 1987 Final Four win over Indiana.

FLORIDA ATLANTIC 62, TENNESSEE 55

NEW YORK (AP) — Florida Atlantic, playing in just its second NCAA Tournament, moved within a victory of the Final Four by using a second-half push led by Michael Forrest to beat fourth-seeded Tennessee.

The ninth-seeded Owls (34-3) will play Kansas State in the East Region final.

Johnell Davis led the Owls with 15 points and Forrest finished with 11, eight in a crucial second-half run where FAU took control.

The Volunteers (25-11), who were looking for just the second Elite Eight appearance in program history, shot just 33% — including 6 of 23 from 3-point range. Josiah-Jordan James and Jonas Aidoo scored 10 points apiece.

WEST REGION

GONZAGA 79, UCLA 76

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Julian Strawther hit a deep 3-pointer with 7.2 seconds left to answer a 3 by UCLA's Amari Bailey, lifting Gonzaga to a wild win over UCLA.

The second-seeded Bruins (31-6) stormed back from an eight-point deficit in the final 1:05 and took a 76-75 lead on Bailey's 3 with 12.2 seconds left.

The Zags (31-5) brought the ball up the floor and Strawther stepped into a 3. His shot, off a drop pass, was reminiscent of the one Villanova's Kris Jenkins made to clinch the 2016 national championship.

Tyger Campbell's desperation 3 at the buzzer hit the back of the rim, sending the third-seeded Zags rushing off the bench and into the West Region final against UConn on Saturday.

Drew Timme scored 36 points for Gonzaga, his record 10th NCAA Tournament game with 20 points or more. Jaime Jaquez Jr. finished with 29 points and 11 rebounds for UCLA.

UCLA led by 13 at the half, but Gonzaga went ahead by 10 with 2:30 left in the game with UCLA in the midst of an 11-minute field goal drought. The Bruins rallied from there to regain the lead, with Jaquez converting two three-point plays in a 30-second span.

UCONN 88, ARKANSAS 65

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Jordan Hawkins scored 24 points and UConn routed Arkansas to reach the Elite Eight.

The fourth-seeded Huskies (28-8) have outscored their three March Madness opponents by a combined 62 points and will play Gonzaga on Saturday for a spot in the Final Four.

The Huskies never trailed and led by as many as 29 points. Adama Sanogo scored 18 points, Alex Kara-

ban had 11 and Nahiem Alleyene added 10.

Anthony Black led Arkansas (22-14) with 20 points. Ricky Council IV had 17 and Nick Smith Jr. scored 11 as coach Eric Musselman fell one game short of taking the Razorbacks to a third consecutive Elite Eight.

AP March Madness coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/march-madness> and bracket: <https://apnews.com/hub/ncaa-mens-bracket> and <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-top-25-college-basketball-poll> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## Gwyneth Paltrow expected to testify in ski collision trial

By SAM METZ Associated Press

PARK CITY, Utah (AP) — Gwyneth Paltrow and the man who broke four ribs after the two collided at a Utah ski resort seven years ago are both expected to testify on Friday in a trial over his claims that the movie star's recklessness caused his concussion and lasting physical injuries.

Paltrow and Terry Sanderson, the retired optometrist suing her, are expected to answer questions about the crash as their attorneys jostle to convince the 10-member jury who was responsible for the collision and who had the right of way as the skier farther downhill. Paltrow claims Sanderson was responsible for the crash.

In a trial that Judge Kent Holmberg and attorneys for both parties have agreed will last eight days, with each side getting four to call witnesses, Friday marks the final day that Sanderson's attorneys can compel Paltrow to testify. Next week, Paltrow's team is expected to call medical experts, ski instructors and her two children, Moses and Apple.

The trial thus far has shone a spotlight on Park City, Utah — the posh ski town known for rolling out a red carpet for celebrities each January for the Sundance Film Festival — and Deer Valley Resort, where Paltrow and Sanderson were skiing on a Friday in February seven years ago. The resort is among the most upscale in North America, known for sunny slopes, après-ski champagne yurts and high-amenity lodges.

The proceedings have delved deep into the 76-year-old Sanderson's medical history and personality quirks, with attorneys questioning whether his deteriorating health and estranged relationships stemmed from the collision or more innate phenomenon, like aging or anger problems.

The trial has touched on themes ranging from skier's etiquette to the power — and burden — of celebrity. The amount of money at stake for both sides pales in comparison to the typical legal costs of a multiyear lawsuit, private security detail and expert witness-heavy trial.

Sanderson claims Paltrow recklessly crashed into him while the two were skiing on a beginner run at Deer Valley Resort, breaking his ribs and causing a concussion. He is seeking "more than \$300,000." Paltrow has countersued for \$1 and attorney fees.

Lawyers for Paltrow, an actor-turned-lifestyle influencer, spent much of Thursday raising questions about Sanderson's mentions of her wealth and celebrity as well as his "obsession" with the lawsuit.

The first three days of the trial through Thursday featured testimony from medical experts, Sanderson's personal doctor, a ski companion and his daughter, who said she noticed post-concussion symptoms less than a year after the accident and realized something had gone terribly wrong.

Paltrow's attorneys have cast doubt on Sanderson's medical experts and asked about whether his prior remarks suggest the lawsuit could be an attempt to exploit her fame and celebrity. Her lawyers Thursday asked Sanderson's daughter whether her father thought it was "cool" to collide with a celebrity like Paltrow, the Oscar-winning star of "Shakespeare in Love" and founder-CEO of lifestyle brand, Goop.

## Radioactive water leaks at Minn. nuclear plant for 2nd time

MONTICELLO, Minn. (AP) — Water containing a radioactive material has leaked for a second time from a nuclear plant near Minneapolis and the plant will be shut down, but there is no danger to the public, the plant's owner said Thursday.

A leak of what was believed to be hundreds of gallons of water containing tritium was discovered this

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week from a temporary fix at the Monticello Nuclear Generating Plant, where 400,000 gallons (1.5 million liters) of water with tritium leaked in November, Xcel Energy said in a statement Thursday.

The plant about 38 miles (61 kilometers) northwest of Minneapolis is scheduled to power down Friday so permanent repairs can begin, the company said.

There was a monthslong delay in announcing the initial leak that raised questions about public safety and transparency, but industry experts said there was never a public health threat.

The new leak, announced a day after Xcel Energy says it was discovered, was found to be coming from a temporary fix to the original leak, the company said in a statement. This time, the leak is anticipated to be in the hundreds of gallons.

"While the leak continues to pose no risk to the public or the environment, we determined the best course of action is to power down the plant and perform the permanent repairs immediately," said Chris Clark, president of Xcel Energy—Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. "We are continuing to work with and inform our state, federal, city and county leaders in the process."

After the first leak was found in November, Xcel Energy made a short-term fix to capture water from a leaking pipe and reroute it back into the plant for re-use. The solution was designed to prevent new tritium from reaching the groundwater until installation of a replacement pipe during a regularly scheduled outage in mid-April, the company said.

However, monitoring equipment indicated Wednesday that a small amount of new water from the original leak had reached the groundwater. Operators discovered that, over the past two days, the temporary solution was no longer capturing all of the leaking water, Xcel Energy said.

The leaked water remains contained on-site and has not been detected in any local drinking water, Xcel Energy said.

Tritium is a radioactive isotope of hydrogen that occurs naturally in the environment and is a common by-product of nuclear plant operations. It emits a weak form of beta radiation that does not travel far and cannot penetrate human skin, according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and Minnesota Department of Health released a statement Thursday saying they were told of the new leak Thursday afternoon and that it is ongoing. The agencies said they will continue to monitor groundwater samples and will inform the public if there is an imminent risk.

Minnesota regulators said last week that Xcel Energy voluntarily notified state agencies and reported the leak of tritium to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission soon after it was confirmed in November. The amount of leaked material never reached a threshold requiring public notification and they waited to make a public announcement until they had more information, officials said.

Edwin Lyman, director of nuclear power safety with the Union of Concerned Scientists, told The Associated Press last week that a significant health risk only would occur if people consumed fairly high amounts of tritium. That risk is contained if the plume stays on the company's site, which Xcel Energy and Minnesota officials said is the case.

## What to stream this weekend from 'Top Gun' to Lana Del Rey

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's a collection curated by The Associated Press' entertainment journalists of what's arriving on TV, streaming services and music and video game platforms this week.

### MOVIES

— The Oscar-nominated "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed" was one of the high points in documentary in the past year. In it, Laura Poitras chronicles the pioneering photographer Nan Goldin, juxtaposing an intimate survey of her groundbreaking work in 1970s and 1980s New York and her contemporary crusade against the Sackler family, owners of the Oxycontin-maker Purdue Pharma. Goldin, who has herself wrestled with addiction, led the campaign to eradicate the Sackler name from many of the world's top museums. Though the film didn't win at the Oscars — something Goldin told me she was surprised to find she wanted — it took the top prize of the Venice Film Festival. In her review, AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr called the film "a holistic portrait of an artist's battle cry." After debuting Sunday, March 19, "All the

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Beauty and the Bloodshed" is available to stream on HBO Max.

— "Top Gun: Maverick" did come away with an Academy Award, for best sound. But one of the biggest box office hits of the year otherwise struck out at the Oscars. After an uncommonly long run in theaters, a lucrative stop on video on demand and a streaming launch on Paramount+, "Top Gun Maverick" arrives on a larger streaming platform Friday, March 24th, when it touches down on Amazon's Prime Video. In his review, AP Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy called "Maverick" "a textbook example of how to make a sequel."

— This month, the Criterion Channel has been paying tribute to the greatest comic artist of the 20th century: Buster Keaton. With five features and more than a dozen shorts, the series is an unbeatable feast. You can't go wrong but a few highlights: Keaton's glorious Olympic finale in "College"; his deft ladder balancing act in "Cops"; and his escape, through a high window, from an angry police chief-slash-furious-father in "The Goat." With apologies to Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, nobody did it better.

— AP Film Writer Jake Coyle

## MUSIC

— Fans of Lana Del Rey got two albums in 2021 — "Chemtrails Over the Country Club" and "Blue Banisters" but nothing full-length in 2022. Now she's got "Did You Know That There's a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd" set to drop Friday. One of the singles, "A&W," offers a glimpse at the sing-songwriter's bleak poetry: "Puts the shower on while he calls me/Slips out the back door to talk to me/I'm invisible, look how you hold me/I'm a ghost now." The album features Jack Antonoff, Father John Misty, Jon Batiste and more.

— Back in 1984, Phil Collins and Philip Bailey had a hit with the song "Easy Lover." These days, UK pop star Ellie Goulding and Big Sean have a song with the same title that's just as infectiously fun, part of Goulding's 11-track album "Higher Than Heaven." The songs marry her ethereal voice to strong dance hooks, from the '80s-inspired "By the End of the Night" and "Just 4 You" to the modern pop of "Cure for Love."

— Do you have what it takes to be a country music's next big star? Then tune into Apple TV+'s "My Kind of Country," in which Jimmie Allen, Mickey Guyton and Orville Peck search for talented amateur artists and invite them to Nashville, Tennessee, for a showcase. Reese Witherspoon and Kacey Musgraves also are featured in the series, set to premiere globally on Friday.

— 6lack is 6ack! The Atlanta singer-songwriter and rapper known as 6lack — pronounced "black" — returns with "Since I Have a Lover," his first album in nearly five years. The title track is a airy, sweet ode to love with the lyrics: "Feel like a million bucks or somethin'/ Feel like we need to be up to somethin'/ Not tryna press my luck or nothin'/Don't wanna love you just for fun." The artist, raised in Zone 6 of Atlanta, has been doing a lot of collaborations since his last album, including Lil Tjay's "Calling My Phone" and more recently Jessie Reyez's "Forever."

— AP Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy

## TELEVISION

— Fans of shows including "Jack Ryan" and "The Recruit," about low-level government agency workers who get pulled into danger and secret missions, should check out "The Night Agent" on Netflix. It follows an FBI agent tasked with manning an overnight emergency phone that surprisingly rings during one of his shifts. A desperate civilian is on the other end of the call and together, they find themselves embroiled in a major government conspiracy. The series stars Gabriel Russo and Luciane Buchanan and is based on the novel by Matthew Quirk. "The Night Agent" debuts Thursday.

— Mae Whitman, best-known for her roles in "Parenthood" and "Good Girls," demonstrates she can also sing in her new rom-com series "Up Here" for Hulu. Set in 1999 in New York, Whitman plays Lindsay who falls for Miguel — played by Carlos Valdes ("The Flash" and "Gaslit") — and the will-they, won't-they find a happily ever after ensues. The series boasts some major behind-the-scenes musical talent. EGOT winners Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez, behind that little animated film that could "Frozen," are co-executive producers and wrote the show's original music. The show has a whimsical, "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist"-vibe, plus there are fun late-'90s references including Y2K. All eight-episodes drop Friday, the same day the soundtrack lands.



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— Kiefer Sutherland is back with another high-stakes TV drama in “Rabbit Hole” for Paramount+. He plays John Weir, a corporate spy skilled in the art of deception – until he finds the rug pulled out from underneath him and he is framed for murder. Weir goes from having total control to none, and unsure of who can be trusted. “Rabbit Hole” premieres with two episodes on Sunday.

— Alicia Rancilio

## VIDEO GAMES

— Annapurna Interactive has developed a nearly impeccable reputation among connoisseurs of indie video games, from 2017’s groundbreaking mystery *What Remains of Edith Finch* to 2022’s futuristic cat sim *Stray*. The publisher’s latest release is *Storyteller*, a long-brewing project from Argentine designer Daniel Benmergui. The premise is simple: You have a library of characters, objects, events and other plot devices, and your job is arrange them to tell a particular type of tale. It’s a puzzle game that pays homage to classic literature, and the graphics ooze charm. Start spinning your own yarns Thursday on Nintendo Switch and PC.

— Death, the CEO of Death Inc., is burned out. His top minions — the executives in charge of Natural Disasters, Modern Warfare, Toxic Food-Processing and other misery-producing departments — are going about their business way too enthusiastically, and Death needs them to settle down before he drowns in paperwork. In *Have a Nice Death*, from France’s Magic Design Studios, you wield Death’s scythe as he hacks and slashes his way through the red tape. The vibrant, angular 2D graphics are reminiscent of the classic *Rayman*, which some members of Magic Design’s team worked on. The not-so-grim reaping comes to Nintendo Switch and PC on Wednesday.

