

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Groton Community Calendar

### Monday, March 27

Senior Menu: Beef stroganoff noodles, mixed vegetables, fruit cocktail, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Mini waffles.

School Lunch: Oriental chicken, rice.

The Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

United Methodist: Lent Bible Study with Pastor Brandon, 7 p.m.; PEO Meeting, 7 p.m. (outside group)

Noon: Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center with potluck dinner.

### Tuesday, March 28

Senior Menu: Meatballs, mashed potatoes and gravy, carrots and peas, mixed fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast sandwich.

School Lunch: corndogs, tater tots.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

The Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Large Group Music Contest at NSU.

Indoor track meet at NSU

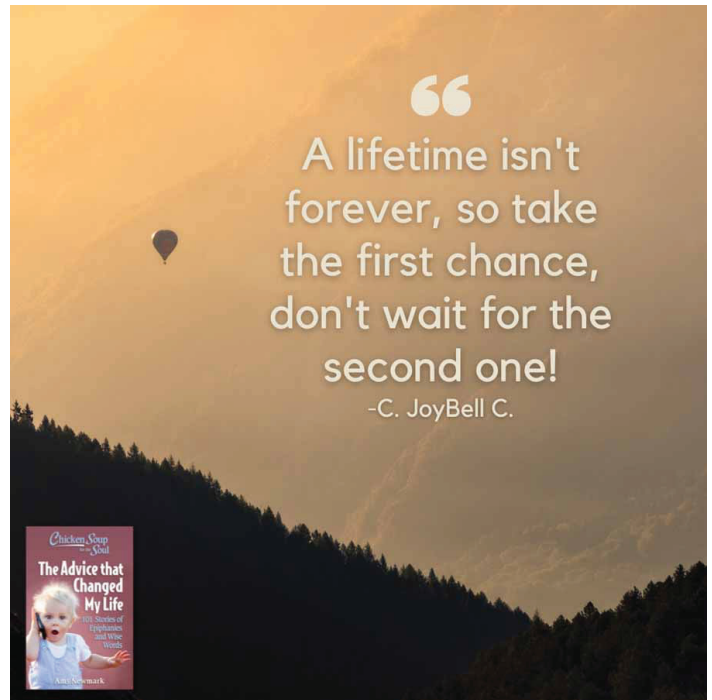
### Wednesday, March 29

Senior Menu: Teriyaki chicken, rice pilaf, broccoli, pineapple/strawberry ambrosia, whole wheat bread.

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PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



School Breakfast: Eggs and breakfast potatoes.

School Lunch: Pizza grilled cheese, chips.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m. (Nigeria Circle serves), worship, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.

### Thursday, March 30

Senior Menu: Tater tot hot dish, green beans, grape juice, apple crisp, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Goulash, corn.

### Friday, March 31

Senior Menu: Ham and bean soup, egg salad sandwich, fruit, cookie.

School Breakfast: Biscuits and gravy.

School Lunch: Fish fry spudsters.

## OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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## 2023 SDWCA State Tournament

### Results for Groton

Tots 37: Brooks Sombke – 2nd  
Bantam 76: Braxten Sombke – 3rd  
Midgets 63: Henry Pharis – 3rd  
Midgets 134: Hank Flihs – 2nd  
Novice 68: Bentley Ehresmann – 7th  
Novice 87: Keegan Kucker – 6th  
Schoolboy 110: Donavan Block – 8th  
Girls A (Grades PreK-2) 75: Elsy Hagen – 2nd  
Girls C (Grades 6-8) 110: Liza Krueger – 5th  
Cadets 220: Gavin Englund – 4th  
Junior 145: Christian Ehresmann – 3rd

## Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling

### League Week #20 Results

**Team Standings:** Shihtzus – 18, Jackelopes – 12 ½, Foxes – 12 ½, Chipmunks – 11 ½, Cheetahs – 9, Coyotes – 8 ½

**Men's High Games:** Roger Spanier – 224, Brad Waage – 209, Brad Larson – 201

**Women's High Games:** Darci Spanier – 179, Sam Bahr – 170, Vicki Walter – 170, 163

**Men's High Series:** Roger Spanier – 578, Brad Waage – 571, Brad Larson – 546

**Women's High Series:** Sam Bahr – 498, Vicki Walter – 474, Sue Stanley – 455

# GDILIVE.COM

## GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

### School Board Meeting

March 27, 2023 – 7:00 PM – GHS Library Conference Room

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.  
POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3 CONSENT AGENDA:

### OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Program Overview Presentations
  - a. Destination Imagination...J. Groeblichhoff, J. Milbrandt
  - b. CTE...Don Donley, A. Franken, L. Tietz, B. Hubsch
3. Discussion and/or action regarding school bus purchase.
4. Administrative Reports:
  - (a) Superintendent's Report;
  - (b) Principal's Reports;
  - (c) Business Manager Report

### NEW BUSINESS:

1. Consider ASBPT Health Fund renewal and plan options for 2023-2024 school year.
  2. Consider proposal from Huff Construction for Health Science Lab renovation.
  3. Approve Carla Tracy as volunteer assistant track coach for the 2023 season.
  4. Approve hiring Brittany Hubbard as Science/Health Science Teacher and Oral Interp Advisor for the 2023-24 school year.
  5. Approve hiring Eric Swenson as Middle School Math Teacher for the 2023-24 school year.
  6. Declare school bus surplus property for disposal.
  7. Executive Session pursuant SDCL 1-25-2(1) personnel and SDCL 1-25-2(4) negotiations.
- ADJOURN

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## Boys Basketball Awards Banquet



**C Team awarded by Jesse Zak: Teammate Award: Jayden Schwan.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**C Team awarded by Jesse Zak: Best Effort: Logan Warrington.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**C Team awarded by Jesse Zak: Best Attitude: Jayden Schwan.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**C Team awarded by Jesse Zak: Defensive Player of the Year: Gage Sippel.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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**C Team awarded by Jesse Zak: Offensive Player of the Year: Gage Sippel.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

**C Team Finished 6-0  
JV Finished 17-2  
Varsity Finished 16-6 (SoDak16 Qualifier)**



**JV awarded by Kyle Gerlach: Teammate of the Year: Holden Sippel.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**JV awarded by Kyle Gerlach: Best Attitude: Holden Sippel.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**JV awarded by Kyle Gerlach: Best Effort: Colby Dunker.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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**JV awarded by Kyle Gerlach: Defensive Player of the Year: Teylor Diegel.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**JV awarded by Kyle Gerlach: Offensive Player of the Year: Ryder Johnson.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**The Pillar Award went to two seniors who garnered the most votes in most categories. Coach Brian Dolan presented the awards to Cade Larson and Cole Simon.** (Photos by Paul Kosel)

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**Varsity awards presented by Coach Brian Dolan: Most Improved Player: Ryder Johnson.**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Varsity awards presented by Coach Brian Dolan: Defensive Player of the Year: Jacob Zak.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Varsity awards presented by Coach Brian Dolan: Offensive Player of the Year and the Most Valuable Player: Lane Tietz.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Varsity awards presented by Coach Brian Dolan: Andrew Pereboom Scout Team Player: Braxton Imrie**(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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**Varsity awards presented by Coach Brian Dolan: Offensive Player of the Year and the Most Valuable Player: Lane Tietz.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

The rest of the photos were fun awards handed out by Coach Dolan.



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The seniors were recognized. Cade Larson, Tate Larson, Cole Simon and Tyson Parrow (Keegen Tracy stepping in for him). (Photo by Paul Kosel)



All Conference members were Tate Larson, third team; Jacob Zak, second team; and Lane Tietz, first team. (Photos by Paul Kosel)

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Varsity Awards were presented to Tate Larson, All-Conference third team; Cade Larson, Pillar Award; Cole Simon, Pillar Award; Jacob Zak, Defensive Player of the Year and All-Conference second team; Ryder Johnson, Most Improved Player; Lane Tietz, Offensive Player of the Year, Most Valuable Player and All-Conference first team; and Braxton Imrie, Andrew Pereboom Scout Team Player. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Junior Varsity Awards were presented to Holden Sippel, Teammate of the Year and Best Attitude; Colby Dunker, Best Effort; Ryder Johnson, Offensive Player of the Year; and Teylor Diegel, Defensive Player of the Year. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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**C Team Awards were presented to Jayden Schwan, Teammate of the Year and Best Attitude; Gage Sippel, Offensive Player of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year; and Logan Warrington, Best Effort award.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

## POPS Concert is Sunday

The Groton Area High School music department will present its annual POPS Concert on Sunday, April 2nd, at 2:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. in the high school gym. Tickets will not be sold in advance. Admission is \$5.00 at the door.

The concert will feature performances from the award-winning Prismatic Sensations Show Choir, the new High School Drumline, High School Flex Band, as well as many talented soloists/groups. There will be no reserved seating, and seats do fill up quickly, so plan on arriving early to get a great view of the show! The doors will open one hour prior to show time. This concert is one of the highlights of the year for the music department, and you do not want to miss it!

Come on out, have some Coca-Cola and popcorn, and enjoy performances by many of our music department's students!

If you have card tables that the music department may borrow for the day, please label them with your name and drop them off at the high school or e-mail Mrs. Yeigh at [desiree.yeigh@k12.sd.us](mailto:desiree.yeigh@k12.sd.us) to arrange pick up.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### COMMENTARY

## A state that's 'pro-birth' should also be truly 'pro-life'

BY DANA HESS - MARCH 26, 2023

No matter where you fit on the political spectrum, the news on June 24, 2022, was staggering: The Supreme Court had overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark decision that guaranteed women the right to an abortion.

Polls indicate that two-thirds of the country saw this as a crippling blow to the rights of women. For anti-abortion activists, it was the answer to a prayer. Some state legislatures are still struggling to figure out what the decision means for them.

Lawmakers in North Carolina, Florida and Nebraska are working on new, stricter abortion laws. That isn't the case in South Dakota, where the 2005 Legislature passed a trigger law on abortion, designed to go into effect when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. The 2005 version of the Legislature was a strict bunch. Abortion will only be allowed in South Dakota "to preserve the life of the pregnant female." There are no allowances here for rape or incest. Anyone who induces an abortion is guilty of a Class 6 felony.

Additionally, in January, South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem and Attorney General Marty Jackley issued a news release aimed at pharmacists, telling them that despite approval by the Food and Drug Administration, chemical abortion drugs can't be dispensed at South Dakota pharmacies. They told pharmacists that dispensing those drugs could lead to a felony prosecution.

It's clear from those and other examples that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* doesn't mark the end of debates over abortion, but rather the beginning of a new struggle. With abortion no longer an option in South Dakota under most circumstances, anti-abortion activists have a responsibility to be truly pro-life rather than just pro-birth.

Emily Leedom, executive director of the Lourdes Center in Sioux Falls, formerly known as Catholic Family Services, asked the members of her church if they were ready for the responsibility of being more than just "pro-birth."

In an October 2020 article in the *Bishop's Bulletin*, Leedom painted a bleak picture of a post-*Roe* world where more families would be in crisis, more single mothers would struggle, more children would be born into difficult home situations and more children would live in poverty. She asked the members of her church if, through their charitable gifts of time and treasure, they are ready to "walk with and support single parents who chose life despite its many difficulties."

Whether she read Leedom's article or not, Noem seems aware that a state that outlaws almost all abortions should take responsibility for helping new parents. Maybe it was happenstance or skillful marketing, but on the day *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, Noem rolled out *Life.SD.gov*.

That website brings together in one place all the resources that state government can offer to help young parents. The home page provides links to information on pregnancy, parenting, financial assistance and adoption. Another page offers help on subjects as wide-ranging as applying for Medicaid, finding child care, learning about breastfeeding and how to quit smoking.

While the website is a helpful resource for people who may not have been expecting to be parents, there's more that could be done.

Noem's State of the State address mentioned "family" or "families" or "strong families" no less than 30 times. Yet nowhere in that speech was any reference to the state's abortion law. Noem could ask the Legislature to change the rules for abortion, adding allowances for rape or incest. Certainly those are two



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circumstances that would roil the strongest of families.

During the recent legislative session, Noem didn't comment on House Bill 1169, an attempt to clarify "the life of the mother" exception in the trigger law governing abortion. The bill's sponsor, who asked that it be tabled due to a lack of support, has vowed to bring the legislation back in the next session. Here's hoping she does and that Noem, who describes herself as a champion of strong families, has something to say about how the law should be applied in this most crucial of circumstances for women with high-risk pregnancies.

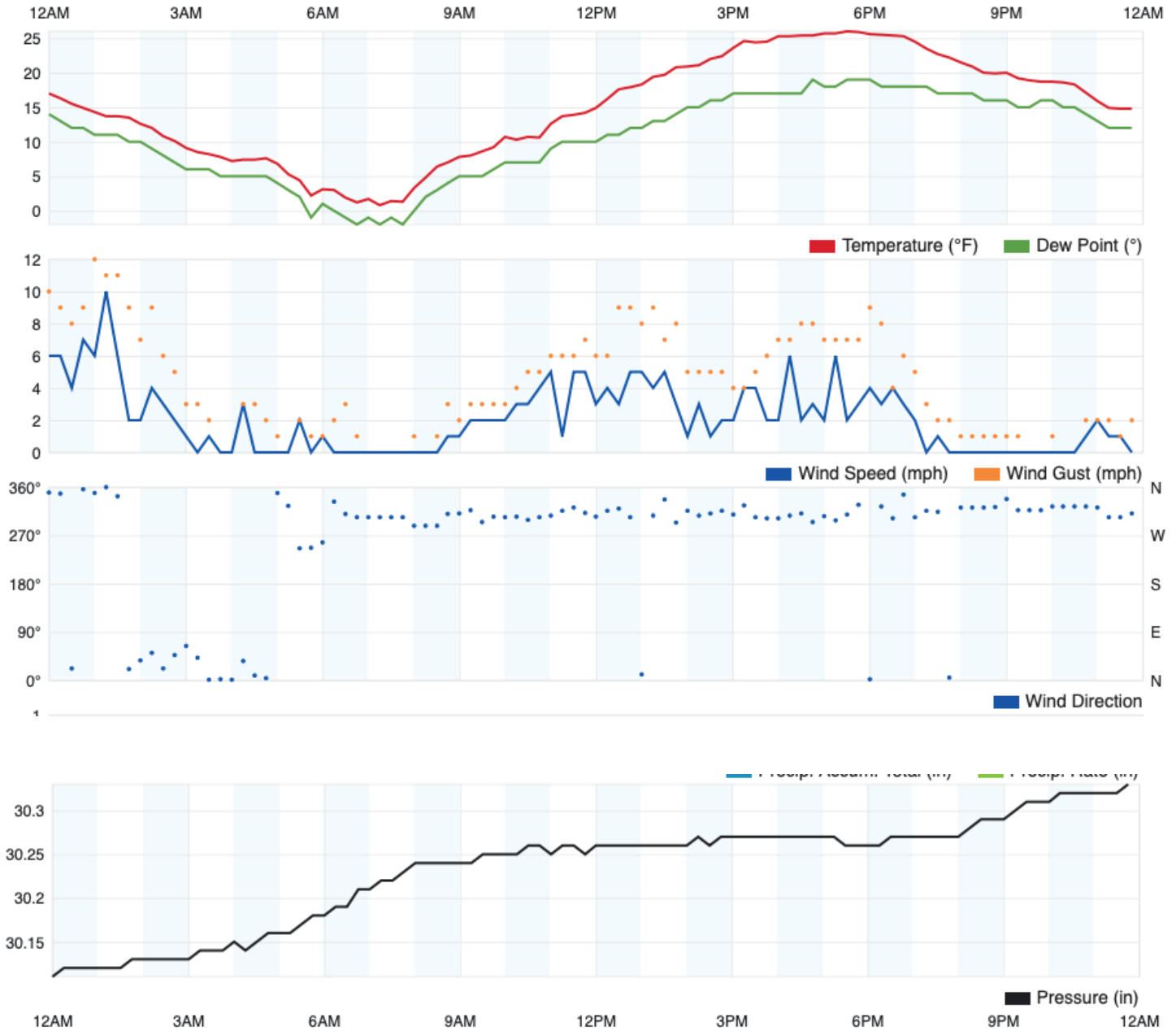
The overturning of Roe v. Wade could have a devastating effect on some families. The governor should take a look at the way that law is applied and any changes that are needed if she truly wants to ensure that South Dakota families are strong.

*Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.*

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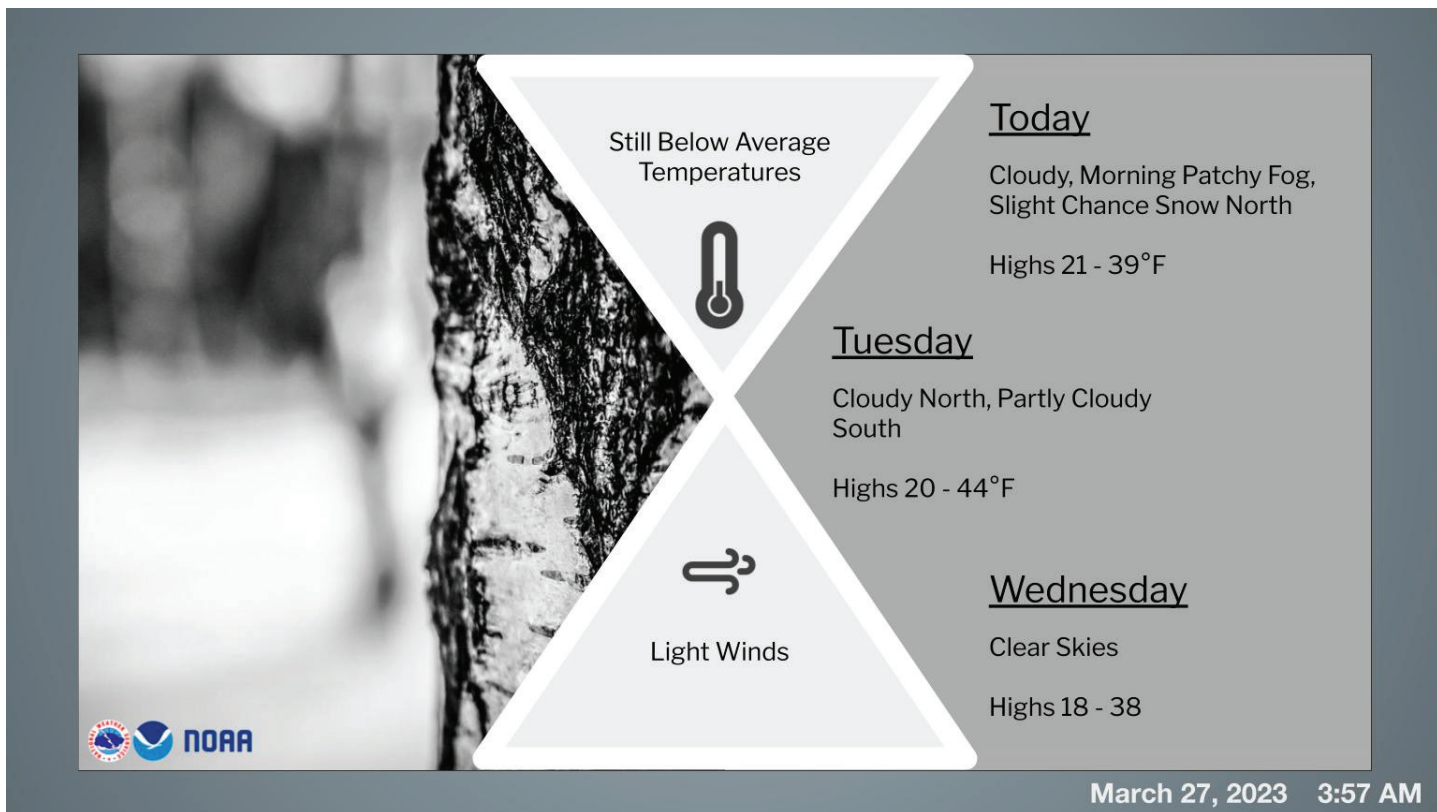
## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




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Today	Tonight	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday
						
Patchy Fog then Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Decreasing Clouds	Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Slight Chance Snow
High: 23 °F	Low: 3 °F	High: 25 °F	Low: -6 °F	High: 19 °F	Low: 4 °F	High: 33 °F




Still Below Average Temperatures




Today  
Cloudy, Morning Patchy Fog, Slight Chance Snow North  
Highs 21 - 39°F

Tuesday  
Cloudy North, Partly Cloudy South  
Highs 20 - 44°F



Light Winds

Wednesday  
Clear Skies  
Highs 18 - 38



March 27, 2023 3:57 AM

Some areas along the ND/SD border could see some patches of fog and some flurries this morning. Otherwise, today will be cloudy with highs in the 20s to 30s. Tomorrow, clouds are expected to clear in our southern counties and Wednesday everyone should see clear skies. Temperatures will remain significantly below average, but winds will also continue to be light.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 26 °F at 5:35 PM

Low Temp: 1 °F at 7:14 AM

Wind: 15 mph at 1:16 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 34 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 83 in 1946

Record Low: -12 in 1913

Average High: 48

Average Low: 24

Average Precip in March.: 0.74

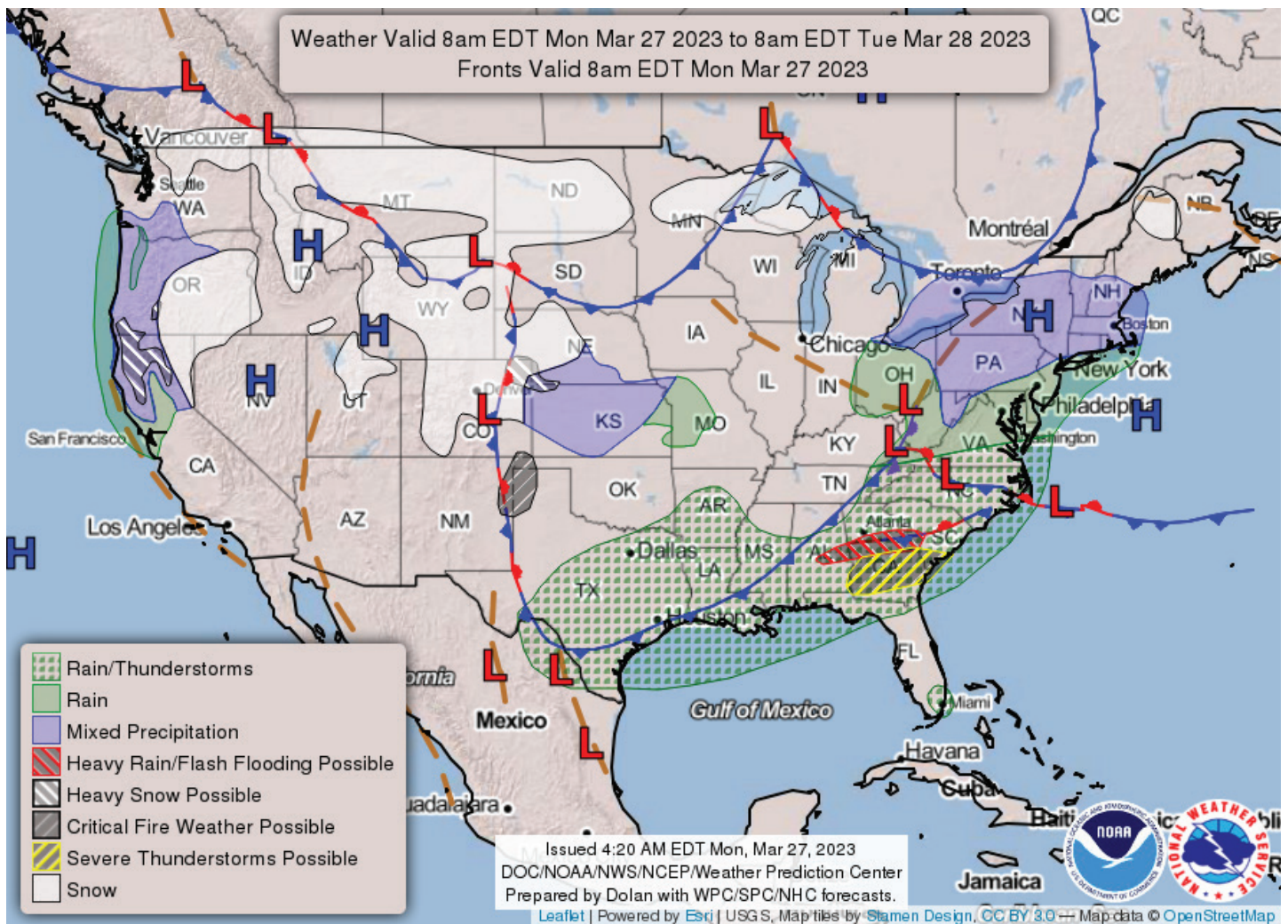
Precip to date in March.: 1.60

Average Precip to date: 1.91

Precip Year to Date: 3.18

Sunset Tonight: 7:55:05 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:18:31 AM



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## Today in Weather History

March 27, 1993: Rain and rapid snowmelt caused the Big Sioux and Vermillion Rivers to rise to 1 to 8 feet above flood stage March 26th through March 31st, 1993. The worst of the flooding occurred in far southeast South Dakota where large areas of farmland were under water. The floodwaters closed at least four state highways in southeast South Dakota and blocked dozens of smaller roads in the east. Large chunks of ice on the Big Sioux led to many temporary ice jams. The ice jams took out fences and washed out roads. In some areas, the ice had to be pushed off of the streets with tractors.

1890: The middle Mississippi Valley saw a significant tornado outbreak on this day with 24, estimated F2 or stronger tornadoes impacting the area. Tornadoes killed at least 146 people. The most notable of the tornadoes was an estimated F4 that carved a path from the Parkland neighborhood to Crescent Hill in Louisville, Kentucky. This tornado destroyed 766 buildings and killed an estimated 76 to 120 people. Most of the deaths occurred when the Falls City Hall collapsed.

1931: A blizzard struck western Kansas and adjoining states was called the "worst since January 1888". Twenty children, ages seven to fourteen, were stranded in a makeshift school bus for 33 hours during this blizzard.

1946: Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada thawed out as the mercury soared to 74 degrees, their warmest March temperature on record.

1950 - A three day snowstorm in the High Plains Region finally came to an end. The storm produced 34 inches of snow in 24 hours at Dumont, located in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and a total of 50 inches. (David Ludlum)

1964: Great Alaskan earthquake left at least 100 dead in Anchorage, Alaska. The magnitude 9.2 quake is the largest in US history and the second strongest worldwide. Waves reached 103 feet above the low - tide mark.

1984 - The temperature at Brownsville, TX, soared to 106 degrees, and Cotulla, TX, reached 108 degrees, equalling the March record for the U.S. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - The second blizzard in less than a week hit eastern Colorado and western Kansas. Snowfall totals ranged up to 24 inches at San Isabel CO. Winds gusted to 50 mph at Goodland KS. The high winds piled snow into massive drifts, closing roads for days and killing thousands of cattle. Snow drifts thirty feet high were reported in northwest Kansas. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Temperatures rose quickly, then dropped just as rapidly, in the central U.S. Eight cities reported record high temperatures for the date as readings soared into the 80s. In southeastern Colorado, the temperature at Lamar CO reached 91 degrees. Strong southerly winds gusted to 63 mph at Gage OK. Strong northwesterly winds, gusting to 61 mph at Goodland KS, then proceeded to usher much colder air into the area. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in the south central U.S. Two tornadoes were reported, and there were 77 other reports of large hail and damaging winds. Baseball size hail was reported at Willow OK and Bartlesville OK. Twenty-six cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Yankton SD with a reading of 84 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Temperatures dipped into the teens and single numbers in the northeastern U.S. Scranton PA tied their record for the date with a morning low of 18 degrees. Temperatures warmed into the 60s and lower 70s in the Pacific Northwest. The afternoon high of 65 degrees at Astoria OR equalled their record for the date. (The National Weather Summary)

1994: The Southeastern Palm Sunday Tornado Outbreak occurred on this date. What began as a peaceful Palm Sunday quickly changed to a historic day in weather history when a powerful tornado ripped through southern Alabama and Georgia. By the time the storm was over, 22 people were dead, and 92 were injured. The F4 tornado cut a 50-mile path from Ragland in St. Clair, County Alabama to the Georgia line. The storm touched down near Ragland at 10:51 am. The storm struck Ohatchee then roared across northeastern Calhoun County, passing near Piedmont and hitting Goshen in Cherokee County. The most disastrous damage occurred at Goshen, where the twister struck the Goshen United Methodist Church at 11:37 am. 20 people were killed at the church, which did not hear the tornado warning issued 10 minutes earlier by the National Weather Service in Birmingham. A tornado watch had been released at 9:30 am. Following the tornadoes, Vice President Al Gore pledged to extend NOAA Weatheradio coverage into the areas affected by the twisters, which had previously been unable to receive the alarm signals.

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### FROM TRIALS TO TRIUMPH

What do you do when you have a difficult time pleasing someone?

George Crum was the chef at a famous country club in Saratoga Springs, New York. One evening there was a guest who ordered fried potatoes to go with his meal. When his order of fries was served, he asked the waiter to return it to the kitchen saying they were too thick. This happened several times. Crum became frustrated. But he did not give up.

Challenged, he took his sharpest knife, sliced some potatoes wafer-thin, deep-fried them in boiling oil, and sprinkled salt on them. Then he had the waiter take them to the guest. The guest sampled them, smiled and decided to pass them around the table to his friends. Everyone enjoyed them and ordered more. The "potato chip" was born that evening and has become one of our favorite snacks.