— Lou Kesten

Catch up on AP’s entertainment coverage here: <https://apnews.com/apf-entertainment>.

## Nowell breaks NCAA assist record, KSU beats MSU 98-93 in OT

By TOM CANAVAN AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Markquis Nowell walked the ball up the floor with the score tied in the final minute of overtime and exchanged animated hand signals with his coach, Jerome Tang.

Standing on the March Madness logo at Madison Square Garden, the 5-foot-8 Kansas State point guard who grew up in Harlem glanced at the basket for a split second and flicked a chest pass into the lane. Keyontae Johnson slipped behind the Michigan State defense, elevated with his back to the basket, grabbed the ball and slammed it down.

It was the signature play of a towering performance by the shortest player on the floor.

Nowell broke the NCAA Tournament record for assists in a game with 19, his last two on spectacular passes in the last minute of OT, and Kansas State beat Michigan State 98-93 on Thursday night in a Sweet 16 thriller.

“Today was a special one, man,” said Nowell, who fought through a second-half ankle injury. “I’ve got to give a lot of credit to my teammates for battling, for fighting through adversity when we was down. I can’t even explain how I’m feeling right now. I just know that I’m blessed and I’m grateful.”

Nowell’s alley-oop to Johnson with 52 seconds left in overtime gave the Wildcats (26-9) the lead for good in this back-and-forth East Region semifinal.

“I mean, it was just a basketball play between me and Keyontae,” Nowell said. “We knew how Michigan State plays defense. They play high up, and Keyontae just told me, we got eye contact, and he was like, lob, lob. I just threw it up, and he made a great play.”

Michigan State cut the lead to one before Nowell bounced an inbound pass from under the basket to Ismael Massoud, who knocked down a jumper with 17 seconds left that put Kansas State ahead 96-93 and gave Nowell the assists record.

With Michigan State needing a 3 to tie, Nowell stole the ball from the Spartans’ Tyson Walker and drove for a clinching layup at the buzzer. Nowell finished with 20 points and five steals in a signature performance

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at basketball's most famous arena that drew tweets of praise from Patrick Mahomes and Kevin Durant.

"That was a legendary display of controlling a basketball game Markquis," Durant tweeted.

UNLV's Mark Wade had the previous NCAA tourney assists record with 18 during the Runnin' Rebels 1987 Final Four win over Indiana.

Tang, the energetic, 56-year-old first-year head coach who was hired to lead the Wildcats after two decades as an assistant at Baylor, gave all the credit to his senior point guard.

"Well, what really helps is that all 10 eyes on the defense have to pay attention to him, and that's what allows everybody else to get open," Tang said. "It's not just that he sees it, but they all have to pay attention to him when he has the ball in his hands."

Johnson — the Florida transfer who was sidelined for nearly two years after he collapsed on the court during a game in December 2020 — scored 22 points for the No. 3 seed Wildcats. Kansas State will face ninth-seeded Florida Atlantic on Saturday as it seeks the program's first Final Four berth since 1964.

A.J. Hoggard scored a career-high 25 points for seventh-seeded Michigan State (21-13). Joey Hauser added 18 points and Walker had 16, including a layup with 5 seconds left in regulation that forced the first overtime of this year's NCAA Tournament.

Nowell turned his ankle early in the second half, was helped off the court and had it taped. Michigan State took the lead with him sidelined, and when he returned, he pushed off the ankle to bank in a 3-pointer that beat the shot clock and tied the game at 55-all.

Turns out he was just getting started. Neither team led by more than seven points in the final 15 minutes of regulation, and Nowell steadied Kansas State's offense down the stretch, finding Massoud for a 3-pointer that made it 80-75 and hitting a jumper with 1:04 left for the Wildcats' final basket of regulation.

Massoud, who like Nowell honed his game on the playgrounds of Harlem, finished with 15 points for the Wildcats, who shot 55.9% from the field. They become only the second team to shoot better than 50% against the Spartans this season. Cam Carter added 12 points.

Jaden Akins added 14 points for coach Tom Izzo's Spartans, the final Big Ten team in the tournament. Michigan State outrebounded Kansas State 37-31 and finished 31 of 63 from the field (49.2%).

"We got caught mesmerized on Nowell," Izzo said. "He's a special player. We actually did a pretty good job on him. ... It was the assists that really killed us, and the back cuts."

Both teams were efficient from 3-point range in a tournament that's featured shaky outside shooting, with Michigan State hitting 13 of 25 (52%) and Kansas State connecting on 11 of 24 (45.8%).

Nowell was the difference, putting his name alongside New York City point guard greats like Kenny Smith, Kenny Anderson, Mark Jackson and Bob Cousy, and sending Kansas State to its first Elite Eight since 2018.

## BIG PICTURE

Michigan State: The 68-year-old Izzo has led the Spartans to 25 straight NCAA Tournaments but is still seeking his second national title. Since their championship in 2000, the Spartans have made six Final Fours, most recently in 2019.

Kansas State: Nowell has 64 points and 42 assists in three games, including 14 assists in the first round against Montana State. He had nine assists against Kentucky; one more would have given him double-doubles in all three games.

AP March Madness coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/march-madness> and bracket: <https://apnews.com/hub/ncaa-mens-bracket> and <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-top-25-college-basketball-poll> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## 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:

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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.

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. \_\_\_ MPAA definition of R: Restricted. Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian. \_\_\_ Online: <https://johnwick.movie>

\_\_\_ Mark Kennedy is at <http://twitter.com/KennedyTwits>

## Informant didn't spy on Proud Boys defense, prosecutors say

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As revelations that a defense witness was also an FBI informant roil the already contentious Capitol riot trial of members of the far-right Proud Boys group, prosecutors said Thursday that the informant was never told to gather information about the defendants or their lawyers.

The FBI ended its relationship with the informant this past January after it learned that the person had received a subpoena to testify, an agent said in an affidavit filed in court.

U.S. District Judge Timothy Kelly said there's no clear evidence of wrongdoing by the government and allowed the trial to continue Friday, but is also set to hear additional arguments about how deeply enmeshed the informant was with the case.

The government only found out from the defense team that the informant had been communicating with the defense and had participated in "prayer meetings" with relatives of at least one of the Proud Boys on trial, prosecutors said. They called suggestions of government misconduct "baseless."

The revelation came Wednesday when defense lawyer Carmen Hernandez said in court papers that the defense team was told by prosecutors that afternoon that the witness they were planning to call to the stand on the next day had been a government informant.

"From our point of view, this is alarming, shocking, troublesome," Hernandez, who is representing Proud Boy Zachary Rehl, during an emergency hearing on the matter held after the judge canceled testimony for the day.

The informant had been set to testify for former Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrío and had met with his lawyers in preparation for testimony. The informant also had defense contacts, including sending a "constant drumbeat" of unsolicited messages to one lawyer and recommended potential witnesses to another.

"I've lost confidence in the process," said Norman Pattis, who said the informant had more than two dozen calls with his client, including about legal issues.

It's the latest twist in the trial, which is one of the most serious to emerge from the Jan. 6 attack that halted Congress' certification of President Joe Biden's victory, sent lawmakers running and left dozens of police officers injured.

Tarrío, Rehl and three other Proud Boys — Joseph Biggs, Ethan Nordean and Dominic Pezzola — are charged with seditious conspiracy for what prosecutors allege was a plot to block the transfer of presidential power from Donald Trump to Biden after the 2020 election.

Tarrío, a Miami resident, served as national chairman for the far-right extremist group, whose members describe it as a politically incorrect men's club for "Western chauvinists." He and the other Proud Boys could face up to 20 years in prison if convicted of seditious conspiracy.

Prosecutors said the FBI was "generally aware" that the informant was "active in assisting defendants charged with crimes related to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol and their families, including by assisting in fundraising efforts and protesting against their conditions of confinement," prosecutors wrote.

But investigators "intentionally chose to never ask" the informant about the person's relationship with Tarrío or any other defendants or lawyers involved in the case, they said.

"That certain defendants or defense counsel chose to communicate with the (confidential human source) about matters related to this prosecution is a decision made by them. However, the government in no way orchestrated such alleged voluntary interactions," prosecutors wrote.

Defense lawyers didn't name the informant in their court filing, but said it is somebody who served as an informant for the government from April 2021 through at least January 2023, though the original contact dated back to 2019.

The Justice Department considers the situation "very serious," and has shared documents in an effort to show the informant was never asked for any information about the trial defense, said Denise Cheung, acting deputy chief of the criminal division, at the hearing.

It's not the first time the government's use of informants has become an issue in the case. Defense attorneys have repeatedly pushed to get more information about informants in the far-right extremist group

as they try to undermine the notion that the group had a plan to attack the Capital on Jan. 6.

FBI Agent Nicole Miller testified last week that she was aware of two informants in the Proud Boys, including one who marched on the Capital on Jan. 6.

Law enforcement routinely uses informants in criminal investigations, but their methods and identities can be closely guarded secrets. Federal authorities haven't publicly released much information about their use of informants in investigating the Proud Boys' role in a mob's attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6.

Nordean, of Auburn, Washington, was a Proud Boys chapter leader. Biggs, of Ormond Beach, Florida, was a self-described Proud Boys organizer. Rehl was president of the Proud Boys chapter in Philadelphia. Pezzola was a Proud Boys member from Rochester, New York.

## Gwyneth Paltrow's lawyer asks about missing GoPro video

By SAM METZ Associated Press

PARK CITY, Utah (AP) — Gwyneth Paltrow's attorneys asked the daughter of a man suing the actor-turned-lifestyle influencer over a 2016 ski collision about missing GoPro camera footage that they called "the most important piece of evidence" at trial Thursday.

Steve Owens, Paltrow's attorney, asked one of the man's daughters, Polly Grasham, about emails exchanged with her father about the mysterious footage and the possibility that the lawsuit was filed against Paltrow because she was famous.

The GoPro footage has not been found or included as evidence for the trial.

"I'm famous ... At what cost?" Terry Sanderson, the 76-year-old retired optometrist suing Paltrow, wrote in the subject line of an email to his family after the crash.

Sanderson is suing Paltrow for more than \$300,000 in damages, claiming that she skied recklessly into him on a beginner run at Deer Valley Resort seven years ago, breaking his ribs and leaving him with a concussion. Paltrow has claimed Sanderson caused the crash and countersued for \$1 and attorney fees.

The trial took on an increasingly personal note on the third day of proceedings when Sanderson's daughter and a neuropsychologist testified about his declining health.

Sanderson's attorneys tried to persuade jurors that the collision had changed the course of their client's life, leaving him brain-impaired and damaging his relationships with loved ones.

Paltrow's attorneys questioned whether Grasham and neuropsychologist Dr. Alina Fong could say with certainty that Sanderson's downturn wasn't a result of aging or documented, pre-crash conditions. They questioned Grasham about her father's anger problems, divorces and estranged relationship with another of his daughters, who is not testifying at trial.

Paltrow has previously called the lawsuit an attempt to exploit her fame and celebrity. On Thursday, Owens, her lead counsel, asked Grasham why her father sent messages about his newfound fame.

"It matches his personality a little bit, making light of a serious situation," Grasham said of the email.

Owens probed Sanderson's "obsession" with the case and whether he thought it was "cool" to collide with a celebrity like Paltrow, the Oscar-winning star of "Shakespeare in Love" and founder-CEO of the wellness company, Goop.

Sanderson is expected to testify Friday about the lasting effects of the crash. He has not been present in the courtroom while his doctors and experts have detailed his health problems.

Paltrow could be called to testify on Friday or early next week, when the eight-day trial continues.

The proceedings thus far have touched on themes ranging from skier's etiquette to the power — and burden — of celebrity. The amount of money at stake for both sides pales in comparison to the typical legal costs of a multiyear lawsuit, private security detail and expert witness-heavy trial. Sanderson's attorney told the jury Thursday that this trial is about "value, not cost."

The first two days of trial featured attorneys arguing about whether Sanderson or Paltrow was further down the slope during the collision — a disagreement rooted in a "Skiers Responsibility Code" that gives the skier who is downhill the right of way. Sanderson's attorneys and expert medical witnesses described how his injuries were likely caused by someone crashing into him from behind. They attributed noticeable

changes in Sanderson's mental acuity to injuries from that day.

Paltrow's attorneys have tried to represent Sanderson as a 76-year-old whose decline followed a normal course of aging rather than the results of a crash. They have not yet called witnesses of their own to testify, but in opening statements previewed for jurors that they plan to call Paltrow's husband Brad Falchuk and her two children, Moses and Apple, to the stand next week.

Associated Press writer Anna Furman contributed reporting from Los Angeles.

## Artwork that secretly honored Hong Kong dissidents removed

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — A Hong Kong department store took down a digital artwork that contained hidden references to jailed dissidents, in an incident the artist says is evidence of erosion of free speech in the semi-autonomous Chinese city.

It was unclear whether the government played a role in the decision to remove the artwork, it came just days after a slasher film featuring Winnie the Pooh, a figure often used in playful taunts of China's President Xi Jinping, was pulled from local cinemas.

Patrick Amadon's "No Rioters" was put on display on a billboard at the SOGO Causeway Bay Store for an exhibition that started last Friday, as the city was promoting its return as a vibrant cultural hub following years of pandemic travel restrictions. Art Basel Hong Kong, a prominent art fair in Asia, began this week, alongside other art events.

Hong Kong is a former British colony that returned to China's rule in 1997, promising to retain its Western-style freedoms. The city was rocked by a massive pro-democracy protest movement in 2019, which ended after China imposed a "National Security Law" that criminalized much dissent. The city's government has since jailed and silenced many activists.

Amadon said he had followed the protests in Hong Kong closely, and he wanted his work to show solidarity with the protesters and remind people about the new reality of the city.

"It was too much watching Art Week in Hong Kong pretend the Chinese government didn't crush a democracy and turn Hong Kong into a vassal surveillance state... because it's a convenient location for a good market," the Los Angeles-based artist said.

Amadon said he knew the work would be controversial and was surprised it had been displayed in public for days. It featured a panning surveillance camera.

Flashes of Matrix-like text showcased the names and prison sentences of convicted activists and other prominent figures in the pro-democracy movement, including legal scholar Benny Tai and former student leader Joshua Wong, who were both charged with subversion in the biggest case brought under the National Security Law.