There are times in all of our lives when people irritate us or bother us. It seems like nothing we do will ever please them or meet the standards they have set for us. No matter what we do or how hard we try, it is not going to be good enough. So, we are tempted to give up or quit. Paul said, "God causes all things to work together for our good." This includes the most painful problems and difficult demands of life. In all things we must trust Him, be willing to do our best, and leave the results to Him. He, not others, knows what is best for our lives.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for giving us problems to solve and challenges to meet, so we can grow strong. Help us to be patient, to be polite, and to persevere. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. Romans 8:28



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

### Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White ..... \$48.99/year
- Colored ..... \$79.88/year
- Colored ..... \$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly\* ..... \$31.95/year

\* The E-Weekly is a PDF file emailed to you each week. It does not grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

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State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Mail Completed Form to:

Groton Independent

P.O. Box 34

Groton, SD 57445-0034

or scan and email to [paperpaul@grotonsd.net](mailto:paperpaul@grotonsd.net)

## Groton Daily Independent

[www.397news.com](http://www.397news.com)

### Subscription Form

This option will grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

- 1 Month ..... \$15.98
- 3 Months ..... \$26.63
- 6 Months ..... \$31.95
- 9 Months ..... \$42.60
- 12 Months ..... \$53.25

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

The following will be used for your log-in information.

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Password \_\_\_\_\_

Pay with Paypal. Type the following into your browser window:

[paypal.me/paperpaul](https://paypal.me/paperpaul)





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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.24.23

14 17 33 42 66 15

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$322,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 6  
DRAW: Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.25.23

3 17 29 41 52 10

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$39,930,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 6 Mins 32  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.26.23

20 30 33 40 47 13

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

NEXT 16 Hrs 36 Mins 31  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.25.23

7 9 11 14 34

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

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 6  
DRAW: Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.25.23

18 30 35 42 52 1

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

NEXT 17 Hrs 5 Mins 31  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.25.23

15 17 18 47 57 19

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$122,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 5 Mins 31  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Prince Harry in court for privacy suit against tabloid

LONDON (AP) —

Prince Harry was in a London court on Monday as the lawyer for a group of British tabloids prepared to ask a judge to toss out lawsuits by the prince, Elton John and several other celebrities who allege phone tapping and other invasions of privacy.

The hearing involves one of several lawsuits Harry, also known as the Duke of Sussex, has brought against the media. It is expected to last four days.

Harry's presence at the High Court in London is a sign of the importance he places on the case.

Associated Newspapers, which publishes titles including the Daily Mail, is asking the High Court to end claims brought by a collection of high-profile individuals who are seeking damages for misuse of private information. Other plaintiffs include John's husband, David Furnish, and actresses Liz Hurley and Sadie Frost.

### First Citizens acquires troubled Silicon Valley Bank

NEW YORK (AP) — North Carolina-based First Citizens will buy Silicon Valley Bank, the tech industry-focused financial institution that collapsed earlier this month, rattling the banking industry and sending shockwaves around the world.

The deal could reassure investors at a time of shaken confidence in banks, though the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. and other regulators had already taken extraordinary steps to head off a wider banking crisis by guaranteeing that depositors in SVB and another failed U.S. bank would be able to access all of their money.

Customers of SVB will automatically become customers of First Citizens, which is headquartered in Raleigh. The 17 former branches of SVB will open as First Citizens branches Monday, the FDIC said.

European shares opened higher Monday, with German lender Commerzbank AG up 2.4% and BNP Paribas up 1.2%.

Investors worry that other banks also may crumble under the pressure of higher interest rates. On Friday, much of the focus was on Deutsche Bank, whose stock tumbled 8.5% in Germany, though it was back up about 3.6% in early trading Monday. Earlier this month, shares of and faith in Swiss bank Credit Suisse fell so much that regulators brokered a takeover of by rival UBS.

In the U.S., SVB, based in Santa Clara, California, collapsed March 10 after depositors rushed to withdraw money amid fears about the bank's health. It was the second-largest bank collapse in U.S. history after the 2008 failure of Washington Mutual. Two days later, New York-based Signature Bank was seized by regulators in the third-largest bank failure in the U.S.

In both cases, the government agreed to cover deposits, even those that exceeded the federally insured limit of \$250,000, so depositors were able to access their money.

New York Community Bank agreed to buy a significant chunk of Signature Bank in a \$2.7 billion deal a week ago, but the search for a buyer for SVB took longer.

The sale announced late Sunday involves the sale of all deposits and loans of SVB to First-Citizens Bank and Trust Co., the FDIC said.

The acquisition gives the FDIC shares in First Citizens worth \$500 million. Both the FDIC and First Citizens will share in losses and the potential recovery on loans included in a loss-share agreement, the FDIC said.

First Citizens Bank was founded in 1898 and says it has more than \$100 billion in total assets, with more than 500 branches in 21 states as well as a nationwide bank. It reported net profit of \$243 million in the last quarter. It is one of the top 20 U.S. banks and says it is the largest family-controlled bank in the country.

## Opposition to Netanyahu plan mounts as unions launch strike

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israel's largest trade union group launched a strike across a broad swath of sectors Monday, joining a surging protest movement against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plan to overhaul the judiciary — a plan that is facing unprecedented opposition.

The strike by the Histadrut umbrella group, which represents nearly 800,000 workers in health, transit and banking, among many other fields, could paralyze large parts of Israel's economy, which is already on shaky ground, ratcheting up the pressure on Netanyahu to suspend the overhaul.

Departing flights out of the country's main international airport were grounded in protest, affecting thousands of travelers. Other sectors were also falling in line, with local governments, which manage pre-schools and other essential services, as well as a main doctors union announcing they would walk out.

The growing resistance to the plan came hours after tens of thousands of people burst into the streets around the country in a spontaneous show of anger at Netanyahu's decision to fire his defense minister after he called for a pause to the overhaul. Chanting "the country is on fire," they lit bonfires on Tel Aviv's main highway, closing the thoroughway and many others throughout the country for hours. Thousands of protesters were gathering Monday outside the Knesset, or parliament, in a bid to ramp up the pressure on the government.

The overhaul, driven by Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption, and his allies in Israel's most right-wing government ever, has plunged Israel into one of its worst domestic crises. It has sparked a sustained and intensifying protest movement that has spread to nearly all sectors of society, including its military, where reservists have increasingly come out publicly to say they will not serve a country veering toward autocracy.

The turmoil has further divided Israel, magnifying longstanding and intractable differences over the country's character that have riven it since its establishment. The protesters say they are fighting for the very soul of the nation, seeing the overhaul as a direct challenge to Israel's democratic ideals. The government has labelled them anarchists out to topple a democratically-elected leadership.

The crisis has also shined a light on Netanyahu himself, Israel's longest serving leader, and the lengths he may be willing to go to maintain his grip on power, even as he battles the corruption charges. The firing of his defense minister at a time of heightened security threats in the West Bank and elsewhere, appeared to be a last straw for many, prompting a new surge of opposition.

"Where are we leading our beloved Israel? To the abyss," Arnon Bar-David, the union group head, said in a rousing speech to applause. "Today we are stopping everyone's descent toward the abyss." The group had sat out the monthslong protests but the defense minister's firing appeared to provide the impetus for the drastic measure.

On Monday, as the embers of the highway bonfires were being cleared, Israel's ceremonial President Isaac Herzog urged Netanyahu to immediately halt the overhaul, calling on the government to put aside political considerations for the sake of the nation.

"The entire nation is rapt with deep worry. Our security, economy, society — all are under threat," he said. "Wake up now!"

Opposition leader Yair Lapid said the crisis was driving Israel to the brink.

"We've never been closer to falling apart. Our national security is at risk, our economy is crumbling, our foreign relations are at their lowest point ever, we don't know what to say to our children about their future in this country," Lapid said. "We have been taken hostage by a bunch of extremists with no brakes and no boundaries."

It was unclear if the strikes would prompt Netanyahu to halt the overhaul. Universities across the country said they were shutting their doors "until further notice." Israeli media reported that a lawyer representing Netanyahu in his corruption trial threatened to quit if the overhaul was not halted.

The developments were being watched in Washington, which is closely allied with Israel yet has been uneasy with Netanyahu and the far-right elements of his government. National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said the United States was "deeply concerned" by the developments in Israel, "which further underscore the urgent need for compromise."

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"Democratic values have always been, and must remain, a hallmark of the U.S.-Israel relationship," Watson said in a statement.

Netanyahu had reportedly spent the night in consultations and was set to speak to the nation, but later delayed his speech. Some members of Netanyahu's Likud party said they would support the prime minister if he did heed calls to halt the overhaul, but the architect of it, Justice Minister Yariv Levin, a popular party member, has said he would resign.

Netanyahu's hard-line allies pressed him to continue on. "We must not halt the reform in the judicial system and we must not give in to anarchy," National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir said.

Netanyahu's dismissal of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant appeared to signal that the prime minister and his allies will barrel ahead this week with the overhaul plan. Gallant had been the first senior member of the ruling Likud party to speak out against it, saying the deep divisions were threatening to weaken the military.

Netanyahu's government pledged to forge ahead with a parliamentary vote this week on a centerpiece of the overhaul — a law that would give the governing coalition the final say over all judicial appointments. A parliamentary committee approved the legislation on Monday for a final vote.

The government also seeks to pass laws that would grant the Knesset, as Israel's parliament is called, the authority to overturn Supreme Court decisions and limit judicial review of laws.

A separate overhaul law that would circumvent a Supreme Court ruling to allow a key coalition ally to serve as minister was being delayed following a request from that party's leader.

Netanyahu and his allies say the plan will restore a balance between the judicial and executive branches and rein in what they see as an interventionist court with liberal sympathies.

But critics say the laws will remove Israel's system of checks and balances and concentrate power in the hands of the governing coalition. They also say that Netanyahu has a conflict of interest because of his corruption trial.

Netanyahu faces charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three separate affairs involving wealthy associates and powerful media moguls. He denies wrongdoing and has dismissed accusations that the legal overhaul is designed to find him an escape route from the trial.

Netanyahu returned to power late last year after a protracted political crisis that sent Israelis to the polls five times in less than four years. The elections were all a referendum on Netanyahu's fitness to serve while on trial for corruption.

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Associated Press journalists Laurie Kellman in Tel Aviv and Isaac Scharf in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

## **Amid strained U.S. ties, China finds unlikely friend in Utah**

By ALAN SUDERMAN and SAM METZ Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — China's global campaign to win friends and influence policy has blossomed in a surprising place: Utah, a deeply religious and conservative state with few obvious ties to the world's most powerful communist country.

An investigation by the Associated Press has found that China and its U.S.-based advocates spent years building relationships with the state's officials and lawmakers. Those efforts have paid dividends at home and abroad, the AP found: Lawmakers delayed legislation Beijing didn't like, nixed resolutions that conveyed displeasure with its actions and expressed support in ways that enhanced the Chinese government's image.

Its work in Utah is emblematic of a broader effort by Beijing to secure allies at the local level as its relations with the U.S. and its western allies have turned acrimonious. U.S. officials say local leaders are at risk of being manipulated by China and have deemed the influence campaign a threat to national security.

Beijing's success in Utah shows "how pervasive and persistent China has been in trying to influence America," said Frank Montoya Jr., a retired FBI counterintelligence agent who lives in Utah.

"Utah is an important foothold," he said. "If the Chinese can succeed in Salt Lake City, they can also

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make it in New York and elsewhere.”

Security experts say that China’s campaign is widespread and tailored to local communities. In Utah, the AP found, Beijing and pro-China advocates appealed to lawmakers’ affiliations with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormon church, which is the state’s dominant religion and one that has long dreamed of expanding in China.

Beijing’s campaign in Utah has raised concerns among state and federal lawmakers and drawn the attention of the Justice Department.

A state legislator told the AP he was interviewed by the FBI after introducing a resolution in 2020 expressing solidarity with China early in the coronavirus pandemic. A Utah professor who has advocated for closer ties between Washington and Beijing told the AP he’s been questioned by the FBI twice. The FBI declined to comment.

## ‘DECEPTIVE AND COERCIVE’

Beijing’s interest in locally focused influence campaigns is not a secret. China’s leader, Xi Jinping, said during a trip to the U.S. in 2015 that “without successful cooperation at the sub-national level it would be very difficult to achieve practical results for cooperation at the national level.”

A spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington told the AP that China “values its relationship with Utah” and any “words and deeds that stigmatize and smear these sub-national exchanges are driven by ulterior political purposes.”

It is not unusual for countries, including the U.S., to engage in local diplomacy. U.S. officials and security experts have stressed that many Chinese language and cultural exchanges have no hidden agendas. However, they said, few nations have so aggressively courted local leaders in ways that raise national security concerns.

In its annual threat assessment released earlier this month, the U.S. intelligence community reported that China is “redoubling” its local influence campaigns in the face of stiffening resistance at the national level. Beijing believes, the report said, that “local officials are more pliable than their federal counterparts.”

The National Counterintelligence and Security Center in July warned state and local officials about “deceptive and coercive” Chinese influence operations. And FBI Director Christopher Wray last year accused China of seeking to “cultivate talent early—often state and local officials—to ensure that politicians at all levels of government will be ready to take a call and advocate on behalf of Beijing’s agenda.”

Authorities in other countries, including Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, have sounded similar alarms.

Those concerns have arisen amid escalating disputes between the U.S. and China over trade, human rights, the future of Taiwan and China’s tacit support for Russia during its invasion of Ukraine. Tensions worsened last month when a suspected Chinese spy balloon was discovered and shot down in U.S. airspace.

## LEGISLATIVE AND PR VICTORIES

U.S. officials have provided scant details about which states and localities the Chinese government has targeted. The AP focused its investigation on Utah because China appears to have cultivated a significant number of allies in the state and its advocates are well-known to lawmakers.

Relying on dozens of interviews with key players and the review of hundreds of pages of records, text messages and emails obtained through public records’ requests, the AP found China won frequent legislative and public relations victories in Utah.

China-friendly lawmakers, for example, delayed action for a year to ban Chinese-funded Confucius Institutes at state universities, according to the legislation’s sponsor. The Chinese language and cultural programs have been described by U.S. national security officials as propaganda instruments. The University of Utah and Southern Utah University closed their institutes by last year.

In 2020, China scored an image-boosting coup when Xi sent a note to a class of Utah fourth-graders thanking them for cards they’d sent wishing him a happy Chinese New Year. He encouraged them to “become young ‘ambassadors’ for Sino-American friendship.”

Emails obtained by the AP show the Chinese Embassy and the students’ Chinese teacher coordinated

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the letter exchange, which resulted in heavy coverage by state-controlled media in China.

A Chinese state media outlet reported the Utah students jubilantly exclaimed: "Grandpa Xi really wrote back to me. He's so cool!" Portraying China's most authoritarian leader in decades as a kindly grandfather is a familiar trope in Chinese propaganda.