These details were shown too fast to be seen by the naked eyes Amadon said, but viewers could see the details if they used a camera to capture stills. It also referred to journalist-turned activist Gwyneth Ho who was assaulted when she was live-streaming a mob attack in July 2019 during the massive protests sparked by an extradition bill.

The gallery that arranged the exhibit did not know whether the government ordered the work taken down, Francesca Boffetti, CEO at Art Innovation Gallery said in an email.

"Our intermediary told us that the owners of SOGO were concerned about the sensitive political content hidden behind Patrick's work, so they decided to remove the work from the exhibition immediately," Boffetti said.

No one mentioned any law or threatened them with fines, she added, but SOGO's legal team asked the gallery whether it was aware of the content and message of Amadon's work.

Local police and SOGO did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau told the Associated Press that it did not contact SOGO.

Amadon said the gallery told him in an urgent call that it was very concerned about its legal exposure

after a conversation with SOGO.

Since the passage of the National Security Law, the city's art and media communities have learned to be wary of crossing vaguely defined red lines. Pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily was forced to close after authorities arrested its top editors and executives and accused them of foreign collusion. Some artists known for their political work left Hong Kong under the shadow of the law. Some filmmakers have stopped showing their work in the city. Even those producing non-political content have become cautious. But the government insisted that its residents continue to enjoy promised freedoms after the enactment of the law.

Amadon said what happened to his work showed that the city had lost its freedom of expression and artistic freedom.

"This objectively shows that they are no longer here in the same way that they once were," he said. "From a narrative standpoint, I mean, it did have to get censored and taken down, I feel like, to be a completed piece."

Find more AP Asia-Pacific coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/asia-pacific>

## Los Angeles school strike ends, but no deal announced

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A three-day strike by workers in the Los Angeles Unified School District ended Thursday, but it wasn't immediately clear if any progress was made in negotiations for higher pay for teachers' aides, bus drivers, custodians and other support staff in the nation's second-largest school system.

Teachers joined the picket lines in solidarity, shutting down instruction for the district's half-million students during the walkout by members of Local 99 of the Service Employees International Union, which represents about 30,000 of the lowest-paid school workers. Support staffers earn, on average, about \$25,000 a year in Los Angeles, barely enough to get by in one of the most expensive cities in America.

Mayor Karen Bass stepped in as mediator Wednesday after district Superintendent Alberto M. Carvalho accused the union of refusing to negotiate.

Max Arias, executive director of SEIU Local 99, said the union was grateful that Bass was helping "find a path out of our current impasse." There was no indication Thursday how the arbitration was going.

"Education workers have always been eager to negotiate as long as we are treated with respect and bargained with fairly, and with the mayor's leadership we believe that is possible," Arias said.

Carvalho has called the school district's offer "historic." It includes a cumulative 23% raise, starting with 2% retroactive as of the 2020-21 school year and ending with 5% in 2024-25. The package would also give a one-time 3% bonus to those who have been on the job more than a year. It would also add more full-time positions and expand health care benefits.

Sofia Munoz, a special education teacher's assistant, said she hoped the labor action sent a message to Carvalho.

"We're hoping just to bring awareness and let the superintendent know that we're here to make a difference," Munoz said Thursday at a rally marking the strike's final day.

The school district confirmed in a statement Wednesday that school officials have been in talks with union leaders with help from the mayor.

"We continue to do everything possible to reach an agreement that honors the hard work of our employees, corrects historical inequities, maintains the financial stability of the district and brings students back to the classroom," the statement said.

The union said employees, including special education assistants, cafeteria workers and gardeners, would return to work on Friday.

The strike concluded after putting a spotlight on the issue of notoriously underpaid workers who serve as the backbone of schools across the country.

SEIU Local 99 says many of its members live in poverty because of low pay or limited work hours while struggling with inflation and the high cost of housing. The union is seeking a 30% raise for workers.

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While the Los Angeles Unified School District is unique because of its size, the walkout could have lessons for other systems in the state, said Troy Flint, spokesperson for the California School Board Association.

"LAUSD could be the canary in the coalmine when you look at the potential for difficult labor negotiations in school districts across California," he said.

Districts are coping with staff shortages and other challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, while working to address other longstanding issues including student performance that predated the pandemic, according to Flint. In addition, emergency pandemic funding from the state was set to expire next year, which will stretch district finances even thinner after decades of underfunding, he said.

"It's natural that employees want to be better compensated for their important work," Flint said. "There is a lot of tension between what districts want to do and what they have the capacity to do."

Leaders of United Teachers of Los Angeles, which represents 35,000 educators, counselors and other staff, pledged solidarity with the strikers.

Experts say it is unusual for different unions in the same school district to band together but the unified labor action in Los Angeles could mark an inflection point.

Luz Varela, a teacher's aide, said workers felt like they had to strike.

"I feel sad that we have to go through this because we're missing our kids, but we're doing this for our kids," she said. "I feel that we deserve a little bit more. It's not all about the money. This is about our future for our kids."

## Violent French pension protests erupt as 1M demonstrate

By ALEXANDER TURNBULL, NICOLAS GARRIGA and ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — More than 1 million people demonstrated across France on Thursday against unpopular pension reforms, and violence erupted in some places as unions called for new nationwide strikes and protests next week, coinciding with King Charles III's planned visit to France.

The Interior Ministry said the march in Paris — marred by violence, as were numerous marches elsewhere — drew 119,000 people, which was a record for the capital during the pension protests. Polls say most French oppose President Emmanuel Macron's bill to increase the retirement age from 62 to 64, which he says is necessary to keep the system afloat.

Building on the strong turnout, unions swiftly called for new protests and strikes on Tuesday when the British king is scheduled to visit Bordeaux on the second day of his trip to France. The heavy wooden door of the elegant Bordeaux City Hall was set afire and quickly destroyed Thursday evening by a members of an unauthorized demonstration, the Sud Ouest newspaper said.

Nationwide, more than a million people joined protest marches held in cities and towns around the country Thursday, the ministry said.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin, visiting police headquarters Thursday night as fires still burned in some Paris neighborhoods, gave assurance that security "poses no problem" and the British monarch will be "welcomed and welcomed well."

He said there was "enormous degrading" of public buildings and commerce Thursday, "far more important than in precedent demonstrations."

"There are troublemakers, often extreme left, who want to take down the state and kill police and ultimately take over the institutions," the minister said.

The demonstrations were held a day after Macron further angered his critics by standing strong on the retirement bill that his government forced through parliament without a vote.

"While the (president) tries to turn the page, this social and union movement ... confirms the determination of the world of workers and youth to obtain the withdrawal of the reform," the eight unions organizing protests said in a statement. It called for localized action this weekend and new nationwide strikes and protests Tuesday.

Strikes upended travel as protesters blockaded train stations, Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, refineries and ports.



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In Paris, street battles between police and black-clad, masked groups who attacked at least two fast food restaurants, a supermarket and a bank reflected intensifying violence and drew attention away from the tens of thousands of peaceful marchers.

Police, pelted by Molotov cocktails, objects and fireworks, charged multiple times and used tear gas to disperse rioters. A haze of tear gas fumes covered part of the Place de l'Opera, where demonstrators converged at the march's end. Darmanin said radicals numbered some 1,500.

Violence marred other marches, notably in the western cities of Nantes, Rennes and Lorient — where an administrative building was attacked and the courtyard of the police station was set afire and its windows broken — and in Lyon, in the southeast.

Thursday's nationwide protests were the ninth union-organized demonstrations since January, when opponents still hoped that parliament would reject Macron's measure to raise the retirement age. But the government forced it through using a special constitutional measure.

In an interview Wednesday, Macron refused to budge from his position that a new law is necessary to keep retirement coffers funded. Opponents proposed other solutions, including higher taxes on the wealthy or companies, which Macron says would hurt the economy. He insisted the government's bill to raise the retirement age must be implemented by the end of the year.

The Constitutional Council must now approve the measure.

"We are trying to say before the law is enacted ... that we have to find a way out and we continue to say that the way out is the withdrawal of the law," the chief of the moderate CFDT trade union, Laurent Berger, told The Associated Press.

High-speed and regional trains, the Paris metro and public transportation systems in other major cities were disrupted. About 30% of flights at Paris Orly Airport were canceled.

The Eiffel Tower and the Versailles Palace, where the British monarch is to dine with Macron, were closed Thursday due to the strikes.

Violence, a recurring issue at protests, has intensified in recent days. Darmanin said that 12,000 security forces were in the French streets Thursday, with 5,000 in Paris,

The Education Ministry said in a statement that about 24% of teachers walked off the job in primary and middle schools on Thursday, and 15% in high schools.

At Paris' Gare de Lyon train station, several hundred strikers walked on railway tracks to prevent trains from moving, brandishing flares and chanting "and we will go, and we will go until withdrawal" and "Macron, go away."

"This year perhaps maybe our holidays won't be so great," said Maxime Monin, 46, who stressed that employees like himself, who work in public transport, are not paid on strike days. "But I think it's worth the sacrifice."

In the northern suburbs of Paris, several dozen union members blocked a bus depot in Pantin, preventing about 200 vehicles from getting out during rush hour.

Nadia Belhoum, a 48-year-old bus driver participating in the action, criticized Macron's decision to force the higher retirement age through.

"The president of the Republic ... is not a king, and he should listen to his people," she said.

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Associated Press journalists Sylvie Corbet, Helena Alves, Masha Macpherson and Jeffrey Schaeffer in Paris contributed to this report.

## Court blocks COVID-19 vaccine mandate for US gov't workers

By KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — President Joe Biden's order that federal employees get vaccinated against COVID-19 was blocked Thursday by a federal appeals court.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans rejected arguments that Biden, as the nation's chief executive, has the same authority as the CEO of a private corporation to require that employees be

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vaccinated.

The ruling from the full appeals court, 16 full-time judges at the time the case was argued, reversed an earlier ruling by a three-judge 5th Circuit panel that had upheld the vaccination requirement. Judge Andrew Oldham, nominated to the court by then-President Donald Trump, wrote the opinion for a 10-member majority.

The ruling maintains the status quo for federal employee vaccines. It upholds a preliminary injunction blocking the mandate issued by a federal judge in January 2022. At that point, the administration said nearly 98% of covered employees had been vaccinated.

And, Oldham noted, with the preliminary injunction arguments done, the case will return to that court for further arguments, when "both sides will have to grapple with the White House's announcement that the COVID emergency will finally end on May 11, 2023."

Opponents of the policy said it was an encroachment on federal workers' lives that neither the Constitution nor federal statutes authorize.

Biden issued an executive order in September 2021 requiring vaccinations for all executive branch agency employees, with exceptions for medical and religious reasons. The requirement kicked in the following November. U.S. District Judge Jeffrey Brown, who was appointed to the District Court for the Southern District of Texas by Trump, issued a nationwide injunction against the requirement the following January.

The case then went to the 5th Circuit.

One panel of three 5th Circuit judges refused to immediately block the law.

But a different panel, after hearing arguments, upheld Biden's position. Judges Carl Stewart and James Dennis, both nominated to the court by President Bill Clinton, were in the majority. Judge Rhesa Barksdale, nominated by President George H.W. Bush, dissented, saying the relief the challengers sought does not fall under the Civil Service Reform Act cited by the administration.

The broader court majority agreed, saying federal law does not preclude court jurisdiction over cases involving "private, irreversible medical decisions made in consultation with private medical professionals outside the federal workplace."

A majority of the full court voted to vacate that ruling and reconsider the case. The 16 active judges heard the case on Sept. 13, joined by Barksdale, who is now a senior judge with lighter duties than the full-time members of the court.

Judge Stephen Higginson, a nominee of former President Barack Obama, wrote the main dissenting opinion. "For the wrong reasons, our court correctly concludes that we do have jurisdiction," Higginson wrote. "But contrary to a dozen federal courts — and having left a government motion to stay the district court's injunction pending for more than a year — our court still refuses to say why the President does not have the power to regulate workplace safety for his employees."

The date of President Joe Biden's executive order has been corrected to September 2021, not last September.

## March Madness: Sweet 16 begins from NYC to Las Vegas

By The Associated Press undefined

March Madness has reached Sweet 16 weekend. Two No. 1 seeds, Kansas and Purdue, are already gone along with millions of busted brackets and a host of bluebloods including Kentucky, Duke and Indiana — though UCLA's drive for a 12th national title remains alive. Here is what to know:

### GAMES TO WATCH

No. 5 seed San Diego State (29-6) vs. No. 1 seed Alabama (31-5), Friday, 6:30 p.m. ET (TBS)

The Aztecs are in the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2004 and have won 11 of their last 13. They will need balanced scoring against the Crimson Tide, who handily dispatched Maryland. All-America freshman Brandon Miller, who is playing in the shadow of a fatal shooting case back in Alabama, had 19 after going scoreless in the first round.

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No. 1 Houston (33-3) vs. No. 5 Miami (27-7), Friday, 7:15 p.m. (CBS)

The Hurricanes looked kind of like Houston in the game that got them to the Sweet 16. They started fast, got big scoring games from Isaiah Wong and Jordan Miller and dominated the glass to earn their spot in the second weekend for the second year in a row. Now, they'll have to try it against the real Cougars, who waited until after halftime to turn up the heat against Auburn. Tramon Mark and the injured Marcus Sasser both had big offensive games and Houston clamped down on defense with 12 blocks against the Tigers. The Cougars are going to their fourth Sweet 16 in five years. Two more wins for the team ranked No. 1 during the season and they'll get to play in the Final Four in their home city.

No. 6 Creighton (23-12) vs. No. 15 Princeton, Friday, 9 p.m. (TBS)

This year's tournament darlings are the Tigers, and like the Bluejays they will face, they claim to be unsurprised. The Tigers dominated Missouri to reach their first Sweet 16 in 56 years. Win again and they'll be where Bill Bradley took them in 1965. The Bluejays hope the shooting touch that got them to the Sweet 16 for the second time in three years can now get them to their first Elite Eight. They shot 45.8% from 3-point range in the second round after a 3-for-20 showing in the first round and tied the record by making all 22 of their free throws.

No. 3 seed Xavier (27-9) vs. No. 2 seed Texas (28-8), Friday, 9:45 p.m. ET (CBS)

The Musketeers are in the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2017 and will face a Texas team that hasn't been there in 15 years. Xavier put on a clinic on unselfishness in the first half of its 84-73 victory against Pittsburgh, totaling 17 assists on 19 made field goals. The Longhorns made just one 3-pointer in 13 tries in their 71-66 victory against Penn State, but Dylan Disu had a season-high 28 points.

## TOP SEEDS

The top four seeds were given to Alabama, Houston, Kansas and Purdue. Expectations for a chaotic tournament were met quickly: The Boilermakers were ousted by Fairleigh Dickinson in a first-round stunner and the defending champion Jayhawks lost to Arkansas the next day.

## SHINING MOMENTS

Princeton used a late run to earn its first NCAA Tournament win in 25 years by ousting No. 2 seed Arizona and then beat Missouri to lock in its first Sweet 16 spot in 56 years. For Princeton and other teams, getting this far after pandemic-disrupted seasons is a milestone.

Furman celebrated its first tourney appearance since 1980 with a win over No. 4 seed Virginia on a deep 3-pointer by JP Pegues with 2.4 seconds left. Then came 16-seed Fairleigh Dickinson's win over Purdue as the 22 1/2-point underdog joined UMBC in the record books.

All that happened before the Razorbacks and shirtless coach Eric Musselman celebrated their win over the Jayhawks.

## BRAGGING RIGHTS

The SEC and Big Ten led the way by placing eight teams each in the 68-team field. Conference USA (Florida Atlantic) and the Ivy League (Princeton) each got one team into the tournament. The records through two rounds:

ACC (5 teams made tourney): 5-4. 1 remaining (Miami). American Athletic (2): 2-1. 1 remaining (Houston). Big 12 (7): 7-5. 2 remaining (Kansas State, Texas). Big East (5): 7-2. 3 remaining (Creighton, UConn, Xavier). Big Ten (8): 6-7. 1 remaining (Michigan State). Mountain West (4): 2-3. 1 remaining (San Diego State). Pac-12 (4): 3-3. 1 remaining (UCLA). SEC (8): 9-5. 3 remaining (Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee). West Coast (2): 3-1. 1 remaining (Gonzaga).

## GO DEEPER

Gun violence has cost lives and disrupted college sports all season, touching some of the top programs in college basketball, including Alabama. Coaches have been thrust into uncertain and unwelcome roles in trying to navigate the topic — as well as the fallout from the Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe vs. Wade.

On a lighter note, if you feel you know March Madness pretty well, try this 25-question trivia quiz.

## PLAYERS TO WATCH

The NCAA Tournament is filled with great players and the AP All-America team is a good place to get familiar with the names. It's also an event where guys you've never heard of can take a star turn. There

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are some NBA prospects in the mix.

Bet on this, too: Some player — maybe more than one — will have a chance to join the mustachioed Doug Edert (remember Saint Peters' inspiring run last year?) and find a way to cash in on their celebrity.

## HOW TO WATCH

Every game of the men's tournament will be aired — here is a schedule — either on CBS, TBS, TNT or TruTV and their digital platforms. CBS, which also has a handy schedule that includes announcing teams, will handle the Final Four and national title game this year.

The NCAA is streaming games via its March Madness Live option and CBS games are being streamed on Paramount+. Fans of longtime play-by-play announcer Jim Nantz should soak up every moment: It's his final NCAA Tournament.

## BETTING GUIDE

Who's going to win the national championship? The betting favorites earlier this week (in order): Alabama, Houston, UConn, UCLA, Creighton and Texas, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

## MARCH MADNESS CALENDAR

Sweet 16 weekend has games in New York City (East Region), Las Vegas (West), Kansas City, Missouri (Midwest), and Louisville, Kentucky (South).

Where is the Final Four? In Houston, on April 1, with the championship game on April 3. Basketball aficionados, take note: The women's NCAA Tournament will hold its Final Four in Dallas, a four-hour drive up the road from Houston.

Can't get enough March Madness? Well, there is talk about expanding the tournament despite a host of challenges. Enjoy the 68-team version for now!

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AP March Madness coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/march-madness> and bracket: <https://apnews.com/hub/ncaa-mens-bracket> and <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-top-25-college-basketball-poll> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## Trump arrested? Putin jailed? Fake AI images spread online

By ARIJETA LAJKA and PHILIP MARCELO undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump getting gang-tackled by riot-gear-clad New York City police officers. Russian President Vladimir Putin in prison grays behind the bars of a dimly lit concrete cell.

The highly detailed, sensational images have inundated Twitter and other platforms in recent days, amid news that Trump faces possible criminal charges and the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Putin.

But neither visual is remotely real. The images — and scores of variations littering social media — were produced using increasingly sophisticated and widely accessible image generators powered by artificial intelligence.

Misinformation experts warn the images are harbingers of a new reality: waves of fake photos and videos flooding social media after major news events and further muddying fact and fiction at crucial times for society.

"It does add noise during crisis events. It also increases the cynicism level," said Jevin West, a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle who focuses on the spread of misinformation. "You start to lose trust in the system and the information that you are getting."

While the ability to manipulate photos and create fake images isn't new, AI image generator tools by Midjourney, DALL-E and others are easier to use. They can quickly generate realistic images — complete with detailed backgrounds — on a mass scale with little more than a simple text prompt from users.

Some of the recent images have been driven by this month's release of a new version of Midjourney's text-to-image synthesis model, which can, among other things, now produce convincing images mimicking the style of news agency photos.

In one widely-circulating Twitter thread, Eliot Higgins, founder of Bellingcat, a Netherlands-based inves-

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tigative journalism collective, used the latest version of the tool to conjure up scores of dramatic images of Trump's fictional arrest.

The visuals, which have been shared and liked tens of thousands of times, showed a crowd of uniformed officers grabbing the Republican billionaire and violently pulling him down onto the pavement.

Higgins, who was also behind a set of images of Putin being arrested, put on trial and then imprisoned, says he posted the images with no ill intent. He even stated clearly in his Twitter thread that the images were AI-generated.

Still, the images were enough to get him locked out of the Midjourney server, according to Higgins. The San Francisco-based independent research lab didn't respond to emails seeking comment.

"The Trump arrest image was really just casually showing both how good and bad Midjourney was at rendering real scenes," Higgins wrote in an email. "The images started to form a sort of narrative as I plugged in prompts to Midjourney, so I strung them along into a narrative, and decided to finish off the story."

He pointed out the images are far from perfect: in some, Trump is seen, oddly, wearing a police utility belt. In others, faces and hands are clearly distorted.

But it's not enough that users like Higgins clearly state in their posts that the images are AI-generated and solely for entertainment, says Shirin Anlen, media technologist at Witness, a New York-based human rights organization that focuses on visual evidence.

Too often, the visuals are quickly reshared by others without that crucial context, she said. Indeed, an Instagram post sharing some of Higgins' images of Trump as if they were genuine garnered more than 79,000 likes.

"You're just seeing an image, and once you see something, you cannot unsee it," Anlen said.

In another recent example, social media users shared a synthetic image supposedly capturing Putin kneeling and kissing the hand of Chinese leader Xi Jinping. The image, which circulated as the Russian president welcomed Xi to the Kremlin this week, quickly became a crude meme.

It's not clear who created the image or what tool they used, but some clues gave the forgery away. The heads and shoes of the two leaders were slightly distorted, for example, and the room's interior didn't match the room where the actual meeting took place.

With synthetic images becoming increasingly difficult to discern from the real thing, the best way to combat visual misinformation is better public awareness and education, experts say.

"It's just becoming so easy and it's so cheap to make these images that we should do whatever we can to make the public aware of how good this technology has gotten," West said.

Higgins suggests social media companies could focus on developing technology to detect AI-generated images and integrate that into their platforms.

Twitter has a policy banning "synthetic, manipulated, or out-of-context media" with the potential to deceive or harm. Annotations from Community Notes, Twitter's crowd-sourced fact checking project, were attached to some tweets to include the context that the Trump images were AI-generated.

When reached for comment Thursday, the company emailed back only an automated response.

Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, declined to comment. Some of the fabricated Trump images were labeled as either "false" or "missing context" through its third-party fact-checking program, of which the AP is a participant.

Arthur Holland Michel, a fellow at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in New York who is focused on emerging technologies, said he worries the world isn't ready for the impending deluge.

He wonders how deepfakes involving ordinary people — harmful fake pictures of an ex-partner or a colleague, for example — will be regulated.

"From a policy perspective, I'm not sure we're prepared to deal with this scale of disinformation at every level of society," Michel wrote in an email. "My sense is that it's going to take an as-yet-unimagined technical breakthrough to definitively put a stop to this."

Associated Press reporter David Klepper in Washington contributed to this story.

## **Asteroid that could wipe out a city is near, but don't fear**

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — An asteroid big enough to wipe out a city will zip harmlessly between Earth and the moon's orbit this weekend, missing both celestial bodies.

Saturday's close encounter will offer astronomers the chance to study a space rock from just over 100,000 miles (168,000 kilometers) away. That's less than half the distance from here to the moon, making it visible through binoculars and small telescopes.

While asteroid flybys are common, NASA said it's rare for one so big to come so close — about once a decade. Scientists estimate its size somewhere between 130 feet and 300 feet (40 meters and 90 meters).

Discovered a month ago, the asteroid known as 2023 DZ2 will pass within 320,000 miles (515,000 kilometers) of the moon on Saturday and, several hours later, buzz the Indian Ocean at about 17,500 mph (28,000 kph).

"There is no chance of this 'city killer' striking Earth, but its close approach offers a great opportunity for observations," the European Space Agency's planetary defense chief Richard Moissl said in a statement.

Astronomers with the International Asteroid Warning Network see it as good practice for planetary defense if and when a dangerous asteroid heads our way, according to NASA.

The Virtual Telescope Project will provide a live webcast of the close approach.

The asteroid won't be back our way again until 2026. Although there initially seemed to be a slight chance it might strike Earth then, scientists have since ruled that out.

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

## **Track bans transgender athletes, tightens rules for Semenya**

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

Track and field banned transgender athletes from international competition Thursday, while adopting new regulations that could keep Caster Semenya and other athletes with differences in sex development from competing.

In a pair of decisions expected to stoke outrage, the World Athletics Council adopted the same rules as swimming did last year in deciding to bar athletes who have transitioned from male to female and have gone through male puberty. No such athletes currently compete at the highest elite levels of track.

Another set of updates, for athletes with differences in sex development (DSD), could impact up to 13 current high-level runners, WA President Sebastian Coe said. They include Semenya, a two-time Olympic champion at 800 meters, who has been barred from that event since 2019.

Semenya and others had been able to compete without restrictions in events outside the range of 400 meters through one mile but now will have to undergo hormone-suppressing treatment for six months before competing to be eligible.

Coe conceded there are no easy answers on this topic, which has turned into a societal lightning rod involving advocates concerned with keeping a level playing field in women's sports and others who don't want to discriminate against transgender and DSD athletes.

"All the decisions we've taken have their challenges," Coe said. "If that's the case, then we will do what we have done in the past, which is vigorously defend our position. And the overarching principle for me is we will always do what we think is in the best interest of our sport."

Athletes with sex development differences, such as Semenya and Olympic 200-meter silver medalist Christine Mboma of Namibia, are not transgender, although the two issues share similarities when it comes to sports.

Such athletes were legally identified as female at birth but have a medical condition that leads to some

male traits, including high levels of testosterone that World Athletics argues gives them the same kind of unfair advantage as transgender athletes.

Semenya has been running in longer events. She finished 13th in her qualifying heat at 5,000 meters at world championships last year. In a recent interview, she said she was aiming to run in the Olympics at a longer distance.

"I'm in the adaptation phase, and my body is starting to fit with it. I'm just enjoying myself at the moment, and things will fall into place at the right time," the South African runner said.

Now, in order to compete at next year's Olympics, she would have to undergo hormone-suppressing treatment for six months, something she has said she will never do again, having undergone the treatment a decade ago under previous rules.

Mboma, who won her silver in Tokyo two years ago but was out of worlds last year because of an injury, has not publicly stated whether she would be willing to undergo hormone therapy.

Another athlete, Olympic 800-meter silver medalist Francine Niyonsaba of Burundi, also has said she would not undergo treatment. While Semanya struggled at longer distances, Niyonsaba had relative success, winning Diamond League titles at 3,000 and 5,000 meters and running in the 5,000 at the Tokyo Olympics.

Under the new regulations, athletes in the previously "unrestricted" events would have to suppress testosterone levels below 2.5 nanomoles per liter of blood for six months. Ultimately, they would have to stay below those levels for two years.

Previously, athletes with differences in sex development had to lower their testosterone to below 5 nanomoles per liter of blood for at least six months before competing, and the rules only applied to distances between 400 meters and one mile.

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AP Sports Writer Gerald Imray contributed to this report.

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More AP coverage of the Paris Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/2024-paris-olympic-games> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Sports](https://twitter.com/AP_Sports)

## **A fish can sense another's fear, a study shows**

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Our capacity to care about others may have very, very ancient origins, a new study suggests.

It might have been deep-rooted in prehistoric animals that lived millions of years ago, before fish and mammals like us diverged on the tree of life, according to researchers who published their study Thursday in the journal *Science*.

"Some of the mechanisms that underlie our ability to experience fear, or fall in and out of love, are clearly very ancient pathways," said Hans Hofmann, an evolutionary neuroscientist at the University of Texas at Austin, who was not involved in the research.

Scientists are usually reluctant to attribute humanlike feelings to animals. But it's generally accepted that many animals have moods, including fish.

The new study shows that fish can detect fear in other fish, and then become afraid too — and that this ability is regulated by oxytocin, the same brain chemical that underlies the capacity for empathy in humans.

The researchers demonstrated this by deleting genes linked to producing and absorbing oxytocin in the brains of zebrafish, a small tropical fish often used for research. Those fish were then essentially antisocial — they failed to detect or change their behavior when other fish were anxious.

But when some of the altered fish received oxytocin injections, their ability to sense and mirror the feelings of other fish was restored — what scientists call "emotional contagion."

"They respond to other individuals being frightened. In that regard, they behave just like us," said University of Calgary neuroscientist Ibukun Akinrinade, a co-author of the study.

The study also showed that zebrafish will pay more attention to fish that have previously been stressed

out – a behavior the researchers likened to consoling them.

Previous research has shown that oxytocin plays a similar role in transmitting fear in mice.

The new research illustrates “the ancestral role” of oxytocin in transmitting emotion, said Rui Oliveira, a behavioral biologist at Portugal’s Gulbenkian Institute of Science and a study co-author.

This brain processing “may have already been in place around 450 million years ago, when you and me and these little fish last had a common ancestor,” explained Hofmann.