Xi's letter garnered positive attention in Utah, too. A Republican legislator said on the state Senate floor that he "couldn't help but think how amazing it was" that the Chinese leader took the time to write such a "remarkable" letter. Another GOP senator gushed on his conservative radio show that Xi's letter "was so kind and so personal."

Dakota Cary, a China expert at the security firm Krebs Stamos Group, said in making such comments Utah lawmakers are "essentially acting as mouthpieces for the Chinese Communist Party" and legitimizing their ideas and narratives.

"Statements like these are exactly what China's goal is for influence campaigns," he said.

## SPY AGENCY INTEREST

China's interest in Utah is not limited to its officials and advocates who are engaged in diplomacy, trade and education. U.S. officials have noted that China's civilian spy agency, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), has shown an interest in Utah, court records show.

In January, former graduate student Ji Chaoqun was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges related to spying for China. The Chicago student told an undercover agent he'd been tasked by his spy handlers "to meet people, some American friends." He was baptized at a Latter-day Saints church and told the undercover agent he'd "been going to Utah more often lately" before his arrest, according to his Facebook page and court records.

Ron Hansen, a former U.S. intelligence official from Utah, pleaded guilty to trying to sell classified information to China. Hansen said China's spy service had tasked him with assessing various U.S. politicians' views towards China. The FBI found the names of Utah elected officials among sensitive files he stored on his laptop, court records show. Hansen was sentenced in 2019 to serve 10 years in federal prison.

Hansen was well known in Utah political circles and helped organize the first ever annual U.S.-China National Governors Forum, which was held in 2011 in Salt Lake City, according to court records and interviews. The U.S. State Department cancelled the forums in 2020 due to concerns about Chinese influence efforts.

## 'UTAH IS NOT LIKE WASHINGTON D.C.'

The AP found groups of up to 25 Utah lawmakers routinely took trips to China every other year since 2007. Lawmakers have partially used campaign donations to pay for the trade missions and cultural exchanges, while relying on China and host organizations to pay for other expenses.

On the trips, they've forged relationships with government officials and were quoted in Chinese state-owned media in ways that support Beijing's agenda.

"Utah is not like Washington D.C.," then Utah House Speaker Greg Hughes, a vocal supporter of former President Donald Trump, told the Chinese state media outlet in 2018 as the former president ratcheted up pressure on Beijing over trade. "Utah is a friend of China, an old friend with a long history."

In an interview last month with the AP, Hughes said the trips to China made him "bullish" about the country and prospects of improving trade. However, he said he now believes the visits were pretexts for Chinese officials to influence him and other lawmakers.

"It's a trip not worth taking," Hughes said.

Utah doesn't require public officials to report in detail their foreign travel or personal finances, so it's difficult to determine lawmaker's financial ties to China. Some of Utah's most pro-China legislators, however, have China-related personal business connections.

Sen. Curt Bramble told Courthouse News Service last year that his role as a part-time legislator and as a business consultant sometimes overlap and that he "had clients in China — a dozen at times — some of them on legislative tours, some on consulting."

In an interview with AP, Bramble said none of his clients are based in China; they only do business there. He declined to name them.

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Bramble, a Republican who represents a conservative district, also rejected fears of undue Chinese influence in Utah.

"China's not going anywhere. China's going to be a world force. They're going to be a player for the foreseeable future and trying to understand what that implies for the United States or for the state of Utah and get a concept of that seems to be a valuable endeavor," he said.

## TIES FORGED BY TWO UTAH RESIDENTS

Many of the Utah-China ties have been forged by two state residents with links to the Chinese government or to organizations that experts say are alleged front groups for China, including its civilian spy agency, the AP found.

The two men advocated for and against resolutions, set up meetings between Utah lawmakers and Chinese officials, accompanied legislators on trips to China and provided advice on the best way to cultivate favor with Beijing, according to emails and interviews.

In reviewing the AP's findings, legal experts said the men's connections with Chinese officials suggest that they should register with the Justice Department under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, known as FARA. The law generally requires anyone who works on behalf of a foreign entity to influence lawmakers or public perception, but its scope is the subject of significant debate and enforcement has been uneven.

"If I were representing either of these individuals, I would have significant concerns about FARA exposure," said Joshua Ian Rosenstein, an attorney who handles such matters.

One of the men, Taowen Le, has championed China to religious and political leaders in Utah for decades. Le, a Chinese citizen, moved to Utah in the 1980s and has been a professor of information technology at Weber State University since 1998. Le converted in 1990 to the Mormon faith.

From 2003 through 2017, Le had another job -- as a paid representative of China's Liaoning provincial government. Provincial governments are largely controlled by Beijing and Liaoning has had a longstanding "sister" relationship with Utah.

Le's advocacy continued after he said he left Liaoning's payroll, emails and interviews show. He has frequently forwarded messages from Chinese government officials to Utah lawmakers and helped the Chinese Embassy set up meetings with state officials.

After embassy officials tried unsuccessfully last year to get staff for Utah Gov. Spencer Cox to schedule a get-together with China's ambassador to the U.S., Le sent the governor a personal plea to take the meeting.

"I still remember and cherish what you told me at the New Year Party held at your home," Le wrote in a letter adorned with pictures of him and Cox posing together. "You told me that you trusted me to be a good messenger and friendship builder between Utah and China."

State Senate President Stuart Adams turned to Le when Utah was scrambling to obtain large quantities of drugs that Adams thought could be used as potential treatment against the coronavirus in early 2020, emails and interviews show.

Le, who belongs to the same congregation as Adams, said in an email to another lawmaker that he was able to get the Chinese Embassy to assign two staffers to work "tirelessly" on the request until it was fulfilled.

## RELIGIOUS SALES PITCH

A hallmark of Le's approach is to utilize his religion in his pitches to lawmakers. He quoted scripture from the Bible and the Book of Mormon in his emails, text messages and letters, and sprinkled in positive comments that Russell Nelson, the church's president-prophet, has made about China.

Chinese officials have tried to cultivate friendly ties with the church. When visiting Utah, China's diplomats and officials often meet top church members as well as lawmakers, emails and other records show.

Expanding to China has been a top goal for the church, which plays a heavy role in Utah politics and the state's overall identity. Many of the state's residents lived abroad as missionaries, and several of Utah's public schools have robust K-12 Chinese immersion programs.

While the church has historically been an outspoken advocate for religious freedom, Le sought to stop Utah lawmakers from supporting religious figures or groups discriminated against by the Chinese government.

When a Utah lawmaker sponsored a resolution in 2021 condemning China's well-documented and bru-

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tal crackdown of its minority Muslim Uighurs, Le chastised the legislator in text messages and compared unflattering media coverage of the Chinese government to that of the church's founder, Joseph Smith Jr.

"Pray to God and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit as you ponder about these issues instead of solely relying on those biased media reports," Le said.

The resolution failed that year and a similar one introduced in January did not receive a hearing.

## CHINA'S 'ADVANTAGES'

Le has served as a board member of the China Overseas Friendship Association, which has ties to the United Front Work Department -- a Chinese Communist Party organization the U.S. government says engages in covert and malign foreign influence operations.

A United Front publication profiled Le in 2020 after he attended a meeting in Beijing of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a prestigious advisory body controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.

"I deeply feel the advantages of China's system," Le told the publication.

Le told the AP he was interviewed by the FBI in 2007 and 2018 about his Chinese government ties. He said his advocacy has always been self-directed.

"I don't consider myself a lobbyist because I'm not a lobbyist. I'm just someone who cherishes the relationship between the U.S. and China," Le said in an interview in his Weber State office.

Adams, the Senate president, said he feels otherwise.

"I do believe he's lobbying," Adams said. "He advocates very hard on China."

## LAWMAKER'S SON TURNED CHINA ADVOCATE

Another Utah resident whom lawmakers said regularly has advocated better relations with China was Dan Stephenson, the son of a former state senator and employee of a China-based consulting firm.

Emails and other records show Stephenson advised the Utah senate president on how to make a good impression with a Chinese ambassador and assisted a Chinese province in its unsuccessful efforts to build a ceramics museum in Utah.

Stephenson has promoted China in Utah for several years and has boasted of being well connected with government officials there.

"I've heard more than once from the mouths of Chinese government officials that China is prioritizing their relationship with Utah," Stephenson told lawmakers at a committee hearing. That testimony came shortly after Stephenson accompanied Republican state Sen. Jake Anderegg on a trip to Shanghai and Beijing that included meetings with officials at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A few months after that trip, Stephenson provided Anderegg with the draft language for a pro-China resolution the state senator introduced in 2020 expressing solidarity with China during the pandemic, Anderegg told the AP.

The resolution passed with near unanimous approval.

A Chinese diplomat's efforts to win passage of a similar resolution in Wisconsin failed, with the state's senate president publicly blasting it as a piece of propaganda.

Anderegg told the AP that he was interviewed by FBI agents seeking information about the Utah resolution's origins.

"It seemed rather innocuous to me," Anderegg said of his resolution. "But maybe it wasn't."

Stephenson said the FBI has not contacted him and no Chinese government official played a role in the resolution.

## TIES TO ALLEGED FRONT GROUPS

Stephenson has links to Chinese groups allegedly active in covert foreign influence operations, documents show.

He is a partner in the Shanghai-based consulting firm Economic Bridge International. The company's chief executive, William Wang, is a Chinese citizen and council member of the China Friendship Foundation for Peace and Development, according to an online biography. The group is affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party's United Front.

Stephenson, also once worked for the China Academy of Painting, which has been used by China's Min-



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istry of State Security as a front for meeting and covertly influencing elites and officials abroad, according to Alex Joske, the author of the recently published book "Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Covert Operations Fooled the World."

Stephenson said he worked only briefly — without pay — for the China Academy of Painting. He added he did not witness any spy agency involvement.

## WORK ALIGNED WITH CHINESE GOVERNMENT'S DESIRES

Stephenson said he's never taken any action at the direction of the Chinese government and never accepted compensation from it.

"I work to promote Utah's economy, to help American companies succeed in China, and to encourage healthy people-to-people and commercial ties," Stephenson said.

His work sometimes aligned with what Chinese government officials were seeking and in ways experts say likely helped the Chinese Communist Party's messaging.

Stephenson urged Utah's elected officials to make videos to air on Shanghai television to boost the spirits of that city's residents early in 2020 as they battled COVID-19, according to emails obtained by AP.

"You cannot buy this type of positive publicity for Utah in China," Stephenson said in an email pitching the videos.

The request originated with the Shanghai government, according to Stephenson's email, and came as officials in China were scrambling to tamp down public fury at communist authorities for reprimanding a young doctor, who later died, over his repeated warnings about the disease's dangers.

Many lawmakers recorded videos reading sample scripts Stephenson provided, and a compilation of those videos was uploaded to a Chinese social media website. The compilation ends with dozens of lawmakers in unison shouting "jiaoyou!" — a Chinese expression of encouragement — on the Utah House and Senate floors.

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Suderman reported from Washington. AP writer Fu Ting in Washington contributed to this story. Contact AP's global investigative team at [Investigative@ap.org](mailto:Investigative@ap.org).

## Black, Hispanic investors struggle with faith in crypto

By CORA LEWIS and ALEXANDRA OLSON AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — A software developer twice invested his savings in cryptocurrencies, only to lose it all. But he still promotes it to the Black community and would like to get back in himself.

A recent college graduate and a single mom are dabbling hopefully in bitcoin after attending a crypto workshop sponsored by rapper Jay-Z at the public housing complex where the hip-hop star grew up.

But a former executive at a cryptocurrency exchange feels disillusioned by the false promise of crypto helping her family in Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray region.

All were drawn by the idea of crypto as a pathway to wealth-building outside of traditional financial systems with a long history of racial discrimination and indifference to the needs of low-income communities. But crypto's meltdown over the past year has dealt a blow to that narrative, fueling a debate between those who continue to believe in its future and skeptics who say misleading advertising and celebrity-fueled hype have drawn vulnerable people to a risky and unproven asset class.

The collapse of two crypto-friendly banks this month, Silvergate Capital Corp. and Signature Bank, complicates the picture. Their failure was a setback for crypto companies that relied on the banks to convert digital currencies to U.S. dollars. Yet the crisis bolstered Bitcoin, the oldest and most popular digital currency, by reinforcing a distrust in the banking system that helped give rise to cryptocurrencies in the first place.

Mariela Regalado, 33, and Jimmy Bario, 22, neighbors at the Marcy Houses complex in Brooklyn, started putting \$20 or \$30 into bitcoin every two weeks or so after attending "Bitcoin Academy," a workshop sponsored last summer by Jay-Z and Jack Dorsey, co-founder of Block Inc., the parent company of mobile payment system Cash App.

"I don't see it as something that's going to, you know, take me out of Brooklyn and buy me a \$2 million mansion in Texas," said Regalado, an educational consultant and mother of a toddler. "But if it happens,

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I'm all for it."

Only a small minority of the U.S. population owns cryptocurrency, but adoption increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as low interest rates made borrowing money and investing in risky assets more attractive. Prices peaked in 2021, and a constellation of apps, exchanges and even ATM-like crypto machines made buying digital coins easy.

But the drawbacks of crypto played out dramatically after prices cratered in 2022, wiping out millions in investments and leading to a cascade of bankruptcies and layoffs at crypto exchanges, lenders and other companies. Along with its volatility, crypto lacks protections such as deposit insurance since it's not controlled by any single institution. Largely unregulated, the industry is susceptible to scams, hacks and fraud.

Cryptocurrencies are built on decentralized ledgers — usually blockchain — allowing peer-to-peer transactions without a middleman like a bank or government. That continues to appeal to many people who face barriers to traditional wealth-building avenues such as homeownership, college education, or the stock market, said Terri Bradford, a payment specialist at the Kansas City Federal Reserve, who has researched crypto's popularity among many Black investors.

"It doesn't appear that a whole lot of people are dissuaded from crypto even though we have observed what has happened," Bradford said.

According to Pew Research Center polls in 2021 and 2022, some 20% of Black, Hispanic and Asian U.S. adults have bought, traded or used cryptocurrency, compared with 13% of white adults. Bradford's research, which examined data from Pew Research Center and the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, found that Black investors are more likely to own crypto than stocks or mutual funds, while the opposite is true for white investors.

Black and Latino crypto enthusiasts have formed social media groups, written books and organized summits to promote minority developers in the space and champion blockchain technology's potential to create more equitable systems in finance and beyond.

But crypto companies also sought to capture a broader market of retail investors through lucrative sponsorship deals with celebrities and sports teams, many aimed directly at Black and Hispanic consumers by touting crypto as an economic equalizer.

Coin Cloud, a company that makes ATMs for cryptocurrencies and which has filed for bankruptcy, launched an ad featuring movie director Spike Lee deriding "old money" as "exploitative," "oppressive" and "white," and crypto as "positive" and "inclusive."

Tonantzin Carmona, a Brookings Institute fellow who researches crypto's impact on minority communities, said that for inexperienced investors, this sort of high-profile hype easily obscures crypto's drawbacks.