Oxytocin is sometimes thought of as a “love” hormone, but Hofmann said it’s actually more like “a thermostat that determines what is socially salient in a particular situation – activating neural circuits that may make you run from danger, or engage in courtship behavior.”

That could be fundamental to the survival of many animals, especially those who live in groups, said Stony Brook University ecologist Carl Safina, who was not involved in the study.

“The most basic form of empathy is contagious fear – that’s a very valuable thing to have to stay alive, if any member of your group spots a predator or some other danger.”

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Follow Christina Larson on Twitter at @larsonchristina.

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

## TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew: 3 things to know

By TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew testified Thursday at a congressional hearing over concerns about user data collected by the popular video-sharing app and potential Chinese spying.

Under his helm, TikTok reached 150 million users in the U.S., the majority of them teens and young adults who are attracted to the app’s simple interface and addictive algorithm that serves up short videos on just about any imaginable topic.

Lawmakers have said they’re worried about American data falling into the hands of the Chinese government and claim it threatens national security and user privacy and could be used to promote pro-Beijing propaganda and misinformation.

Chew attempted to persuade lawmakers not to pursue a ban on the app or force Chinese parent company ByteDance to give up its ownership stake, testifying that TikTok prioritizes the safety of young users. He says the company plans to store all U.S. user data on servers maintained and owned by the software giant Oracle.

Here’s a closer look at Chew:

### WHAT IS HIS BACKGROUND?

Chew, 40, is a native of Singapore, where he lives with his wife, Vivian Kao, and their two children. He graduated in 2006 from University College London and worked for two years at Goldman Sachs before moving to the U.S. to pursue a master’s degree at Harvard Business School. Chew had a two-year internship with Facebook.

After earning his MBA, he became a partner at venture capital firm DST Global, where he worked for five years and helped facilitate investment in the company that became ByteDance. He then worked for five years at Xiaomi, a Chinese smartphone company, before being appointed TikTok CEO in 2021, replacing Kevin Mayer, a former Disney executive. Chew reports to ByteDance CEO Liang Rubo.

### WHAT’S HIS REPUTATION?

The U.S. public knows relatively little about Chew compared with Silicon Valley social media giants such as Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, said Brooke Erin Duffy, who studies social media platforms as an associate professor of communications at Cornell University.

“Chew has been in the background on public discourse until now, so he doesn’t have the same reputation we would associate with the Silicon Valley set, especially Zuckerberg,” Duffy said.



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Most Americans likely first heard of Chew when he released a video this week speaking directly to TikTok's U.S. users, she said, "so he doesn't have the same reputation as someone we know, and (we) don't have sense of who he is."

But Chew is well-respected within the U.S. and China tech communities, and was considered a good fit for TikTok because of his background in investment banking and his time at Facebook and DST Global, said Dan Ives, managing director of New York-based Wedbush Securities.

"He gained a lot of respect just by taking that high risk, in-the-hot seat role at TikTok," Ives said, adding that the company likely thought he was the right person to ease tensions with U.S. lawmakers.

HOW DID HE DO IN HIS TESTIMONY?

Chew's decision to emphasize TikTok's reach in the U.S. might have backfired, and "actually strengthened U.S. lawmakers' argument that TikTok poses a threat to both national security and young people," said Jasmine Enberg, a social media analyst at Insider Intelligence.

Enberg said there was little Chew could say to convince lawmakers that TikTok is not monitored or influenced in some way by the Chinese government.

Ives said Chew's testimony was always going to be fraught, but his lack of concrete answers about data access and security was "a disaster" and likely set the stage for a ban.

"It was a perfect storm and lawmakers were ready," Ives said.

But Shelly Palmer, a professor of advanced media at Syracuse University who studies social network business models, said Chew did the best he could given the grilling he received from lawmakers who "in my opinion were not actually listening" but instead were grandstanding.

"I don't think he has the ability, because of who he is and what he does, to be satisfying to this audience," said Palmer, adding that he believed Chew's answers were not unlike those given by CEOs from U.S.-based social media companies who have been questioned in the past about privacy.

Webber reported from Fenton, Michigan. Associated Press writer Barbara Ortutay in Oakland, California, contributed to this story.

## Why the religious fast for Ramadan, Lent and other holy days

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO and MARIAM FAM Associated Press

Muslims around the world are welcoming the start of Ramadan, a month of fasting, increased worship, heightened charity, good deeds and community. Christians are also fasting during Lent, the 40-day period of penance and prayer ahead of Easter, which marks the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Fasting across religions is practiced for a wide range of reasons that include spiritual purification and self-discipline. Here is a quick look at fasting as an act of faith:

**BUDDHISM**

-- In Buddhism, fasting is recognized as one of the methods for practicing self-control. Buddhist monks generally refrain from taking solid food after noon every day.

**CHRISTIANITY**

-- In Christianity, fasting is used as a way to purify the body, practice self-control and save resources to give to the poor.

— Many Pentecostal Christians fast in anticipation that it will equip them to experience the Holy Spirit more powerfully.

-- During Lent, many Christians observe a 40-day period of penance, prayer and fasting. It is observed from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday, the day before Easter, which marks their belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This year, Easter falls on April 9 for most Christians. During Lent, Christians replicate the biblical account of Jesus withdrawing to the desert to pray and fast for the 40 days.

-- Christians often abstain from eating meat on Fridays during Lent, and some for the entire period. Some also give up coffee, candy or another item they see as a personal sacrifice. "You're showing your seriousness and your willingness to suffer for your religion," said Deana Weibel, an anthropology and

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religious studies professor at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan.

-- The Catholic Church does not consider fish, lobster and other shellfish to be meat, so they can be consumed on days of abstinence, according to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In many U.S. communities, Friday fish fries are common occurrence during Lent.

## HINDUISM

-- In Hinduism, fasting is not an obligation, but a voluntary act of spiritual purification. The most commonly observed fast is Ekadashi, which falls on the 11th day of each lunar cycle as the moon waxes and wanes. Hindus also fast during several festivals or as part of their spiritual discipline. People may do complete or partial fasts or just give up their favorite foods for a certain period of time.

## ISLAM

— Abstaining from all food and drink -- not even a sip of water is allowed-- and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan is regarded as an act of piety and devotion to God and an exercise in self-restraint.

— Islamic scholars say the merits of fasting also include cultivating gratitude and compassion for the less fortunate and poor.

— Making donations and helping feed the needy are hallmarks of the month, which also typically sees the devout dedicating more time for prayers, religious studies and reading of the Quran, the Muslim holy book.

— Many look forward to the fast as an act of spiritual rejuvenation and purification.

— In Islam, fasting is one of The Five Pillars of the faith, along with the profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, and pilgrimage, which is known in Arabic as hajj. There are exemptions from fasting, including for the sick.

— The daily fasting is followed by iftar, or breaking of the fast, often in festive gatherings with family and friends.

## JAINISM

-- Fasting is an important part of Jainism. It is viewed as a way to cleanse one's body, including one's bad karma or actions. Jain fasts could last from one day to more than a month. People may do complete or partial fasts or just give up their favorite foods for a certain period of time.

## JUDAISM

-- The holiest day of the Jewish calendar involves a 25-hour fasting period that's coupled with prayers for forgiveness. During Yom Kippur, Judaism's day of atonement, Israeli life grinds to a halt -- businesses shut down, roads empty out and even radio and TV stations go silent as the faithful fast for 25 hours and hold intensive prayers of atonement.

## SIKHISM

-- Sikhism is one of few religions that does not regard fasting as meritorious. Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh faith, regarded fasting as inferior to the "truth" or "right action," which he said was superior to fasting, penance or other austerities.

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Associated Press writers Deepa Bharath and Peter Smith contributed to this report.

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Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP's collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

## Park outside: Hyundai, Kia recall vehicles due to fire risk

DETROIT (AP) — Hyundai and Kia are telling the owners of more than 571,000 SUVs and minivans in the U.S. to park them outdoors because the tow hitch harnesses can catch fire while they are parked or being driven.

The affiliated Korean automakers are recalling the vehicles and warning people to park them away from structures until repairs are made.

Affected Hyundai vehicles include the 2019 to 2023 Santa Fe, the 2021 to 2023 Santa Fe Hybrid, the

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2022 and 2023 Santa Fe Plug-in hybrid and the 2022 and 2023 Santa Cruz. The only Kia affected is the Carnival minivan from 2022 and 2023. All have Hyundai or Kia tow hitch harnesses that came as original equipment or were installed by dealers.

The Korean automakers say in documents posted Thursday by U.S. safety regulators that water can get into a circuit board on the hitches and cause a short circuit even if the ignitions are off.

Hyundai has reports of one fire and five heat damage incidents with no injuries. Kia has no reports of fires or injuries.

Dealers at first will remove the fuse and tow hitch computer module until a fix is available. Later they will install a new fuse and wire extension with an improved connector that's waterproof. Owners will be notified starting May 16.

Last year Hyundai recalled more than 245,000 2020 through 2022 Palisade SUVs for a similar problem.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said Thursday that the latest recall is a direct result of the agency monitoring the Palisade recall from last year.

## Princeton Tigers add to their March Madness lore

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

PRINCETON, N.J. (AP) — Two years ago, Mitch Henderson was coaching a Princeton team that was basically on sabbatical.

The Ivy League had called off sports again amid the pandemic as other leagues and the NCAA pushed ahead so the Tigers blended in with other hoops junkies and watched March Madness like fans. Henderson ordered pizzas and smoothies, gathered the Tigers at their on-campus gym, and they watched tournament games on the big screen.

"That was fun and we got to do something," Henderson said. "It really brought us closer."

Princeton's bonding period over a season of Zooms and tournament watch parties fueled the Tigers' growth into this season's brainy basketball bullies of March. See ya, Arizona. Maybe next year, Missouri.

Oh, and that's not the delivery driver this week dropping pizzas off at Jadwin Gym. That was Phil Murphy, the governor of New Jersey, who made a cameo appearance at a practice before the Tigers left for their first Sweet 16 since 1967. Murphy raised his arm with the rest of the Tigers and coaching staff and broke the huddle on the three count with "together!"

"I don't think any of us have had a governor roll into practice," Tigers standout Ryan Langborg said, laughing. "That was a really cool experience. But at the same time, it was just another day at the office."

The cubicle is getting cramped.

Politicians, professors, media hordes, anyone who can snag a spot has popped by the gym to glean insights on how the 15th-seeded Tigers have pulled this off. Ousting second-seeded Arizona by 4 points looked every bit an upset; blowing out Missouri by 15 in the second round did not.

"Things are going to be different as much as I try to keep it normal," Henderson said. "At Princeton, we don't get this that often. I love that they're getting a chance to feel like celebrities."

Take 2022 Ivy League Player of the Year Tosan Evbuomwan. He picked up food at Winberie's -- "where extraordinary people are regulars" -- and received a standing ovation. Henderson, himself a March hero for Princeton under Pete Carril in the 1990s, was shuttled with his players to New York for spots on CNN and "The Dan Patrick Show." Blake Peters became a March meme when he channeled Kevin Garnett and yelled "anything is possible!" Even late night host Jimmy Fallon dropped a lyric that "Missouri got served by some old Princeton nerds, now you're busted" in a campy song about the spate of extreme upsets.

Up next, Princeton's biggest game since the 1967 team that boasted three All-Ivy League first-team players lost to North Carolina in the Sweet 16, - when only 23 teams were in the tournament. The Tigers are 9½-point underdogs to No. 6 seed Creighton on Friday in Louisville, Kentucky, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

Still, Princeton has yet to be overwhelmed by the big stage. Missouri lost as a 6½-point favorite and Arizona was a 13½-point favorite.

Henderson recalled some advice former Wisconsin coach Bo Ryan once offered about the tournament.

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"All you've got to do is win six game in a row," Henderson said. "It is a bit of a math thing."

Princeton kids love a good equation and the late John Nash is perhaps more well-known than Carril, the basketball legend who died last summer. The downtown university store didn't have a single tournament T-shirt in the window, or on the racks. The stately buildings that house Princeton's clubs -- private social and networking facilities for students and alumni -- seemed naked without banners and flags that would fly at more traditional basketball schools.

"It's not a very big sports school," sophomore Elise Kait said inside the student union. "I think the athletes are probably all pretty excited. I'd say a good number of students are. But I'd say a good number of them don't really care."

Kait was likely to juggle game updates as she hits up a performance Friday night of Princeton's rock ensemble, PURE.

"It's unfortunate it happened at the same time so I can't really cheer on the guys as much," ensemble singer Samara Samad said. "But that's how the cookie crumbles"

The Tigers practiced Tuesday at the same time "Star Wars" actress Kelly Marie Tran was speaking at the school's center for equality. Many of the Tigers consider themselves movie buffs. Langbord, the senior guard, had a midterm essay due this week on the Federico Fellini film "Amarcord." The Tigers made it a habit of watching movies together before every game. One of last weekend's selections? The Tom Hanks hijacking film "Captain Phillips."

Just ask Arizona, the Tigers are the captains now.

"I should have said that in the postgame press conference," Langborg cracked.

Langborg and Evbuomwan are also focused on the NBA but as fodder for senior theses. Evbuomwan, Princeton's British big man, is writing about "How Diversity in Executive Management in the NBA Affects Team Performance." Langborg is researching how traveling through time zones affects players, results and how that could factor into sports betting lines.

Hey, didn't the Tigers just fly 2,800 miles to Sacramento, California, and win two games?

"Maybe it doesn't make that much difference after all," Langborg said, laughing. "It would be hard to throw all those other studies I've been looking at out the door."

What did go out the door? His deadline. Langborg was granted a one-week extension on completing the thesis.

"You'd be surprised at these Ivy League schools, You'd think they're not going to give you any leeway on this stuff. I have personal relationships with so many professors," he said.

Langborg, who hit a jumper and then a layup to give the Tigers the lead for good against Arizona, will play next season at another school as a graduate student.

There's no guarantee that the 47-year-old Henderson, who has only one losing season in 11 years at Princeton, will stay much longer, either. He could parlay this deep run into a job at a school where scholarships and other support await. It's lately a Jersey thing — Shaheen Holloway bolted Saint Peter's for Seton Hall after last season's Elite Eight run and Farleigh Dickinson's Tobin Anderson used last week's monumental 16-over-1 win against Purdue to leave for Iona.

Henderson sidestepped questions about his future.

He recalled a lesson from his past, when Carril told Henderson when he was hired, "don't be me." Henderson's retort: "You're in the Hall of Fame."

Henderson, though, has grown the program in the era of an Ivy League Tournament and the game has evolved to the point where there is no more Princeton offense in Princeton's offense. There was not a single backdoor cut -- a staple in Carril's heyday and the spark that punctuated Princeton's famed upset over UCLA in 1996 -- in last week's wins.

Henderson has picked the basketball minds of national championship-winning coaches such as Jay Wright and Tony Bennett and said he realized "sustained winning over time is on the defensive end."

One thing Henderson won't do and that is compare this team to the '96 team. The photo of Henderson forever frozen with his arms outstretched in his victory leap after that upset remains the iconic snapshot in program history. His players bust his chops over his hang time.

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"Why didn't we try to replicate that moment and all of us just jump up and pump our fists?" Langborg said. Maybe they will get another chance.

\_\_\_ AP March Madness coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/march-madness> and bracket: <https://apnews.com/hub/ncaa-mens-bracket> and <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-top-25-college-basketball-poll> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## Q&A: Chuck D talks rap's rise through 'Fight the Power' doc

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Hip-hop became a cultural phenomenon against the backdrop of American history, and now Public Enemy's Chuck D has committed himself to explore the artform's origins.

Chuck D rounded up several rap greats — including Ice-T, Run DMC and MC Lyte — who offered their firsthand accounts ahead of this year's 50th anniversary of hip-hop. Their reflections are explored in the four-part docuseries "Fight the Power: How Hip Hop Changed the World," that aired on PBS and is available to stream on its platforms and YouTube with a premium subscription.

The series delves into the history of hip-hop including the genre's radical rise from the New York City streets, creating a platform for political expression and being a leading voice for social justice

"Fight the Power" touches on how the hip-hop has played an impactful role in speaking up against injustice in the aftermath of America's racial and political reckoning in 2020 after George Floyd's killing by Minneapolis police. The series, executive produced by Chuck D, features archival footage and insightful interviews from of rap's most integral figures including Fat Joe, Lupe Fiasco, Grandmaster Caz, B-Real of Cypress Hill, Melle Mel, will.i.am, John Forte, Roxanne Shanté and Abiodun Oyewole of The Last Poets.

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Chuck D talked about hip-hop's cultural growth in 50 years, the genre being the backbone for Black men's voices and how rap could last for another half century.

Remarks have been edited for clarity and bravery. \_\_\_ AP: You mentioned in your docuseries that hip-hop was a catalyst for the Black Lives Matter movement. How so?

CHUCK D: It's a collective where people felt the same way. It spoke politically to the injustice regarding George Floyd and was a spark that connected around the world. Hip-hop has done the same thing. Hip-hop ties human beings for their similarities and knocks the differences to the side. It's a movement, when you talk about collective people feeling similar, enact upon something and still even stay within the constraints of the law. Younger people say, "OK, listen, we're going to speak truth to power right now. We're going to protest march. We're going to show you numbers that you ain't seen in a long time about something you probably didn't care about." That's hip-hop, right?

AP: During the birth of hip-hop, how do it help encourage Black voices?

CHUCK D: Black men didn't have a voice. You might've sung records for people who were fortunate to become recording artists. Our music has always been code. Hip-hop is the term for our creativity, maybe for the last 50 years. But before that, we always was creative and musicianship, vocalization, arts and craft, and also the movement of dance. Just that the elements had gotten refined in another period in the '70s out of another Big Bang Theory of socio political environments. That's where that voice came out and it came out culturally. It still speaks loudly, culturally.

AP: How does your documentary amplify that notion?

CHUCK D: Some people like to deal with hip-hop where they first started. I think what this documentary series says is "Nah, this is where it started." You might have picked up on it after you were born in the 1990s and picked up maybe 2000, but it started before you.

AP: What do you want people to take away from your documentary?

CHUCK D: I don't want people to do what they don't want to do. If you say you love hip-hop, then you should be able to know about what you love. You don't have to love hip-hop. I used to ask people straight out, "Do you love hip-hop?" They would respond "Oh yeah. I love it." Then I was ask, "Do you love Black people?" They would say "What's that got to do with it?" I'm here to tell you that the culture and the music comes out of the people. Sometimes your love of it got to infuse and give something back to the people. That's the cycle.

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AP: How do you feel about hip-hop being misinterpreted at times?

CHUCK D: I'm 12 years older than hip-hop, so I'm not in awe of it. I've seen the trajectory and my involvement in it was to see if I can make it go head-to-head, stand shoulders and shoulders next to everything else that gets bragged and talked about. I'm a big sports fan. You know, a lot of people in New York broke up because the Giants lost. That's how they tied into their loyalty for something that they say that they love. Well, people love music, too. They seem to know less about it than they know about sports, because sports make sure you're not stupid. Stephen A. Smith now is a superstar journalist who makes sure that if you come in the room, you're not stupid about sports. You can't go off the top of your head and freestyle what you think when it's fact. This four-part series at least deals with facts, especially in this misinformation age. Facts are important. Facts is not opinion, bro.

AP: How have you seen hip-hop transcend?

CHUCK D: Africa is the future of hip-hop. It's 54 African nations. Not only are they spitting like crazy, but they're also braiding languages. Hip-hop is going to like 3.0 when you talk about Africa. Hip-hop is there. So that's the sustaining power if you want to pay attention to it.

AP: Do you feel like rappers can still be commercially successful while being socially conscious?

CHUCK D: Depends on where they are and who they're talking to. If you're in France, it might work for you. Each level that you get into it, you got to go deeper because you build a fan base that's three times harder than you. If you're an activist, you're going to bring on activists that's really doing this. You as an artist could engage on it and group them together.

Now, as far as what's going to make that artists keep a light on or go out and get the Lamborghini, that's a personal thing. Money is relative. There's pressure put on the arts. That's an illusion. It's a little unfair to any art — which is not supposed to bring you an industry. It's supposed to be able to bring a canvas to the world.

AP: What's it going to take for hip-hop to live for another 50 years?

CHUCK D: Commitment collective, people recognizing that this is a part of us and recognizing more parts of us that have been part of our cultural history around the world. We got to recognize the world too.

## Fetterman expected back 'soon,' but no certain timeline yet

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman's office said Thursday that he is expected to return soon to the chamber, although Democratic leaders are giving no timeline five weeks after he sought inpatient treatment for clinical depression.

Fetterman, 53, was weeks into his service in Washington and still recovering from the aftereffects of the stroke he had last May during his campaign when he checked himself into Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Feb. 15.

Aides said at the time that Fetterman had not been his usual self for weeks. He was withdrawn, showing a disinterest in talking, eating and the usual banter with aides. Post-stroke depression is common and treatable, doctors say.

Asked about when Fetterman might return, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said only that Fetterman is recuperating.

"We want to give him the space to recuperate," Schumer said at a Wednesday news conference. "He needs it, it's fair, it's right. There are other people in the Senate who have taken their time to recuperate but I'm confident he's going to come back and be an outstanding and fine senator."

A spokesperson said Fetterman is getting better and that the recovery is going well.

"He'll be back soon, at least over a week, but soon," spokesperson Joe Calvello said Thursday.

Fetterman is receiving daily in-person briefings by chief of staff Adam Jentleson, Calvello said. The senator is reading the news and getting briefings, he said, while issuing statements through his office and sponsoring legislation. Aides are opening new regional offices in Pennsylvania.

After Fetterman checked in to Walter Reed, his office said he had experienced depression "off and on

throughout his life," but it had only become severe in recent weeks. The Capitol physician, Dr. Brian P. Monahan, recommended Fetterman's hospitalization after conducting an evaluation, his office said then.

In the meantime, Fetterman's aides and his wife, Gisele, have released photos of the senator smiling, being briefed or visiting with her and their three school-age children.

Fetterman had the stroke last May as he was campaigning in a three-way Democratic primary race. The stroke nearly killed him, he has said, and he had surgery to implant a pacemaker with a defibrillator to manage two heart conditions, atrial fibrillation and cardiomyopathy.

He won the primary while in the hospital and went on to beat GOP nominee Dr. Mehmet Oz in November, winning the campaign cycle's most expensive race. Fetterman's victory boosted Democrats to a 51-49 majority.

Fetterman was sworn in Jan. 3.

One of Fetterman's main aftereffects from the stroke is auditory processing disorder, which can render someone unable to speak fluidly and quickly process spoken conversation into meaning. Fetterman uses devices in conversations, meetings and congressional hearings that transcribe spoken words in real time.

Post-stroke depression is also a common aftereffect, with 1 in 3 stroke patients experiencing it, and is treatable through antidepressant medication and counseling, doctors say.

Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., said in an interview that he has purposely not called Fetterman to talk — "the last thing he needs is a lot of phone calls," Casey said — and does not know when Fetterman will return.

Casey said his sense from Fetterman's staff is that Fetterman has made "good progress."

"I'm just happy he's getting the time that he needs and most people understand that these things don't occur over two or three weeks, it takes a little longer," Casey said.

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Associated Press writer Mary Clare Jalonick in Washington contributed to this report. Follow Marc Levy on Twitter: @timelywriter

## Rioter charged in Pelosi laptop theft sentenced to prison

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Pennsylvania woman linked to a far-right extremist movement was sentenced on Thursday to three years in prison for storming the U.S. Capitol, where she invaded then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office with other rioters.

Riley June Williams, 23, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was charged but not convicted of helping steal a laptop from Pelosi's office suite during the riot on Jan. 6, 2021.

A federal jury convicted Williams in November of six charges, including a felony count of civil disorder, after a two-week trial. But it deadlocked on two other counts, including "aiding and abetting" the laptop's theft.

Jurors also deadlocked on a charge of obstructing an official proceeding, the Jan. 6 joint session of Congress for certifying President Joe Biden's 2020 electoral victory. Then-Vice President Mike Pence and members of Congress evacuated the House and Senate chambers when rioters attacked the Capitol.

Prosecutors had asked U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson to sentence Williams to seven years and three months in prison.

"Everywhere she went, Williams acted as an accelerant, exacerbating the mayhem. Where others turned back, she pushed forward," prosecutors wrote in a court filing.

Defense lawyers requested a term of imprisonment of one year and one day for Williams, who was 22 in January 2021.

"In some respects, she is starkly different from the average January 6th defendant — particularly given her youth and that she is a female," they wrote. "In other ways she is similar to many of other January 6th defendants with no prior criminal record, that were caught up with the mob that day, acting on impulse and without thought to the consequences of their actions."

Jackson also sentenced Williams to three years of supervised release after her prison term and ordered

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her to pay \$2,000 in restitution, according to the U.S. attorney's office for the District of Columbia.

Williams was an ardent supporter of the white nationalist "Groyper" movement led by internet personality Nick Fuentes, according to prosecutors. They said Williams was "obsessed" with Fuentes and fixated on baseless claims — amplified by Fuentes — that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump.

Williams' attorneys argued that her political beliefs shouldn't be a factor in her sentencing. They said the First Amendment protects her interest in Fuentes and his "Groyper Army" of followers.

Fuentes has used his online platform to spew antisemitic and white supremacist rhetoric. In November, former President Trump dined at his Mar-a-Lago club with Fuentes and the rapper formerly known as Kanye West, who is now known as Ye.

Other Fuentes followers have been charged with Jan. 6-related crimes, including former UCLA student Christian Secor, who waved a flag associated with Fuentes' movement when he entered the Capitol. Secor was sentenced last year to three years and six months in prison.

Williams wore a green "I'm with Groyper" T-shirt when she traveled to Washington, D.C., with her father and his friends on Jan. 6. They attended Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally before heading to the Capitol. Williams entered the building through the Senate Wing Door two minutes after other rioters breached the entrance.

Williams used men wearing helmets and body armor like a "human battering ram," pushing them forward to break through police lines inside the Capitol, prosecutors said. Entering Pelosi's main conference room, she stole a gavel and encouraged another rioter to take a laptop from atop a table, according to prosecutors.

"As the other rioter later manipulated the laptop and its cords, Williams filmed the theft that she had just commanded and encouraged, and further instructed the rioter, 'Dude, put on gloves!'" prosecutors wrote.

Williams then went to the Rotunda, where she shouted insults at police and urged other rioters to join her in pushing against officers.

Williams spent roughly 90 minutes in the Capitol. After leaving, she climbed on the roof of a parked police car.

Williams destroyed evidence before her arrest, deleting her social media accounts, resetting her iPhone and using software to wipe her computer, according to prosecutors.

Williams bragged online that she stole Pelosi's gavel, laptop and hard drives and that she "gave the electronic devices, or attempted to give them, to unspecified Russian individuals," prosecutors said in a June 2022 court filing.

"To date, neither the laptop nor the gavel has been recovered," they added.

A witness described as a former romantic partner of Williams told the FBI that she intended to send the stolen laptop or hard drive to a friend in Russia who planned to sell it to Russia's foreign intelligence service. But the witness said Williams kept the device or destroyed it when the transfer fell through, according to the FBI.

When the FBI questioned her, Williams denied stealing the laptop. She accused an ex-boyfriend of fabricating the allegation.

Williams was taken into custody after the jury convicted her on Nov. 21.

Approximately 1,000 people have been charged with federal crimes related to the Capitol riot. More than 400 have been sentenced, with over half of them receiving terms of imprisonment ranging from seven days to 10 years.

## Ukraine president visits front-line areas as new phase nears

By KARL RITTER Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's president on Thursday made his third visit in two days to areas that have felt the brunt of Russia's war, with a trip to the southern Kherson region that was retaken from the Kremlin's forces, and as a senior Kyiv commander hinted that a brewing Ukrainian counteroffensive could



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come "very soon."

Ukraine took back control of the Kherson region's capital, also called Kherson, at the end of last year, pushing out the Russian occupiers who had captured the city in the weeks following the start of Moscow full-scale invasion more than a year ago. The Dnieper River now marks the front line in the region, which is still partially occupied.

While in Kherson on Thursday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with local security officials and inspected infrastructure damaged by Russian strikes, his office said.

On Wednesday, Zelenskyy visited Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city in northeastern Ukraine. Kyiv's troops recaptured Kharkiv from the Russians last September as part of the same monthslong counteroffensive that won back Kherson.

Also Wednesday, Zelenskyy met with troops in the eastern Donetsk region, stopping by a hospital to see wounded soldiers and giving state awards to the defenders of Bakhmut, a wrecked city that is now a symbol of Ukraine's dogged resistance against Russian President Vladimir Putin's ambitions.