Carmona considers crypto's marketing to racial minorities part of a legacy of "predatory inclusion" in the tradition of payday loans and subprime mortgages — risky services that promise access to financing that would otherwise be out of reach.

"You'll have a marginalized group, a community that has been historically excluded from accessing products, services, opportunities, and all of a sudden they're told that they will get access to maybe some type of alternative," Carmona said. "But this access often comes with conditions that undermine the benefits or that will reproduce insecurity for these very same communities."

Rahwa Berhe first started investing in crypto while studying alternative financial products during a master's degree program at the University of Washington in Seattle. The Chicago native tried to forge a career in crypto, leading a compliance team for digital assets at an exchange for four years, only to feel isolated as a Black woman.

"It's like you took all the tech bros and the finance bros and put them together. I didn't know where I fit in," Berhe said.

Her disillusion deepened when crypto couldn't help her family in Tigray during the conflict there from 2020 to 2022 because the lack of infrastructure and access to electricity made transfers impossible. When she tried to point out these realities to some in the crypto community, she was dismissed as "negative" by social media posters breezily celebrating that the hashtag #eth, for Ethiopia, was introducing people

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to the digital coin Ether.

Berhe now works with a Stanford University research lab exploring how decentralized web tools can be applied to archiving Africana artifacts. As for cryptocurrency, she is done for now.

"It was great until it wasn't," Berhe said.

Crypto advocates argue minority communities deserve access to a potentially lucrative asset class that isn't going away. Many believe another boom is inevitable and liken last year's collapse to the dotcom bust of the 2000s, which, far from dooming the tech industry, only weeded out bad actors and bolstered winners like Amazon.

Andre Mego, Bitcoin Academy's program manager, said crypto is an accessible way to teach financial literacy to a community where many find concepts like wealth-building investment abstract and out of reach. At the end of the summer workshop, participants were each gifted \$1,000 in bitcoin, most of them through Cash App, which launched bitcoin trading in 2018.

"When we talk about accessibility, that provides motivation. Because for anybody thinking about investment, they could think, 'That's a big thing in the future. That's something that I have to save up so much money for. I don't know if I'm allowed to do this. Am I even part of this conversation?'" Mego said.

Bario said Bitcoin Academy's workshop at the Marcy Houses complex was his first meaningful introduction to personal finance, though he graduated last spring with a degree in economics from Lafayette University. Growing up, he said, investing was not a realistic possibility in his family, which relied on income from his father, who worked as taxi driver back in Honduras.

"I always thought, as soon as you get your money, it's time to spend it — as soon as you get that Friday paycheck," said Bario, who now works as a soccer coach.

Omid Malekan, who teaches a course on blockchain and cryptocurrency at Columbia Business School, said he hopes the latest crash will disabuse people of the idea that crypto is a reliable avenue for getting rich quick. But Malekan said the crypto industry needs more diversity, not less, and that young Black and Hispanic people should be encouraged to pursue careers in developing a technology he believes will be the future of finance.

"The people who are attracted to crypto because of the way the technology works and because of the promise of a more global, more accessible financial system — those people, it takes more than just prices going down to scare them away," Malekan said.

Tyrone Norris, the software developer, said he learned to be cautious about how to buy crypto the hard way.

Growing up in Washington, D.C., Norris studied computer programming in high school and took college courses, but never graduated because he couldn't afford to go full time. He has worked as a contractor, moving around the country and never owning a home or accessing a workplace retirement plan.

When Norris first decided to invest in crypto, he poked around on exchanges and chose MANA, a token powering the 3D virtual world Decentraland, because it shared his ex-girlfriend's name and he saw it as a sign.

He went all in, emptying his bank account of \$4,000. When his MANA investment doubled, he started betting on whichever coins he thought would be most lucrative. But one exchange turned out to be scam, and another based in New Zealand lost millions in a hack. Norris's investment went to zero, but two years later, he got back in the game with another \$5,000. Again, he watched it soar, then crash as the 2022 "crypto winter" set in.

"I was a rookie — I didn't understand what I was doing. I was putting my crypto into dangerous places," Norris said.

For now, he is taking a break from software development to focus on building a crypto-backed hip-hop gaming project. Norris said he has no regrets because investing introduced him to the possibilities of the blockchain.

"I come from nothing," he said. "I don't come in expecting anything to be fair."

## Man suing Gwyneth Paltrow to testify in Utah ski crash trial

By SAM METZ Associated Press

PARK CITY, Utah (AP) — The man suing Gwyneth Paltrow over a 2016 collision at one of the most up-scale ski resorts in North America is expected to take the stand on Monday as the closely watched trial goes into its second week in Utah.

Attorneys said Friday that retired optometrist Terry Sanderson, 76, would likely testify first on Monday, before his attorneys rest and hand the courtroom over to Paltrow's defense team to make their case. Paltrow's attorneys are expected to call her two children — Moses and Apple — and a ski instructor who was present the day of the collision.

Sanderson is suing Paltrow for more than \$300,000, claiming she skied recklessly into him from behind, breaking four of his ribs and head trauma that post-accident manifested as post-concussion syndrome. Paltrow has countersued for \$1 and attorney fees, alleging that Sanderson was at fault and veered into her from behind in a — first gradual and then sudden — crash.

After Paltrow testified Friday that the collision began when Sanderson's skis veered between her two legs, attorneys will likely question Sanderson on his recollections. Craig Ramon, the sole eyewitness of the crash, testified that he heard a loud scream and saw Paltrow hit Sanderson, causing his skis to fly up into the air before he plummeted down on the beginner run in a "spread eagle" position.

Attorneys will also likely question Sanderson on the post-concussion symptoms that medical experts and his doctors testified about last week. And Paltrow's attorneys are expected to ask about his references to Paltrow's fame and whether the lawsuit amounts to an attempt to exploit it.

Though the courtroom in Park City, Utah, was far from full throughout the first week of the trial, the case has emerged as the most closely watched celebrity trial since Johnny Depp took Amber Heard to court almost a year ago in Virginia. Clips of attorney outbursts and Paltrow's Friday testimony have been cut and circulated widely on social media, while observers have debated the motivations on both sides to sustain the prolonged legal battle seven years after the collision.

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.

## In Macron's France, streets and fields seethe with protest

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A big day has come for French high school student Elisa Fares. At age 17, she is taking part in her first protest.

In a country that taught the world about people power with its revolution of 1789 — and a country again seething with anger against its leaders — graduating from bystander to demonstrator is a generations-old rite of passage. Fares looks both excited and nervous as she prepares to march down Paris streets where people for centuries have similarly defied authority and declared: "Non!"

Two friends, neither older than 18 but already protest veterans whose parents took them to demonstrations when they were little, are showing Fares the ropes. They've readied eyedrops and gas masks in case police fire tear gas — as they have done repeatedly in recent weeks.

"The French are known for fighting and we'll fight," says one of the friends, Coline Marionneau, also 17. "My mother goes to a lot of demonstrations ... She says if you have things to say, you should protest."

For French President Emmanuel Macron, the look of determination on their young faces only heralds deepening crisis. His government has ignited a firestorm of anger with unpopular pension reforms that he railroaded through parliament and which, most notably, push the legal retirement age from 62 to 64.

Furious not just with the prospect of working for longer but also with the way Macron imposed it, his opponents have switched to full-on disobedience mode. They're regularly striking and demonstrating and threatening to make his second and final term as president even more difficult than his first. It, too, was rocked by months of protests — often violent — by so-called yellow vest campaigners against social injustice.

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Fares, the first-time protester, said her mother had been against her taking to the streets but has now given her blessing.

"She said that if I wanted to fight, she wouldn't stop me," the teen says.

Critics accuse Macron of effectively ruling by decree, likening him to France's kings of old. Their reign finished badly: In the French Revolution, King Louis XVI ended up on the guillotine. There's no danger of that happening to Macron. But hobbled in parliament and contested on the streets piled high with reeking garbage uncollected by striking workers, he's being given a tough lesson, again, about French people power. Freshly scrawled slogans in Paris reference 1789.

So drastically has Macron lost the initiative that he was forced to indefinitely postpone a planned state visit this week by King Charles III. Germany, not France, will now get the honor of being the first overseas ally to host Charles as monarch.

The France leg of Charles' tour would have coincided with a new round of strikes and demonstrations planned for Tuesday that are again likely to mobilize many hundreds of thousands of protesters. Macron said the royal visit likely would have become their target, which risked creating a "detestable situation."

Encouraged by that victory, the protest movement is plowing on and picking up new recruits, including some so young that it will be many decades before they'll be directly impacted by the pushed-back retirement age. Their involvement is a worrisome development for Macron, because it suggests that protests are evolving, broadening from workplace and retirement concerns to a more generalized malaise with the president and his governance.

Violence is picking up, too. Police and environmental activists fought pitched battles over the weekend in rural western France, resulting in dozens of injuries. Officers fired more than 4,000 nonlethal dispersion grenades in fending off hundreds of protesters who rained down rocks, powerful fireworks and gasoline bombs on police lines.

"Anger and resentment," says former President François Hollande, Macron's predecessor, "are at a level that I have rarely seen."

For Fares, whose first demonstration was a peaceful protest in Paris this weekend, the final straw was Macron's decision to not let legislators vote on his retirement reform, because he wasn't sure of winning a majority for it. Instead, he ordered his prime minister to skirt parliament by using a special constitutional power to ram the bill through.

It was the 11th time that Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne had to resort to the so-called Article 49.3 power in just 10 months — a telling sign of Macron's fragility since he lost his parliamentary majority in an election last June.

"It's an attack on democracy," Fares said. "It annoyed me too much."

Her friend Luna Dessommes, 18, added hopefully: "We have to use the movement to politicize more and more young people."

At age 76, veteran protester Gilbert Leblanc has been through it all before. He was a yellow vest; by his count, he took part in more than 220 of their protests in Macron's first term, rallying to the cry that the former banker was too pro-business and "the president of the rich."

Long before that, Leblanc cut his teeth in seminal civil unrest that reshaped France in May 1968. He says that when he tells awe-struck young protesters that he was a "soixante-huitard" — a '68 veteran — they "want to take selfies with me."

This winter, he has kept his heating off, instead saving the money for train fares to the capital, so he can protest every weekend, he said.

"My grandfather who fought in World War I, got the war medal. He would rise from his grave if he saw me sitting at home, in my sofa, not doing anything," Leblanc said.

"Everything we've obtained has been with our tears and blood."

## Deputies accused of shoving guns in mouths of 2 Black men

By MICHAEL GOLDBERG Associated Press/Report for America

BRANDON, Miss. (AP) — Several deputies from a Mississippi sheriff's department being investigated by the Justice Department for possible civil rights violations have been involved in at least four violent encounters with Black men since 2019 that left two dead and another with lasting injuries, an Associated Press investigation found.

Two of the men allege that Rankin County sheriff's deputies shoved guns into their mouths during separate encounters. In one case, the deputy pulled the trigger, leaving the man with wounds that required parts of his tongue to be sewn back together. In one of the two fatal confrontations, the man's mother said a deputy kneeled on her son's neck while he told them he couldn't breathe.

Police and court records obtained by the AP show that several deputies who were accepted to the sheriff's office's Special Response Team — a tactical unit whose members receive advanced training — were involved in each of the four encounters. In three of them, the heavily redacted documents don't indicate if they were serving in their normal capacity as deputies or as members of the unit.

Such units have drawn scrutiny since the January killing of Tyre Nichols, a Black father who died days after being severely beaten by Black members of a special police team in Memphis, Tennessee. Nichols' death led to a Justice Department probe of similar squads around the country that comes amid the broader public reckoning over race and policing sparked by the 2020 police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

In Mississippi, the police shooting of Michael Corey Jenkins led the Justice Department to open a civil rights investigation into the Rankin County Sheriff's Department. Jenkins said six white deputies burst into a home where he was visiting a friend, and one put a gun in his mouth and fired. Jenkins' hospital records, parts of which he shared with AP, show he had a lacerated tongue and broken jaw.

Deputies said Jenkins was shot after he pointed a gun at them; department officials have not answered multiple inquiries from the AP asking whether a weapon was found at the scene. Jenkins' attorney, Malik Shabazz, said his client didn't have a gun.

"They had complete control of him the entire time. Six officers had full and complete control of Michael the entire time," Shabazz said. "So that's just a fabrication."

Rankin County, which has about 120 sheriff's deputies serving its roughly 160,000 people, is predominantly white and just east of the state capital, Jackson, home to one of the highest percentages of Black residents of any major U.S. city. In the county seat of Brandon, a towering granite-and-marble monument topped by a statue of a Confederate soldier stands across the street from the sheriff's office.

In a notice of an upcoming lawsuit, attorneys for Jenkins and his friend Eddie Terrell Parker said on the night of Jan. 24 the deputies suddenly came into the home and proceeded to handcuff and beat them. They said the deputies stunned them with Tasers repeatedly over roughly 90 minutes and, at one point, forced them to lie on their backs as the deputies poured milk over their faces. The men restated the allegations in separate interviews with the AP.

When a Taser is used, it's automatically logged into the device's memory. The AP obtained the automated Taser records from the evening of Jan. 24. They show that deputies first fired one of the stun guns at 10:04 p.m. and fired one at least three more times over the next 65 minutes. However, those unredacted records might not paint a complete picture, as redacted records show that Tasers were turned on, turned off or used dozens more times during that period.

The Mississippi Bureau of Investigation was brought in to investigate the encounter. Its summary says a deputy shot Jenkins at approximately 11:45 p.m., or about 90 minutes after a Taser was first used, which matches the timeframe given by Parker and Jenkins. The deputy's name was not disclosed by the bureau.

Police say the raid was prompted by a report of drug activity at the home. Jenkins was charged with possessing between 2 and 10 grams of methamphetamine and aggravated assault on a police officer. Parker was charged with two misdemeanors — possession of paraphernalia and disorderly conduct. Jenkins and Parker say the raid came to a head when the deputy shot Jenkins through the mouth. He still has difficulty speaking and eating.

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Another Black man, Carvis Johnson, alleged in a federal lawsuit filed in 2020 that a Rankin County deputy placed a gun into his mouth during a 2019 drug bust. Johnson was not shot.

There is no reason for an officer to place a gun in a suspect's mouth, and to have allegations of two such incidents is telling, said Samuel Walker, emeritus professor of criminal justice at the University of Nebraska.

"If there are incidents with the same kind of pattern of behavior, they have their own set of rules," he said. "So these are not just chance experiences. It looks like a very clear pattern."

Jenkins doesn't know the name of the deputy who shot him. In the heavily redacted incident report, an unidentified deputy wrote, "I noticed a gun." The unredacted sections don't say who shot Jenkins, only that he was taken to a hospital. Deputy Hunter Elward swore in a separate court document that Jenkins pointed the gun at him.

Elward's name also appears in police reports and court records from the two incidents in which suspects were killed.

The sheriff's department refused repeated interview requests and denied access to any of the deputies who were involved in the violent confrontations. The department has not said whether deputies presented a search warrant, and it's unclear if any have been disciplined or are still members of the special unit.

The news outlet Insider has been investigating the sheriff's department and persuaded a county judge to order the sheriff to turn over documents related to the deaths of four men in 2021. Chancery Judge Troy Farrell Odom expressed bewilderment that the department had refused to make the documents public.

"(The) day that our law enforcement officers start shielding this information from the public, all the while repeating, 'Trust us. We're from the government,' is the day that should startle all Americans," Odom wrote.

The AP requested body camera or dashcam footage from the night of the Jenkins raid. Jason Dare, an attorney for the sheriff's department, said there was no record of either.

Mississippi doesn't require police officers to wear body cameras. Incident reports and court records tie deputies from the raid to three other violent encounters with Black men.

During a 2019 standoff, Elward said Pierre Woods pointed a gun at him while running at deputies. Deputies then shot and killed him. In a statement to the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation obtained by the AP, Elward said he fired at Woods eight times. Police say they recovered a handgun at the scene of the Woods shooting.

Court records place Christian Dedmon, another deputy who shot at Woods, at the Jenkins raid.

Dedmon was also among deputies involved in a 2019 arrest of Johnson, according to the lawsuit Johnson filed alleging that one of the deputies put a gun in his mouth as they searched him for drugs. Johnson is currently imprisoned for selling methamphetamine.

Other documents obtained by the AP detail another violent confrontation between Elward and Damien Cameron, a 29-year-old man with a history of mental illness. He died in July 2021 after being arrested by Elward and Deputy Luke Stickman, who also opened fire on Woods during the 2019 standoff. A grand jury declined to bring charges in the case last October.

In an incident report, Elward wrote that while responding to a vandalism call, he repeatedly shocked Cameron with a Taser, punched and grappled with Cameron at the home of his mother, Monica Lee. He said after getting Cameron to his squad car, he again stunned him to get him to pull his legs into the vehicle.

After going back inside to retrieve his Taser, deputies returned to find Cameron unresponsive. Elward wrote that he pulled Cameron from the car and performed CPR, but Cameron was later declared dead at a hospital.

Lee, who witnessed the confrontation, told the AP that after subduing her son, Elward kneeled on his back for several minutes. She said when Stickman arrived, he kneeled on her son's neck while handcuffing him, and that her son complained he couldn't breathe.

Lee said she later went outside, hoping to talk to her son before the deputies drove him away.

"I walked outside to tell him goodbye and that I loved him, and that I would try to see him the next day. That's when I noticed they were on the driver's side of the car doing CPR on him," Lee said. "I fell to the ground screaming and hollering."

Michael Goldberg 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. Follow him on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/mikergoldberg>.

## A steel plant ready for war shows hit to Ukraine's economy

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

ZAPORIZHZHIA, Ukraine (AP) — Flak jackets are piled up at Ukraine's Zaporizhstal steel plant, and anti-tank traps guard the entrance. Whenever air raid sirens sound — and they go off every day — most workers head to one of the 16 bomb shelters scattered across the sprawling grounds.

But some keep working — braving not only the intense heat and sparks flying from blast furnaces forging steel used in everything from railway cars to household appliances, but the threat of shelling — to keep the molten metal moving.

The southwestern city of Zaporizhzhia, which gives the plant its name, is less than 50 kilometers (31 miles) from the front line and its residential buildings and energy infrastructure are a frequent Russian target. The impact of the war has left the plant running below full capacity, with a third of its 10,000 workers idle.

The damage to Ukraine's metal industry has crippled a lucrative sector and key employer needed to support an economy cratered by war. Efforts to restore production and get goods moving again to customers worldwide will be crucial to helping the country rebuild.

A pillar of the economy before the war, the metal industry accounted for a third of the goods that Ukraine exported, but it has been upended by Russian forces who have taken control of the industrial heartland — the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

For steel and mining company Metinvest, the slowdowns at the Zaporizhstal steel plant are only part of the pain. Since Russia seized Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula in 2014, the company has lost equipment and facilities in Russian-controlled areas, seen workers head to the front line and lacked enough security to grow.

But "the biggest damage we have suffered is the damage caused to the economy of Ukraine," Metinvest CEO Yurii Ryzhenkov told The Associated Press. "When damage is done to the country, the company suffers from it no less than from direct hits of shells."

At the Zaporizhstal steel plant, life still revolves around the blast furnaces, even if only three out of four are operating. Relentless hissing fills the air, which is tinged with the pungent, acidic tang of sulfur that results from separating cast iron and waste deposits.

The workers' silver suits reflect the blinding light emanating from the red, molten metal churning in the blast furnace, where temperatures reach 1,500 C (more than 2,700 F).

The process looks busy, but the workers know they are melting less cast iron than before the war.

"We are limited. Both in terms of raw materials and sales," said Oleh Ilin, the blast furnace master.

Unlike other industrial enterprises in Ukraine, Zaporizhstal wasn't damaged by artillery fire or missile strikes. But like many others, its growth has been hindered by power outages from Russian missile attacks, damage to infrastructure and blocked Black Sea ports.

The latter is one of the biggest challenges for Zaporizhstal, where work has been interrupted only twice in its almost 90-year history — during World War II and shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine. Russian troops were stopped just dozens of kilometers from the plant last spring, but almost a year later, it hasn't been able to recover fully.

Prices are higher for products that Zaporizhstal makes, and they are harder to get to customers. Trains instead of ships mostly move orders, increasing prices not just for transportation but for production and raw materials.

Before the war, Zaporizhstal could complete a batch of steel strips used in appliances like refrigerators, for example, and deliver it in a month or two, said Roman Slobodianiuk, general director of Zaporizhstal. Now, it could take three months or longer.

"Not every client is ready to take such risks. So we were forced to reduce the geography of our customers," he said.



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Zaporizhstal used to work with customers in almost 60 countries — that has been reduced by half. The war affected its capacity to fulfill orders in much of the Middle East and many African countries.

“Before the war, around 90% of metallurgical products were exported through the sea, because it was much cheaper,” said Dmytro Goriunov from Ukraine’s Center for Economic Strategy.

Now, the plant focuses on closer European countries and the U.S. market, which can be reached through Polish seaports.

About a third of the metal industry’s capacity has been destroyed and production is about 65% lower, according to data from industry association Ukrmetallurgprom and Oxford Economics.

The KSE Institute of Ukraine estimated that damage to Ukrainian businesses as a whole from the war amounts to \$13 billion. Economic output shrank by about a third in 2022, and the economy ministry forecasts growth of only 1% this year.

The government relies on donations from allies like the European Union and the U.S. to pay citizens’ wages and pensions, helping it avoid printing money that could fuel inflation. Ukraine got a boost last week with a \$15.6 billion loan package from the International Monetary Fund.

For its part, Metinvest is trying to rebuild after losing two major facilities to Russia, including the Azovstal steel plant where Ukrainians fought off a siege from its labyrinth of tunnels and bunkers in Mariupol.

Maksym Notchenko, 41, a former worker of Azovstal, watched from a distance as the plant was besieged with Russian strikes: “It was like pieces of your body were being cut off.”

He fled and started working at Zaporizhstal last April. About 20,000 other Metinvest workers did the same, leaving occupied territories or front-line fighting. Before the invasion, Metinvest had around 100,000 workers — now the number is 85,000.

Ryzhenkov, the CEO, said that restoring supply chains, primarily unblocking Black Sea ports, will revive the company.

“A trait of Ukrainians, that despite everything that happens to us, we continue to work, we invent new ways of working, how to be effective in any situation,” Ryzhenkov said.

He says the only way to guarantee Metinvest’s security and development is liberating all Russian-held territories, including Crimea. That’s why the company invests resources to support Ukrainian forces.

Their “victory can guarantee Ukraine and the business that it can develop here,” Ryzhenkov said.

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AP Business Writer David McHugh contributed to this report from Frankfurt, Germany.

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

## Mississippi tornado recovery tough for low-income residents

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

ROLLING FORK, Miss. (AP) — A massive tornado obliterated the modest one-story home that Kimberly Berry shared with her two daughters in the Mississippi Delta flatlands, leaving only a foundation and some random belongings — a toppled refrigerator, a dresser and matching nightstand, a bag of Christmas decorations, some clothing.

During the storm Friday, Berry and her 12-year-old daughter huddled and prayed at a nearby church that was barely damaged, while her 25-year-old daughter survived in the hard-hit town of Rolling Fork, some 15 miles (24 kilometers) away.

Berry shook her head as she looked at the remains of their material possessions. She said she’s grateful she and her children are still alive.

“I can get all this back. It’s nothing,” said Berry, 46, who works as a supervisor at a catfish growing and processing operation. “I’m not going to get depressed about it.”

Like many people in this economically struggling area, she faces an uncertain future. Mississippi is one of the poorest states in the U.S., and the majority-Black Delta has long been one of the poorest parts of Mississippi — a place where many people work paycheck to paycheck in jobs tied to agriculture.

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Two of the counties walloped by the tornado, Sharkey and Humphreys, are among the most sparsely populated in the state, with only a few thousand residents in communities scattered across wide expanses of cotton, corn and soybean fields.

Sharkey's poverty rate is 35%, and Humphreys' is 33%, compared to about 19% for Mississippi and under 12% for the entire United States.

"It's going to be a long road to recovery, trying to rebuild and get over the devastation," Wayne Williams, who teaches construction skills at a vocational education center in Rolling Fork, said Sunday as people across town hammered blue tarps onto damaged roofs and used chainsaws to cut fallen trees.

The tornado killed 25 and injured dozens in Mississippi. It destroyed many homes and businesses in Rolling Fork and the nearby town of Silver City, leaving mounds of lumber, bricks and twisted metal.

The local housing stock was already tight, and some who lost their homes said they will live with friends or relatives. Mississippi opened more than a half-dozen shelters to temporarily house people displaced by the tornado.

President Joe Biden issued an emergency declaration for Mississippi early Sunday, making federal funding available to hardest-hit areas.

Berry spent the weekend with friends and family sorting through salvageable items at her destroyed home near a two-lane highway that traverses farm fields. She said she walked to the church before the tornado because her sister called her Friday night and frantically said TV weather forecasters had warned a potentially deadly storm was headed her way. Berry said as the storm rumbled and howled overhead, she tried to ignore the noise.

"That's the only thing that was stuck in my head was just to pray, pray and cry out to God," she said Saturday. "I didn't hear nothing but my own self praying and God answering my prayer. I mean, I can get another house, another furniture. But literally saving my life — I'm thankful."

Her sister, Dianna Berry, said her own home a few miles away was undamaged. She works at a deer camp, and she said her boss has offered to let Kimberly Berry and her daughters live there for as long as they need.

## Caitlin Clark leads Iowa to first Final Four since 1993

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

SEATTLE (AP) — Caitlin Clark put on quite a show, having one of the greatest performances in NCAA Tournament history to help Iowa end a 30-year Final Four drought.

She had 41 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds to lead the No. 2 seed Hawkeyes to a 97-83 win over fifth-seeded Louisville on Sunday night and send the team to its first women's Final Four in since 1993.

"I dreamed of this moment as a little girl, to take a team to the Final Four and be in these moments and have confetti fall down on me," said Clark, who is a Iowa native.

The unanimous first-team All-American was as dominant as she's been all season in getting the Hawkeyes to Dallas for the women's NCAA Tournament national semifinals on Friday night. The Seattle 4 Region champion will face the winner of the Greenville 1 region that has South Carolina playing Maryland on Monday night.

"I thought our team played really well. That's what it's all about. I was going to give it every single thing I had," said Clark, who was the region's most outstanding player. "When I came here I said I wanted to take this program to the Final Four, and all you've got to do is dream. And all you've got to do is believe and work your butt off to get there. That's what I did, and that's what our girls did and that's what our coaches did and we're going to Dallas, baby."

Iowa (30-6) hadn't been to the Final Four since Hall of Fame coach C. Vivian Stringer led the team to its lone appearance in 1993. Before Sunday, the team had only been to one other Elite Eight — in 2019 — since the Final Four team.

Clark had the 11th triple-double of her career and the 19th in NCAA Tournament history. She had the first 30- and 40-point triple-double in March Madness history.

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"It's like a storybook, been like that all year long," Iowa coach Lisa Bluder said. "We keep talking about destiny and how it's supposed to happen. ... She's spectacular. I don't know how else to describe what she does on the basketball court. A 40-point triple-double against Louisville to go to the Final Four. Are you kidding me? That's mind-boggling."

Trailing by five at the half, Louisville cut its deficit to 48-47 before Clark and the Hawkeyes scored the next 11 points as part of a 17-6 run to blow the game open. That brought most of the pro-Iowa crowd of nearly 12,000 fans to their feet.

Louisville was down 22 with just under 6 minutes left before going on a 13-1 run to get within 86-76 with 2:10 left. The Cardinals could get no closer.

Clark left the game with 22.7 seconds left to a loud ovation from the crowd as she hugged her coach. After the game, Clark paraded around the court holding the regional trophy high above her head, delighting the thousands of fans who stuck around to celebrate their Hawkeyes.

Hailey Van Lith scored 27 points and Olivia Cochran had 20 points and 14 rebounds to lead Louisville (26-12).

Clark hit eight of the Hawkeyes' season-high 16 3-pointers, including a few from just past the March Madness logo. It was a school record for the Hawkeyes in the NCAA Tournament, blowing past the previous mark of 13 against Gonzaga in 2011.

Louisville scored the first eight points of the game, forcing Iowa to call timeout. Then Clark got going. The 6-foot junior scored the first seven points for the Hawkeyes and finished the opening quarter with 15 points. When she wasn't scoring, she found open teammates with precision passes.

She also had four assists in the first 10 minutes, accounting for every one of Iowa's points as the Hawkeyes led 25-21.

Clark continued her mastery in the second quarter, hitting shots from all over the court, including a few of her famous long-distance 3s from near the logo.

Louisville was able to stay in the game, thanks to Van Lith. After scoring the first six points of the game, she went quiet before getting going late in the second quarter. She had 11 points in the second quarter as the Cardinals found themselves down 48-43 at the break.

Clark had 22 points and eight assists in the opening 20 minutes enroute to the fourth-highest scoring total all-time in a NCAA regional.

"She played great, she made some big shots," Louisville coach Jeff Walz said of Clark. "She passed the ball well. we turned her over at times."

## 1,000-POINT CLUB

Clark has 984 points this season and is looking to join form Hawkeye Megan Gustafson with 1,000 points in a single year. Four other players have done it, including Villanova's Maddy Siegrist, who accomplished the feat this season. Kelsey Plum, Jackie Stiles and Odyssey Sims were the others to do it.

## HOMETOWN HERO

Van Lith once again played well in her home state. The small-town standout from 130 miles away from Seattle grew into being one of the best prep players in the country, the all-time state high school leader in scoring and now a star for the Cardinals.

Hundreds of fans from her hometown of Cashmere, which has a population of 3,200, took in the game, cheering the Louisville star on.