Zelenskyy's 48 hours of visits far from Kyiv — and close to the front line — came as improving weather sets the stage for possible new offensives by both sides. The biting winter weather, followed by mud as the ground thawed out, have prevented major changes on the battlefield, and the war has largely been deadlocked in recent months.

Ukraine is now starting to receive modern weapons, including tanks, from its Western allies, who are also training Ukrainian troops to use them.

Russian forces have been digging in where they hold territory in the four provinces that Moscow illegally annexed in September — Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia. Putin has made it clear he wants to have control there.

Ukraine's ground forces commander said Thursday that Russian forces are "exhausting themselves" in their grinding push to take Bakhmut, giving Kyiv a window of opportunity for a counterstrike.

Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyy said in a Telegram post that the Russian assault on Bakhmut was causing Russian forces to "lose considerable strength."

"Very soon, we will take advantage of this opportunity, as we once did near Kyiv, Kharkiv, Balakliia and Kupiansk," Syrskyy added, referencing Ukraine's counteroffensive last year that pushed Russia back from the country's capital and large swathes of the northeast.

Russia has kept up its long-range attacks using artillery, missiles and drones, meanwhile.

The death toll from a Russian drone attack Wednesday on a high school and dormitories south of Kyiv rose to nine, Ukrainian emergency services reported.

Russia on Wednesday also struck a nine-story apartment building in the southern city of Zaporizhzhia where at least one person was killed.

In other developments:

— European Union leaders endorsed a plan to send Ukraine 1 million rounds of artillery ammunition within the next 12 months. The EU said at a summit Thursday they would also deliver missiles if Kyiv requests them.

— Ukraine's General Staff retracted a claim that units of the Russian army had left Nova Kakhovka, a strategically important city in the occupied part of the Kherson region on the eastern side of the Dnieper. It said the claim was made erroneously "as a result of incorrect use of available data." The city, which had a prewar population of around 45,000 people, possesses strategic value: A dam there is one of only two road crossings of the lower stretches of the Dnieper

— The first four of 13 Soviet-era MiG-29 fighter jets that Slovakia decided to give Ukraine have been handed over to the Ukrainian air force. The Slovak Defense Ministry said Thursday that the remaining MiG-29s will be handed over to the Ukrainian side in the coming weeks. — Finland said Thursday that it would deliver additional defense material, including three Leopard 2 armored mine-clearing vehicles, to Ukraine in a military aid package worth 161 million euros (\$175 million). Finland has so far delivered six Leopard vehicles to Ukraine, officials say. The new aid package, the 14th such package from Helsinki so far, also

contains heavy weapons and munitions. — Bulgaria's president said Thursday that despite expanding the national defense industry's capacity, the Balkan country — a member of NATO and the EU — won't export weapons to Ukraine. Bulgaria has been in the grip of a political crisis and is heading in April toward its fifth general elections in the last two years.

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

## South Carolina's top accountant to resign after \$3.5B error

By JAMES POLLARD Associated Press/Report for America

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina's embattled top accountant will step down next month after a \$3.5 billion error in the year-end financial report he oversaw, according to a resignation letter written Thursday that was obtained by The Associated Press.

Republican Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom's decision to leave the post he has held for 20 years came after intense scrutiny of his performance following the blunder and amid rising calls for him to either quit or be removed.

The Senate panel investigating the financial misstatement issued a damning report last week accusing Eckstrom of "willful neglect of duty." As recently as last week, however, Eckstrom had said he would not resign.

"I have never taken service to the state I love or the jobs to which I have been elected lightly, endeavoring to work with my colleagues ... to be a strong defender of the taxpayer and a good steward of their hard-earned tax dollars," Eckstrom wrote in the letter to South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster. "They deserve nothing less."

The governor accepted the resignation, effective April 30.

The Senate report concluded that Eckstrom was solely responsible for the mapping error, which happened during the state's transition to a new internal information system from 2011 to 2017. State officials testified that Eckstrom ignored auditors' yearslong warnings of a "material weakness" in his office and flawed cash reporting.

Eckstrom has said the Annual Comprehensive Financial Report exaggerated the state's cash balances for a decade by double counting the money sent to colleges and universities. The mistake went unsolved until a junior staffer fixed the error this fall.

Officials have said the overstatement did not affect the state budget. But lawmakers alarmed by Eckstrom's inconsistent testimony slammed his failure to fulfill one of his primary constitutional duties: to publish an accurate account of state finances.

The fallout for the state agency that typically flies under the radar is expected to continue. A Senate subcommittee recently approved a joint resolution that would let voters decide whether the comptroller general should continue as an elected position or be appointed by the governor. Eckstrom reiterated his support for that change Thursday in his resignation letter.

The next comptroller general may also lead a much weaker office. The investigating panel suggested its responsibilities be transferred to one or more agencies. State Treasurer Curtis Loftis, an elected Republican, has testified that his office could absorb the main tasks.

Republican Sen. Larry Grooms, who led the investigation, said the comptroller general's office could also be "done away with altogether."

Grooms thanked Eckstrom for doing the "honorable thing" and sparing the General Assembly from using an obscure state constitutional provision to remove him from office.

Between a 104-7 House vote to cut the comptroller general's annual salary to \$1 and the Senate's scheduled April 11 vote to oust Eckstrom, Grooms suggested the rising heat had grown too intense for him to remain on the job.

The Senate must now select a replacement to serve out the rest of Eckstrom's term, which ends in 2027. Grooms said the next comptroller general should be someone who recognizes that their job is to

spend the next three years overseeing the office's incorporation into other state agencies. He does not anticipate any other heads will roll.

"The buck stopped with him," Grooms said. "The accountability was with him."

A certified public accountant, Eckstrom, 74, spent four years as state treasurer before assuming his current office. He has run unopposed in the past two elections and last faced a Republican primary challenger in 2010.

McMaster — who had resisted calls for impeachment and endorsed elections as the proper vehicle for accountability — thanked Eckstrom for his 24 years of "dedicated service." The governor previously served as the state's attorney general alongside Eckstrom early in the comptroller general's tenure.

"The Eckstrom and McMaster families have been dear friends for decades," McMaster said Thursday in a letter accepting the resignation. "I know that your every wish has been, and always will be, prosperity and happiness for the people of South Carolina."

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James Pollard is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

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## DeSantis walks back 'territorial dispute' remark on Ukraine

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is walking back his characterization of Russia's war in Ukraine as a "territorial dispute," following criticism from a number of fellow Republicans who expressed concern about the potential 2024 presidential candidate's dismissive description of the conflict.

In excerpts of an interview with Piers Morgan set to air Thursday on Fox Nation, DeSantis said his earlier comments referenced ongoing fighting in the eastern Donbas region, as well as Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea. Ukraine's borders are internationally recognized, including by the United Nations.

"What I'm referring to is where the fighting is going on now, which is that eastern border region Donbas, and then Crimea, and you have a situation where Russia has had that. I don't think legitimately, but they had," DeSantis said, according to excerpts. "There's a lot of ethnic Russians there. So, that's some difficult fighting, and that's what I was referring to, and so it wasn't that I thought Russia had a right to that, and so if I should have made that more clear, I could have done it."

DeSantis made his initial comments last week in a written response to questions sent to declared and potential GOP presidential candidates by Fox News host Tucker Carlson. The Florida governor, seen as a top rival to former President Donald Trump for the 2024 GOP nomination, said that defending Ukraine wasn't a national security priority for the U.S., and he downplayed the Russian invasion.

"While the U.S. has many vital national interests — securing our borders, addressing the crisis of readiness within our military, achieving energy security and independence, and checking the economic, cultural, and military power of the Chinese Communist Party — becoming further entangled in a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia is not one of them," DeSantis wrote, echoing how Russia has characterized its ongoing invasion.

The day responses were posted, Trump told reporters traveling with him that DeSantis' answers were just "following what I am saying." A day later, South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley — already in the 2024 GOP field — said she agreed with Trump that "DeSantis is copying him." In an op-ed Monday, she wrote that the characterization of the war as a "territorial dispute" represented "weakness."

A number of Republican senators have also weighed in with criticism. In an interview with radio host Hugh Hewitt, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio said DeSantis "doesn't deal with foreign policy every day as governor," adding that "foreign policy is all about nuance." Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who has endorsed Trump's 2024 campaign, told Fox News that DeSantis "is basically taking the Chinese position when it comes to Russia's invasion."

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Republican Sens. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, John Cornyn of Texas and Roger Wicker of Mississippi said they disagreed with DeSantis' framing.

In the interview with Morgan, DeSantis sought to toughen his position toward Russia, calling Russian President Vladimir Putin a "war criminal" and arguing that his detractors had incorrectly characterized his "territorial dispute" remarks.

"I think it's been mischaracterized," he told Morgan, according to excerpts. "Obviously, Russia invaded — that was wrong. They invaded Crimea and took that in 2014 — that was wrong."

Democrats have also seized on DeSantis' apparent shifting stance, blasting out emails rounding up the GOP criticism and saying DeSantis' "stumbling over this answer makes clear he is out of his depth."

Asked by The Atlantic about DeSantis' initial comments, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy suggested that failure to act on Russia's aggression in his country could ultimately draw the U.S. into a conflict if incursions are also made into NATO member countries.

"When they will occupy NATO countries, and also be on the borders of Poland and maybe fight with Poland, the question is: Will you send all your soldiers with weapons, all your pilots, all your ships? Will you send tanks and armored vehicles with your young people? Will you do it?" Zelenskyy said. "Because if you will not do it, you will have no NATO."

Meg Kinnard can be reached at <http://twitter.com/MegKinnardAP>

## Zebra runs loose in Seoul before being taken back to zoo

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A young zebra walked, trotted, and galloped for hours in the busy streets of South Korea's capital before emergency workers tranquilized the animal and brought it back to a zoo.

The zebra — a male named Sero that was born in the zoo in 2021 — was in stable condition and being examined by veterinarians as of Thursday evening, said Choi Ye-ra, an official at the Children's Grand Park in Seoul.

She said the zoo was investigating how the zebra managed to escape. She didn't immediately confirm media reports that the animal partially destroyed the wooden fencing surrounding its pen before busting out around 2:50 p.m.

Social media was flowing with smartphone videos of the zebra trotting alongside lines of cars that were waiting for the greenlight at an intersection, and galloping through a street surrounded by commercial buildings as pedestrians stopped and gasped.

Police and emergency workers managed to corner the zebra after it entered a narrow alleyway between houses and shot it with tranquilizers, ending its three hours of freedom.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or property damage caused by the zebra running loose.

## Russia's security chief blasts West, dangles nuclear threats

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A top Russian security official warned Thursday about the rising threat of a nuclear war and blasted a German minister for threatening Russian President Vladimir Putin with arrest, saying that such action would amount to a declaration of war and trigger a Russian strike on Germany.

Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council chaired by Putin, said in video remarks to reporters that Russia's relations with the West have hit an all-time bottom.

Asked whether the threat of a nuclear conflict has eased, Medvedev responded: "No, it hasn't decreased, it has grown. Every day when they provide Ukraine with foreign weapons brings the nuclear apocalypse closer."

He has issued a barrage of such strongly-worded statements in the past, blasting the U.S. and its NATO allies for what he described as their efforts to break up and destroy Russia. It's been a drastic metamorphosis for the gentle-looking politician, who once was hailed by the West as a liberal hope.

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In Thursday's comments, the 57-year-old Medvedev denounced the International Criminal Court's decision to issue an arrest warrant for Putin on charges of alleged involvement in abductions of thousands of children from Ukraine as legally null and void. He noted that the move added to a "colossal negative potential" in the already bitterly strained ties between Russia and the West.

"Our relations with the West are already worse than they have ever been in history," he said.

Medvedev specifically blasted German Justice Minister Marco Buschmann, who said last week that Putin would be arrested on the ICC's warrant if he visits Germany.

"Let's imagine ... the leader of a nuclear power visits the territory of Germany and is arrested," Medvedev said, adding that it would amount to a declaration of war against Russia. "In this case, our assets will fly to hit the Bundestag, the chancellor's office and so on."

He noted that Russia's nuclear forces have provided a strong deterrent amid the fighting in Ukraine, adding that "we would have been torn to pieces without them."

Medvedev also challenged Ukraine's sovereignty in comments that could reflect Moscow's plans to extend its gains.

"Honestly speaking, Ukraine is part of Russia," he said. "But due to geopolitical reasons and the course of history we had tolerated that we were living in separate quarters and had been forced to acknowledge those invented borders for a long time."

The soft-spoken and mild-mannered Medvedev, who served as Russia's president from 2008 to 2012 when term limits forced Putin to shift into the prime minister's post, was widely seen by Western officials as more liberal than his mentor. Many in the West expected Medvedev to win a second term and further soften the Kremlin's policies, but he stepped down to allow Putin to reclaim the presidency in what Kremlin critics denounced as a cynical manipulation.

Since Putin sent troops into Ukraine more than a year ago, Medvedev, a law faculty graduate, has emerged as one of the most hawkish Russian officials, regularly issuing blustery remarks that combine Latin mottos and legal expressions with four-letter words, and sound much tougher than those issued by old-time Kremlin hard-liners. Observers have interpreted Medvedev's rhetoric as an apparent attempt to curry favor with Putin.

Medvedev launched more anti-Western diatribes Thursday, declaring that "it's useless to have talks" with the West and speaking with contempt about Western politicians, alleging a "catastrophic drop in competence and elementary literacy of European Union leaders."

"I have no illusions that we could communicate with them again any time soon," he said. "It makes no sense to negotiate with certain countries and blocs — they only understand the language of force."

Medvedev, who heads a Security Council panel coordinating weapons production, derided Western statements alleging that Russia is running out of weapons and charged Russian weapons industries have increased output.

He said that Russia will produce 1,500 battle tanks this year alone and boost production of other weapons to meet the army's needs. His claims couldn't be independently verified.

"The most important thing now is to make it all in necessary volumes, and we are launching new factories to do that," Medvedev said.

He said that the Russian military already has good intelligence drones and loitering munitions, but acknowledged that it has yet to deploy long-range strike drones.

Medvedev drew parallels with World War II, when the Soviet Union managed to drastically ramp up weapons production. He noted that while checking historic archives, he found Soviet leader Josef Stalin's telegrams urging arms factories directors to boost output under the threat of reprisals.

In a video fragment from his meeting with top factory managers posted Thursday, Medvedev read one of those telegrams, in which Stalin demanded a tank factory to meet the production plans and warned: "If you breach your duty before the Motherland, I will destroy you as criminals who forget their honor and interests of the Motherland."

Added Medvedev: "I want you to hear me and remember the Generalissimo's words. As you understand,

the results were quite impressive, and if there were none you understand what happened.”

## Manhattan DA rejects GOP demand for info on Trump case

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Manhattan district attorney investigating Donald Trump rebuffed House Republicans’ request Thursday for documents and testimony about the case, dismissing it as an “unprecedented inquiry” with no legitimate basis.

In a letter obtained by The Associated Press, the general counsel for Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg slammed the congressional request as “an unlawful incursion into New York’s sovereignty.”

“The Letter only came after Donald Trump created a false expectation that he would be arrested the next day and his lawyers reportedly urged you to intervene,” Leslie Dubeck wrote in the letter. “Neither fact is a legitimate basis for congressional inquiry.”

The Republican chairmen of three House committees on Monday sent a letter to Bragg seeking information about his actions in the Trump case. The Republicans criticized the grand jury investigation as an “unprecedented abuse of prosecutorial authority.”

The chairmen requested testimony as well as documents and copies of any communications with the Justice Department to be turned over by Thursday. The request came as Republicans in the House quickly rallied around the former president as a grand jury in New York weighs whether to bring an indictment against him.

“If a grand jury brings charges against Donald Trump, the DA’s Office will have an obligation, as in every case, to provide a significant amount of discovery from its files to the defendant so that he may prepare a defense,” Dubeck wrote.

The five-page response from Bragg’s office provides a rare insight into what has remained a secret grand jury process, marking one of the first public acknowledgments that there is a sitting grand jury currently investigating Trump. The DA’s office has adhered closely to centuries-old rules that have kept grand juries under wraps to protect the reputations of people who end up not being charged and to encourage reluctant witnesses to testify.

In proceedings closed to the public and members of the media, grand jurors listen to evidence presented by prosecutors and hear from witnesses. There is no judge present nor anyone representing the accused, and prosecutors do not have to offer any evidence favorable to the defense.

The disclosure comes as the grand jury appears close to finishing its work, after hearing last week from Trump’s former lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen, but the timing of a possible decision on whether to charge the ex-president remains uncertain. Prosecutors canceled a scheduled grand jury session Wednesday and planned to hear testimony on other matters Thursday, according to a person familiar with the matter. But law enforcement in New York has been making preparations for any unrest, should Trump face charges.

The case revolves around hush money payments during Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign to women who alleged sexual encounters with him. Bragg’s team appears to be looking at whether Trump or anyone committed crimes in New York state in arranging the payments, or in the way they accounted for them internally at the Trump Organization.

On Thursday, one of the GOP chairmen, Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, expanded his probe into the handling of the Trump case by demanding testimony and documents from Mark Pomerantz and Carey Dunne, two former Manhattan prosecutors who had been leading the Trump case before quitting last year in a clash over the direction of the probe.

“Last year, you resigned from the office over Bragg’s initial reluctance to move forward with charges, shaming Bragg in your resignation letter — which was subsequently leaked — into bringing charges,” Jordan, an Ohio Republican, wrote in the letter to Pomerantz late Wednesday. “It now appears that your efforts to shame Bragg have worked as he is reportedly resurrecting a so-called ‘zombie’ case against President Trump using a tenuous and untested legal theory.”

Requests for comment from Pomerantz and Dunne were not returned.

Associated Press writer Michael R. Sisak in New York contributed to this report.

## Biden approval dips near lowest point: AP-NORC poll

By JOSH BOAK and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Approval of President Joe Biden has dipped slightly since a month ago, nearing the lowest point of his presidency as his administration tries to project a sense of stability while confronting a pair of bank failures and inflation that remains stubbornly high.

That's according to a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, which shows there have been modest fluctuations in support for Biden over the past several months. The president notched an approval rating of 38% in the new poll, after 45% said they approved in February and 41% in January. His ratings hit their lowest point of his presidency last July, at 36%, as the full weight of rising gasoline, food and other costs began to hit U.S. households.

In recent months, approval of Biden had been hovering above 40%.

Interviews with poll respondents suggest the public has mixed feelings about Biden, who is expected to announce a reelection bid by this summer. When it comes to the president, people generally do not swing between the extremes of absolute loyalty and aggressive loathing that have been a feature of this era's divided politics.

"Neutral towards approve," Andrew Dwyer, 30, said of Biden. "I don't think he's the best at representing my position and issues. But I know being president involves compromises."

Dwyer, a data analyst in Milwaukee, said he voted for the president in 2020 and considers himself to be liberal. He acknowledged the recent failures of the Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, but he said that the economy is adjusting to higher interest rates set by the Federal Reserve to combat inflation.

"We all got so used to cheap debt and the ability to throw money around," Dwyer said. He said there were "pain points" caused by higher borrowing costs but that he thinks the process will "ultimately" lead to a healthier economy.

The president has taken ambitious steps to boost the U.S. economy, with his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package from 2021, infrastructure investments, support for computer chip plants and taxes on corporations and the wealthy to help fund health care and a shift away from fossil fuels.

But those efforts involve multiyear investments that have yet to provide much optimism to a public dealing with annual inflation at 6%. The president and other administration officials have toured the country to promote their achievements. But to many, the economy feels as though it could be on a knife's edge after the recent bank failures, as well as the debt limit showdown with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., that could put the U.S. government at risk of defaulting.

Just 31% approve of Biden's stewardship of the national economy, about where it's been over the course of the last year. His handling of the nation's economic fortunes has been a weak point at least since late 2021, when the inflation that the administration had suggested was transitory became a bigger pain point for businesses and families.

Michael McComas, 51, voted Republican in 2020 and described Biden as "not great — average, I guess." A resident of Westland, Michigan, he noted that it will take years to determine whether federal infrastructure spending fulfills the promises made by Biden.

McComas said he believes inflation is the direct result of government spending to counter the pandemic, a claim that Biden has personally rejected when asked by reporters.

"We poured so much money into the system — that's a little frustrating that we were shocked that we got hit by inflation when a lot of our policies were inflationary," McComas said.

The difference between Biden's approval overall and his approval on the economy is driven largely by Democrats, 76% of whom say they approve of how he's handling his job as president while 63% approve of his handling of the economy. Few Republicans approve of Biden on either count.

Democrats under the age of 45 feel less positive about Biden, causing a drag on his approval ratings.

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Just 54% approve of the president's economic leadership, compared to 72% of Democrats older than 45. Similarly, just 66% of Democrats under 45 approve of Biden overall, compared to 85% of older Democrats.

Only about a quarter of Americans say the national economy is good or that the country is headed in the right direction, the poll shows. Those numbers have also fluctuated only slightly over the last few months.

Ratings of Biden's handling of foreign policy (39%) and climate change (41%) are about on par with his overall approval ratings. Seventy-four percent of Democrats and 9% of Republicans approve of Biden on foreign policy, while 67% of Democrats and 17% of Republicans approve of his handling of climate change.

Theresa Ojuro, a 29-year-old doctoral student in Rochester, New York, said she "expected more" from Biden — "just a little bit more stability with the economy." Ojuro, who voted for Biden in 2020, also noted that the bank failures are dragging down her sentiment, but she worries about how high taxes are in New York state relative to the benefits provided.

"If Biden is doing his job, why in a state like this can you see people really suffering?" Ojuro said.

The poll of 1,081 adults was conducted Mar. 16-20 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points.

## Holocaust survivor shares on TikTok to educate young people

By TED SHAFFREY Associated Press

MORRISTOWN, N.J. (AP) — Holocaust survivor Tova Friedman is a TikTok star at age 85, thanks to her 17-year-old grandson.

In the family living room in Morristown, New Jersey, he records short videos of his grandmother reminiscing about life in 1944 and 1945 when she was a 6-year-old child at the Auschwitz death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. She also discusses her experiences before and after the camp.

They say videos on her account have garnered 75 million views since the duo started posting in September 2021.

"It really snowballed," said Friedman. "And then we realized it was a fabulous medium for the Holocaust, for young people who don't want to read the books, who don't like the classes in school, who don't like the way the teachers teach or whatever, who are bored with it, or some who never heard of it. Here they are, listening."

Her grandson, Aron Goodman, said their most-viewed videos are "ones that show her number" — the identification tattooed on prisoners' arms at Auschwitz.

"People around the world can't really get the chance to see a survivor, to see the history on their arm," Goodman said. "So social media and TikTok is the way we kind of impart our message and show the evidence of the Holocaust that people unrightfully deny."

Commenters on the videos thank Friedman for posting her memories, with many remarking they had not learned much — or anything — about the Holocaust in school.

Goodman said he makes the videos to counter antisemitic speech online and to educate the TikTok generation about the horrors of the Holocaust.

"We need to focus on the history and warn people where hate can lead if it's unchecked, if no one does anything about it," the high schooler said.

Another TikTok features black-and-white footage of Friedman with other Jewish children in early 1945, as she pushes up her sleeve to show the tattooed number on her arm. The film was shot by the Soviet military a week after they liberated the camp.

When Friedman looks at the film, she remembers her mother, out of frame but nearby, who taught her how to survive in the camp by not making eye contact with the guards and hiding amid dead bodies. Her mother fell into despair after the war and died in her mid-40s.

Friedman said people often ask how she could ever trust or love people after what she witnessed. Friedman said she saw many other Holocaust survivors who lost their families in the camps go on to remarry



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and have more children, which they called "replacement children" in those days.

"Life is resilient, and you can live again," said Friedman, who works as a therapist and social worker and wrote a book about her experiences called "The Daughter of Auschwitz." "This is what I'd like to let people know. It's the hope that humanity can rebuild itself."

## Today in History: March 24, Exxon Valdez crashes in Alaska

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, March 24, the 83rd day of 2023. There are 282 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 24, 1989, the supertanker Exxon Valdez (vahl-DEEZ') ran aground on a reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound and began leaking an estimated 11 million gallons of crude oil.

On this date:

In 1765, Britain enacted the Quartering Act, requiring American colonists to provide temporary housing to British soldiers.

In 1832, a mob in Hiram, Ohio, attacked, tarred and feathered Mormon leaders Joseph Smith Jr. and Sidney Rigdon.

In 1882, German scientist Robert Koch announced in Berlin that he had discovered the bacillus responsible for tuberculosis.

In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a bill granting future independence to the Philippines.

In 1976, the president of Argentina, Isabel Peron, was deposed by her country's military.

In 1980, one of El Salvador's most respected Roman Catholic Church leaders, Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, was shot to death by a sniper as he celebrated Mass in San Salvador.

In 1995, after 20 years, British soldiers stopped routine patrols in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

In 1999, NATO launched airstrikes against Yugoslavia, marking the first time in its 50-year existence that it had ever attacked a sovereign country. Thirty-nine people were killed when fire erupted in the Mont Blanc tunnel in France and burned for two days.

In 2010, keeping a promise he'd made to anti-abortion Democratic lawmakers to assure passage of his historic health care legislation, President Barack Obama signed an executive order against using federal funds to pay for elective abortions covered by private insurance.

In 2015, Germanwings Flight 9525, an Airbus A320, crashed into the French Alps, killing all 150 people on board; investigators said the jetliner was deliberately downed by the 27-year-old co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz.

In 2016, a U.N. war crimes court convicted former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic of genocide and nine other charges for orchestrating a campaign of terror that left 100,000 people dead during the 1992-95 war in Bosnia; Karadzic was sentenced to 40 years in prison. (The sentence was later increased to life in prison.)

In 2020, the International Olympic Committee announced that the Summer Olympics in Tokyo would be postponed until 2021 because of the coronavirus.

Ten years ago: Just days after the 10th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, on a previously unannounced trip to Baghdad, confronted Iraqi officials for continuing to grant Iran access to its airspace and said Iraq's behavior was raising questions about its reliability as a partner. Hundreds of thousands marched in Paris protesting the imminent legalization of same-sex marriage. (It would be signed into law just over two months later).

Five years ago: In the streets of the nation's capital and in cities across the country, hundreds of thousands of teenagers and their supporters rallied against gun violence, spurred by a call to action from student survivors of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, that left 17 people dead. An extreme right-wing group in Greece claimed responsibility for an arson attack on an Afghan community center in Athens.

One year ago: Ukraine accused Moscow of forcibly taking hundreds of thousands of civilians from shattered Ukrainian cities to Russia, where some could be used as "hostages" to pressure Kyiv to give up.

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Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell announced that he would vote against confirming Ketanji Brown Jackson, saying he "cannot and will not" support the groundbreaking nominee for a lifetime appointment on the Supreme Court. Stephen Wilhite, the inventor of the internet-popular short-video format, the GIF, died.

Today's Birthdays: Fashion and costume designer Bob Mackie is 84. Former Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire is 76. Rock musician Lee Oskar is 75. Singer Nick Lowe is 74. Rock musician Dougie Thomson (Supertramp) is 72. Fashion designer Tommy Hilfiger is 72. Actor Donna Pescow is 69. Actor Robert Caradine is 69. Sen. Mike Braun, R-Indiana, is 69. Former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer is 67. Actor Kelly LeBrock is 63. TV personality Star Jones is 61. Country-rock musician Patterson Hood (Drive-By Truckers) is 59. Actor Peter Jacobson is 58. Rock singer-musician Sharon Corr (The Corrs) is 53. Actor Lauren Bowles is 53. Actor Lara Flynn Boyle is 53. Rapper Maceo (AKA P.A. Pasemaster Mase) is 53. Actor Megyn Price is 52. Actor Jim Parsons is 50. Christian rock musician Chad Butler (Switchfoot) is 49. Actor Alyson Hannigan is 49. Former NFL quarterback Peyton Manning is 47. Actor Amanda Brugel (TV: "The Handmaid's Tale") is 46. Actor Olivia Burnette is 46. Actor Jessica Chastain is 46. Actor Amir Arison is 45. Actor Lake Bell is 44. Rock musician Benj Gershman (O.A.R.) is 43. Neo-soul musician Jesse Phillips (St. Paul & the Broken Bones) is 43. Actor Philip Winchester (TV: "Strike Back") is 42. Dancer Val Chmerkovskiy is 37. Actor Keisha Castle-Hughes is 33.