## EMOTIONAL DAY

It was a bittersweet day for Iowa assistant coach Jan Jensen. Her dad Dale died in the morning after battling pancreatic cancer for a year. He was 86.

"He didn't sound so good the last couple days and I was kind of fretting, 'When am I going to go if we go to Dallas?'" she said. "I just feel like he knew. He was never a high maintenance guy, he was never a guy who made it complicated with me in anything. So I think, he told my people at home, I'm not ready to go until Jan's team is done."

ap-top-25-womens-college-basketball-poll and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## Twenty years on, reflection and regret on 2002 Iraq war vote

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow was sitting in Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's conference room at the Pentagon, listening to him make the case that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction.

At some point in the presentation — one of many lawmaker briefings by President George W. Bush's administration ahead of the October 2002 votes to authorize force in Iraq — military leaders showed an image of trucks in the country that they believed could be carrying weapons materials. But the case sounded thin, and Stabenow, then just a freshman senator, noticed the date on the photo was months old.

"There was not enough information to persuade me that they in fact had any connection with what happened on Sept. 11, or that there was justification to attack," Stabenow said in a recent interview, referring to the 2001 attacks that were one part of the Bush administration's underlying argument for the Iraq invasion.

"I really thought about the young men and women that we would be sending into battle," she said. "I have a son and a daughter — would I vote to send them to war based on this evidence? In the end the answer for me was no."

As with many of her colleagues, Stabenow's "nay" vote in the early morning hours of Oct. 11, 2002, didn't come without political risk. The Bush administration and many of the Democrat's swing-state constituents strongly believed that the United States should go to war in Iraq, and lawmakers knew that the House and Senate votes on whether to authorize force would be hugely consequential.

Indeed, the bipartisan votes in the House and Senate that month were a grave moment in American history that would reverberate for decades — the Bush administration's central allegations of weapons programs eventually proved baseless, the Middle East was permanently altered and nearly 5,000 U.S. troops were killed in the war. Iraqi deaths are estimated in the hundreds of thousands.

Only now, 20 years after the Iraq invasion in March 2003, is Congress seriously considering walking it back, with a Senate vote expected this week to repeal the 2002 and 1991 authorizations of force against Iraq. Bipartisan supporters say the repeal is years overdue, with Saddam's regime long gone and Iraq now a strategic partner of the United States.

For senators who cast votes two decades ago, it is a full-circle moment that prompts a mixture of sadness, regret and reflection. Many consider it the hardest vote they ever took.

The vote was "premised on the biggest lie ever told in American history," said Democratic Sen. Ed Markey of Massachusetts, then a House member who voted in favor of the war authorization. Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa said that "all of us that voted for it probably are slow to admit" that the weapons of mass destruction did not exist. But he defends the vote based on what they knew then. "There was reason to be fearful" of Saddam and what he could have done if he did have the weapons, Grassley said.

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, then a House member who was running for the Senate, says the war will have been worth it if Iraq succeeds in becoming a democracy.

"What can you say 20 years later?" Graham said this past week, reflecting on his own vote in favor. "Intelligence was faulty."

Another "yes" vote on the Senate floor that night was New York Sen. Chuck Schumer, now Senate majority leader. With the vote coming a year after Sept. 11 devastated his hometown, he says he believed then that the president deserved the benefit of the doubt when a nation is under attack.

"Of course, with the luxury of hindsight, it's clear that the president bungled the war from start to finish and should not have ever been given that benefit," Schumer said in a statement. "Now, with the war firmly behind us, we're one step closer to putting the war powers back where they belong — in the hands of Congress."

Twenty years later, support has flipped. Then, only 28 senators voted against the authorization. All but

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one were Democrats. Today, roughly the same number of senators are voting against nullifying the 2002 and 1991 measures, arguing that repeal could project weakness to U.S. enemies and hamper future operations. But all of the opponents are Republicans.

Among those Republicans voting in favor of repeal is Grassley. He said withdrawing the war authorization would prevent those powers from being misinterpreted and abused in the future.

In 2002, the Bush administration worked aggressively to drum up support for invading Iraq by promoting what turned out to be false intelligence claims about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. Lawmakers attended briefing after briefing with military leaders and White House officials, in groups and in one-on-one conversations, as the administration applied political pressure on Democrats, in particular.

In the end, the vote was strongly bipartisan, with Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt, D-Mo., and others backing Bush's request.

Joe Biden also voted in favor as a senator from Delaware, and now supports repealing it as president.

Other senior Democrats urged opposition. In one of many speeches on the Senate floor that invoked the country's history, the late Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.V., urged his colleagues to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall, where "nearly every day you will find someone at that wall weeping for a loved one, a father, a son, a brother, a friend, whose name is on that wall."

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., issued a similar warning during the floor debate, saying he believed that anxiety and fear may be driving sentiment for an Iraq invasion. "I caution and beg my colleagues to think twice about that," Durbin said, adding that "America has faced periods of fear in its past."

Now the No. 2 Democrat in the Senate, Durbin recalled on the Senate floor earlier this month his vote against the resolution amid a "fearsome national debate" over whether the U.S. should invade Iraq. The threat of weapons of mass destruction "was beaten into our heads day after day," Durbin said. "But many of us were skeptical."

"I look back on it, as I am sure others do, as one of the most important votes that I ever cast," Durbin said.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., agrees that at the time, "I remember thinking this is the most serious thing I can ever do."

She says the environment was charged with an "emotional pressure" in the public and in the media that the U.S. needed to show Iraq and the world that it was tough. She voted against the resolution after deciding there was not enough evidence to support the Bush administration's argument, and after talking to many of her constituents at home who opposed the idea of an Iraq invasion.

For many lawmakers, the political pressure was intense. Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, then a House member and now the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, says he was "excoriated" at home for his "no" vote, after the Sept. 11 attacks had killed so many from his state. He made the right decision, he says, but "it was fraught with political challenges."

Similarly, Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., recalls that the idea of invading Iraq was popular at home, and the state's other senator, Republican Gordon Smith, was supporting it, as were Daschle and other influential Democrats. But he was a new member of the intelligence committee, with regular access to closed-door briefings by administration officials. He wasn't convinced by their arguments, and voted no.

"It was really a dramatic moment in American history," Wyden says. "You wish you could just unravel it and have another chance."

Senate Armed Services Chairman Jack Reed, D-R.I., then a freshman senator who also voted against the resolution, says the war "made no sense strategically" and took the country's focus off the troops waging war in Afghanistan. "Just absolutely bad strategy," he says, that also contributed to the buildup of other powerful countries like China and Russia.

For those who voted for the invasion, the reflection can be more difficult.

Hillary Clinton, a Democratic senator from New York at the time, was forced to defend her vote as she ran for president twice, and eventually called it a mistake and her "greatest regret." Iowa Democrat Tom Harkin solemnly told an Iowa PBS station several years ago that his vote in the Senate to authorize force

in Iraq was "the worst vote I ever cast in my life."

Markey says "I regret relying upon" Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, along with other administration officials. "It was a mistake to rely upon the Bush administration for telling the truth," Markey said in a brief interview last week.

Graham says he spoke to Bush last week on an unrelated matter, but that they also discussed the war's anniversary.

"I told him, 'Mr. President, Iraq has not retreated from democracy,'" Graham said. "It has been imperfect. But if at the end of the day, Saddam Hussein is eliminated and a democracy takes his place that can work with the United States, that is worth it. It turned out to be in America's interest."

Bush's reply was uncertain.

"He said he believes that history will judge whether or not Iraq can maintain its path to democracy," Graham said.

## Is the David porn? Come see, Italians tell Florida parents

By NICOLE WINFIELD and TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The Florence museum housing Michelangelo's Renaissance masterpiece the David on Sunday invited parents and students from a Florida charter school to visit after complaints about a lesson featuring the statue forced the principal to resign.

Florence Mayor Dario Nardella also tweeted an invitation for the principal to visit so he can personally honor her. Confusing art with pornography was "ridiculous," Nardella said.

The board of the Tallahassee Classical School pressured Principal Hope Carrasquilla to resign last week after an image of the David was shown to a sixth-grade art class. The school has a policy requiring parents to be notified in advance about "controversial" topics being taught.

The incredulous Italian response highlighted how the U.S. culture wars are often perceived in Europe, where despite a rise in right-wing sentiment and governance, the Renaissance and its masterpieces, even its naked ones, are generally free of controversy. Sunday's front page of the Italian daily publication *Corriere della Sera* featured a cartoon by its leading satirist depicting David with his genitals covered by an image of Uncle Sam and the word "Shame."

Carrasquilla believes the board targeted her after three parents complained about a lesson including a photo of the David, a 5-meter tall (17 foot) nude marble sculpture dating from 1504. The work, reflecting the height of the Italian Renaissance, depicts the Biblical David going to fight Goliath armed only with his faith in God.

Carrasquilla has said two parents complained because they weren't notified in advance that a nude would be shown, while a third called the iconic statue pornographic.

Carrasquilla said in a phone interview Sunday that she is "very honored" by the invitations to Italy and she may accept.

"I am totally, like, wow," Carrasquilla said. "I've been to Florence before and have seen the David up close and in person, but I would love to go and be a guest of the mayor."

Cecilie Hollberg, director of the Galleria dell'Accademia, where the David resides, expressed astonishment at the controversy.

"To think that David could be pornographic means truly not understanding the contents of the Bible, not understanding Western culture and not understanding Renaissance art," Hollberg said in a telephone interview.

She invited the principal, school board, parents and student body to view the "purity" of the statue.

Tallahassee Classical is a charter school. While it is taxpayer-funded and tuition-free, it operates almost entirely independently of the local school district and is sought out by parents seeking an alternative to the public school curriculum.

About 400 students from kindergarten through 12th grade attend the three-year-old institution, which is now on its third principal. It follows a curriculum designed by Hillsdale College, a conservative Christian

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school in Michigan frequently consulted by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on educational issues.

Barney Bishop, chairman of Tallahassee Classical's school board, has told reporters that while the photo of the statue played a part in Carrasquilla's ouster, it wasn't the only factor. He has declined to elaborate, while defending the decision.

"Parents are entitled to know anytime their child is being taught a controversial topic and picture," Bishop said in an interview with Slate online magazine.

Several parents and teachers plan to protest Carrasquilla's exit at Monday night's school board meeting, but Carrasquilla said she isn't sure she would take the job back even if it were offered.

"There's been such controversy and such upheaval," she said. "I would really have to consider, 'Is this truly what is best?'"

Marla Stone, head of humanities studies at the American Academy in Rome, said the Florida incident was another episode in escalating U.S. culture wars and questioned how the statue could be considered so controversial as to warrant a prior warning.

"What we have here is a moral crusade against the body, sexuality, and gender expression and an ignorance of history," Stone said in an email. "The incident is about fear, fear of beauty, of difference, and of the possibilities embedded in art."

Michelangelo Buonarroti sculpted the David between 1501-1504 after being commissioned by the Cathedral of Florence. The statue is the showpiece of the Accademia, and helps draw 1.7 million visitors each year to the museum.

"It is incredibly sought-after by Americans who want to do selfies and enjoy the beauty of this statue," Director Hollberg said.

The museum, like many in Europe, is free for student groups. There was no indication that any trip would be subsidized by the city or museum. \_\_\_\_

Spencer reported from Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

## DeSantis team welcomes contrast with Trump 'chaos' candidacy

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Reporter

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Jim McKee is standing at the end of a line that snakes through five aisles of fiction inside the Books-A-Million store in Florida's capital city.

He is smiling because in a matter of minutes, the book he's holding will be signed by its author, Ron DeSantis, the Republican governor who McKee believes should be the nation's next president. But as a former Donald Trump loyalist, the 44-year-old Tallahassee attorney almost whispers when he first says it out loud.

"Personally, I'd rather see DeSantis win the Republican primary than Trump," McKee says softly, having to repeat himself to be heard. His voice soon grows louder.

"Trump has upset so many people," McKee says. "DeSantis is more palatable. He has a good story to tell."

Indeed, conversations throughout Tallahassee's book stores, conference rooms, state house offices and sports bars reveal that DeSantis' allies are gaining confidence as Trump's legal woes mount. The former president faces a possible indictment in New York over his role in a hush money scheme during the 2016 campaign to prevent porn actor Stormy Daniels from going public about an extramarital sexual encounter, which he denies.

The optimism around DeSantis comes even as an unlikely collection of establishment-minded Republican officials and Make America Great Again influencers raise concerns about the Florida governor's readiness for the national stage. DeSantis has stumbled at times under the weight of intensifying national scrutiny as he builds out his political organization and introduces himself to voters in key primary states.

DeSantis' allies privately scoffed at recent reports of anonymous concerns over the direction of his campaign, noting there is no campaign. The 44-year-old governor isn't expected to launch his White House bid for at least two more months. And the first presidential primary contest is roughly 10 months away.

For now, DeSantis' team, headquartered here on the front edge of Florida's Panhandle, believes he holds

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a position of strength among Republican voters. And as Trump fights to undermine DeSantis, his strongest Republican rival, the Florida governor's growing coalition is eager to highlight the contrast between the two men.

On one side stands Trump, a twice-impeached former president carrying a new level of turmoil into the 2024 presidential contest. On the other is DeSantis, a big-state governor coming off a commanding reelection, who is a far more disciplined messenger and hyperfocused on enacting conservative policies.

"Of all the things that Donald Trump has done and accomplished in his life, it's just constant chaos. And I think the American people are just tired of it," said Florida state Rep. Spencer Roach, a former Trump supporter who thinks DeSantis would be "a very formidable presidential candidate."

Most voters have only just begun to analyze the differences between the dueling Republican stars as the 2024 presidential election season opens under a cloud of unprecedented scandal.

A former president has never been arrested, but prosecutors in New York, Georgia and Washington are leading criminal probes of Trump's behavior on multiple fronts that could potentially produce indictments in the coming days, weeks or months.

The politics are murky at best.

Should Trump be charged, DeSantis supporters concede that Trump would likely benefit politically — in the short term, at least — as the GOP base rushes to defend their former leader from what they see as a weaponized justice system. But in the long term, DeSantis' team believes primary voters will view Trump's legal challenges as an acute reminder of his extraordinary baggage that could lead to another Republican disappointment in 2024.

Meanwhile, Trump is using his mounting legal challenges as a cudgel to force Republican rivals to line up the GOP behind him. It's the same playbook he employed successfully last summer after the FBI raided his Florida estate to seize classified documents and during special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation.

DeSantis condemned the New York prosecutor's potential indictment over the last week under intense pressure from MAGA influencers and after other White House prospects had offered their own criticism.

"I hope it doesn't come to where you end up seeing this going forward," DeSantis said in an interview with Piers Morgan, without mentioning Trump by name. "People see that as weaponizing the justice system. So I think it's fundamentally wrong to do that."

And while DeSantis sprinkled a few jabs at Trump and his leadership style throughout the same interview, such remarks are mild in comparison to Trump's scorched-earth broadsides against him.

Last week alone, the former president seized on DeSantis' votes as a congressman to cut Social Security and Medicare and attacked his record as Florida governor on violent crime, public health and education. Trump also shared a photo suggesting impropriety when DeSantis was a teacher two decades ago, despite no evidence of that.

At a rally over the weekend in Waco, Texas, Trump said DeSantis was "dropping like a rock."

In an effort to combat the perception that his numbers might be slipping, DeSantis' allies quietly distributed polling conducted last week in Iowa and New Hampshire by the Republican firm Public Opinion Strategies that suggests vulnerability for Trump.

Meanwhile, DeSantis is only just beginning to navigate the intense national scrutiny that comes with being a top-tier presidential prospect.

DeSantis' recent reference to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as "a territorial dispute" — a statement he has since walked back — sowed doubt among some would-be supporters about whether he's ready for prime time. There are also consistent concerns that he doesn't have the charisma necessary to connect with voters on a personal level.

"The muttering I'm hearing is that there's concern he doesn't have the ability to go the distance because of his interpersonal skills," said New York-based Republican donor Eric Levine, a fierce Trump critic. "If it's a race between him and Trump, I'm a Ron DeSantis guy. But I don't know if I'm with any of them."

At Thursday's book signing in Tallahassee, the Florida governor made little effort to speak to people who had waited in the long line — aside from an obligatory "Hey, how are you?" — as he signed their books.



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Most of the one-on-one interactions were silent and spanned less than 10 seconds as he scribbled his name on the inside cover.

DeSantis' staff wouldn't allow pictures.

At the same event, DeSantis did not answer when asked by an Associated Press reporter whether Trump was being treated fairly by prosecutors.

His decision to ignore the mainstream press, just as he often ignores Trump's attacks, is not new. In fact, his allies praise the approach as an example of the discipline that makes him a better presidential contender than Trump.

Yet it carries risks.

By not engaging more directly with the former president in particular, DeSantis is adopting a similar playbook as Trump's 2016 Republican rivals — including former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz — who ignored Trump for much of that campaign. Each ultimately went on the attack more directly, but by that time, Trump had built an insurmountable lead.

"DeSantis will not shrink from the fight. That's not how he's operated in Florida politics to this point," said Matt Caldwell, a former state representative who shared the statewide ballot with DeSantis in 2018 as a candidate for state agriculture commissioner. "One could argue that he's got the upper hand, so he's only engaging when he has to."

Instead of 2016, Caldwell likened Trump's challenges in 2024 to the 1996 presidential election when President Bill Clinton faced serious allegations of sexual impropriety that nearly sank his reelection.

"At end of the day, this is just a hubbub about money and sex, which isn't a whole lot different from 1996," Caldwell said. "I don't like this, and I didn't like '96. But Bill Clinton won reelection."

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Associated Press writer Jill Colvin in Waco, Texas, contributed to this report.

## Mass protests erupt after Netanyahu fires defense chief

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Tens of thousands of Israelis poured into the streets of cities across the country Sunday night in a spontaneous outburst of anger after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu abruptly fired his defense minister for challenging the Israeli leader's judicial overhaul plan.

Protesters in Tel Aviv blocked a main highway and lit large bonfires, while police scuffled with protesters who gathered outside Netanyahu's private home in Jerusalem.

The unrest deepened a monthslong crisis over Netanyahu's plan to overhaul the judiciary, which has sparked mass protests, alarmed business leaders and former security chiefs and drawn concern from the United States and other close allies.

Netanyahu's dismissal of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant signaled that the prime minister and his allies will barrel ahead this week with the overhaul plan. Gallant had been the first senior member of the ruling Likud party to speak out against it, saying the deep divisions were threatening to weaken the military.

But as droves of protesters flooded the streets late into the night, Likud ministers began indicating willingness to hit the brakes. Culture Minister Micky Zohar, a Netanyahu confidant, said the party would support him if he decided to pause the judicial overhaul.

Israeli media said leaders in Netanyahu's coalition were to meet on Monday morning. Later in the day, the grassroots protest movement said it would hold another mass demonstration outside the Knesset, or parliament, in Jerusalem.

In a brief statement, Netanyahu's office said late Sunday the prime minister had dismissed Gallant. Netanyahu later tweeted, "We must all stand strong against refusal."

Tens of thousands of Israelis poured into the streets in protest after Netanyahu's announcement, blocking Tel Aviv's main artery, transforming the Ayalon highway into a sea of blue-and-white Israeli flags and lighting a large bonfire in the middle of the road.

Demonstrations took place in Beersheba, Haifa and Jerusalem, where thousands of people gathered outside Netanyahu's private residence. Police scuffled with protesters and sprayed the crowd with a water

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cannon. Thousands then marched from the residence to the Knesset.

Inon Aizik, 27, said he came to demonstrate outside Netanyahu's private residence in central Jerusalem because "bad things are happening in this country." He called the judicial overhaul "a quick legislative blitz."

Netanyahu's decision came less than a day after Gallant, a former senior general, called for a pause in the controversial legislation until after next month's Independence Day holidays, citing the turmoil in the ranks of the military.

Gallant had voiced concerns that the divisions in society were hurting morale in the military and emboldening Israel's enemies. "I see how the source of our strength is being eroded," Gallant said.

While several other Likud members had indicated they might follow Gallant, the party quickly closed ranks Sunday, clearing the way for his dismissal.

Galit Distal Atbaryan, Netanyahu's public diplomacy minister, said Netanyahu summoned Gallant to his office and told him "that he doesn't have any faith in him anymore and therefore he is fired."

Gallant tweeted shortly after the announcement that "the security of the state of Israel always was and will always remain my life mission."

Opposition leader Yair Lapid said Gallant's dismissal "harms national security and ignores warnings of all defense officials."

Israel's consul general in New York City, Assaf Zamir, resigned in protest.

Avi Dichter, a former chief of the Shin Bet security agency, is expected to replace Gallant. Dichter had reportedly flirted with joining Gallant but instead announced Sunday he was backing the prime minister.

Netanyahu's government is pushing ahead for a parliamentary vote this week on a centerpiece of the overhaul — a law that would give the governing coalition the final say over all judicial appointments. It also seeks to pass laws that would grant parliament the authority to overturn Supreme Court decisions and limit judicial review of laws.

Netanyahu and his allies say the plan will restore a balance between the judicial and executive branches and rein in what they see as an interventionist court with liberal sympathies.

But critics say the laws will remove Israel's system of checks and balances and concentrate power in the hands of the governing coalition. They also say that Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption charges, has a conflict of interest.

Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets over the past three months to demonstrate against the plan in the largest demonstrations in the country's 75-year history. The State Department dismissed as "completely false" claims repeated by Yair Netanyahu, the prime minister's son, that the U.S. government was financing these protests.

Leaders of Israel's vibrant high-tech industry have said the changes will scare away investors, former top security officials have spoken out against the plan and key allies, including the United States and Germany, have voiced concerns.

In recent weeks, discontent has surged from within Israel's army — the most popular and respected institution among Israel's Jewish majority. A growing number of Israeli reservists, including fighter pilots, have threatened to withdraw from voluntary duty if the laws are passed.

Israel's military is facing an increase in fighting in the occupied West Bank, threats from Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group and concerns that archenemy Iran is close to developing a nuclear-weapons capability.

Manuel Trajtenberg, head of an influential Israeli think tank, the Institute for National Security Studies, said that "Netanyahu can dismiss his defense minister, he cannot dismiss the warnings he heard from Gallant."

Meanwhile, an Israeli good governance group asked the country's Supreme Court on Sunday to punish Netanyahu for allegedly violating a conflict of interest agreement meant to prevent him from dealing with the country's judiciary while he is on trial for corruption.

The Movement for Quality Government in Israel, a fierce opponent of the overhaul, asked the court to force Netanyahu to obey the law and sanction him either with a fine or prison time for not doing so. It said he was not above the law.

The prime minister said the appeal should be dismissed and said that the Supreme Court didn't have grounds to intervene.

Netanyahu is barred by the country's attorney general from directly dealing with his government's plan to overhaul the judiciary, based on a conflict of interest agreement that the Supreme Court acknowledged in a ruling over Netanyahu's fitness to serve while on trial for corruption. Instead, Justice Minister Yariv Levin, a close confidant of Netanyahu, is spearheading the overhaul.

But on Thursday, after Parliament passed a law making it harder to remove a sitting prime minister, Netanyahu said he was unshackled from the attorney general's decision and vowed to wade into the crisis and "mend the rift" in the nation. That declaration prompted the attorney general, Gali Baharav-Miara, to warn that Netanyahu was breaking his conflict of interest agreement.

The fast-paced legal and political developments have catapulted Israel into uncharted territory, said Guy Lurie, a research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank.

"We are at the start of a constitutional crisis in the sense that there is a disagreement over the source of authority and legitimacy of different governing bodies," he said.

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Associated Press journalist Tia Goldenberg contributed from Tel Aviv.

## Reese, LSU women push past Miami 54-42 to reach Final Four

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

GREENVILLE, S.C. (AP) — So much for Kim Mulkey's timelines and cautioning against expecting too much, too soon at LSU.

Two years in, and Mulkey's return to lead her home-state program already includes another Final Four trip — and dreams of more.

Angel Reese had 18 rebounds and LSU returned to the women's Final Four for the first time in 15 years by beating Miami 54-42 on Sunday night, carrying a rapid rise under Mulkey straight to the sport's biggest stage.

Alexis Morris scored 21 points and Reese added 13 for the third-seeded Tigers (32-2), who asserted control of a grinding, defense-first game. LSU's length caused Miami problems even with Reese — an Associated Press first-team All-American — having a brutal shooting day, and the Tigers offset their offensive hiccups by dominating the glass.

Not bad for a group that began with nine new players, with Morris as the lone returning starter.

"Coach Mulkey, she's had a plan for us, since Day One," Morris said, pausing from munching on chicken wings in the locker room. "This year, she had 12 players who just bought in, bought into the system. What you're witnessing right now is the result of a team commitment.

"We all made a commitment and we all just want one thing, and that's just to win."

The reward came at the horn, with Mulkey turning to her bench and leaning forward to put her hands on her knees as though in disbelief. Players ran to midcourt to celebrate, except for Morris running straight to the scorer's table and jumping on top of it in a moment she said she had long dreamed of.

As players posed for cellphone photos with the regional-title trophy, the 60-year-old Mulkey looked eager to take it all in after players dumped a cooler of confetti on her. She danced briefly with Reese. She watched her grandchildren roll around in the confetti laying at midcourt. She took a moment to acknowledge LSU fans in the stands by gazing their way while patting her heart.

Mulkey arrived at LSU with a resume headlined by three NCAA titles from her time at Baylor along with some flamboyant sideline looks such as her silver-shimmering jacket with white pants for this one. She had cautioned that the Tigers were overachieving when they're still strengthening a program for the long haul.

Maybe so, but they're ahead of schedule after pushing their way through the NCAA Tournament's Greenville 2 Region. The Tigers head to Dallas to face Ohio State or Virginia Tech in Friday's national semifinals.

"What really makes me smile is not cutting that net down," Mulkey said. "It's looking around out there at all those LSU people, looking at that team I get to coach experience it for the first time."

Reese, a Maryland transfer who has led Mulkey's team all year with her physical play, was named the region's most outstanding player despite missing her first nine shots and going 3 for 15 for the game.

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LSU shot 30.2% and went 1 for 12 from 3-point range, including misses on its first nine attempts. But Miami was even worse from 3, missing all 15 tries.

The third-seeded Tigers finished with a 49-35 rebounding edge behind Reese, which led to a 15-3 edge in second-chance points — all desperately needed on a day with offensive rebounds readily available. They also made 15 of 26 free throws while Miami got to the line just nine times.

Jasmyne Roberts scored 22 points for ninth-seeded Miami (22-13), which had taken a wild ride here. The Hurricanes rallied from a huge deficit to beat Oklahoma State in the first round, stunned No. 1 seed Indiana on the road, then beat Villanova in Friday's Sweet 16 despite blowing a 21-point lead.

The last win set off an emotional on-court celebration for Katie Meier's bunch, which had played with toughness and athleticism to get to its first Elite Eight. The Hurricanes were trying to match the record for lowest-seeded team ever to reach a Final Four, set by Arkansas in 1998.

But the Hurricanes struggled the entire way offensively, even as their defense kept them hanging around and leaving open opportunities.

Outside of Roberts — coming off a career-best 26 points against Villanova — seemingly no Hurricanes player could make a shot.

"I know we were exhausted because we were pouring our heart and soul into the defensive end and the rebounding effort," Meier said, adding: "And that's all the credit to LSU for being so hard to guard inside and for taking our legs out so much."

The Hurricanes shot 31.6% and plenty of their missed 3-pointers came off clean looks. Destiny Harden, who hit the shot to beat Indiana, scored three points on 0-for-9 shooting with seven missed 3s.

It was a disappointing conclusion to an incredible run for Miami, and the school fell short of making history twice in one day.

The men's and women's teams were each playing Sunday to reach the programs' first Final Four. The men pulled it off, beating Texas in Kansas City, Missouri. That game went final during the first quarter of the women's game — drawing cheers when the final play was shown on the arena scoreboards.

Miami battled but couldn't complete the double.

"I mean, it hurts because we competed, we gave it our all," Harden said. "We took the program somewhere it's never been."

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Follow Aaron Beard on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/aaronbeardap>

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

## All 7 Pennsylvania chocolate factory explosion victims found

WEST READING, Pa. (AP) — All seven bodies have been recovered from the site of a powerful explosion at a chocolate factory in a small town in eastern Pennsylvania, officials said.

West Reading Mayor Samantha Kaag said in a statement Sunday night that none of the victims will be named until officials are certain that all families have been contacted.

"Please understand that this is a devastating loss, but we are truly grateful to bring closure to the families involved in the upcoming days," Kaag said.

Police Chief Wayne Holben said at a press briefing just after 9 p.m. that rescue workers had found the bodies earlier in the evening and that they are believed to be the remaining two individuals who were listed as missing earlier in the day. Their identities will be confirmed by the Berks County Coroner's Office, he said.

One of the victims was found around 6:50 p.m., and the other around 8:20 p.m., Holben said. The deaths bring the total number killed in the blast to seven.

Earlier Kaag confirmed to the Associated Press that the fifth body was found Sunday morning by first responders and confirmed dead by the Berks County Coroner's Office. The coroner was unable to confirm the identity of that person, Kaag said.

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West Reading Borough Chief of Police Wayne Holben confirmed the body of a fourth victim was found under debris early Sunday at the R.M. Palmer Co. plant in the borough of West Reading, about 60 miles (96 kilometers) northwest of Philadelphia.

Holben asked for continued prayers from the community and vowed that rescuers and officials "will not rest until every single person affected by this tragedy has been accounted for" from the blast that occurred just before 5 p.m. Friday.

Rescue crews had been using heat imaging equipment and dogs to search for possible survivors after the blast destroyed one building and damaged a neighboring building. Crews were using heavy equipment to methodically and carefully pull debris from the site, Holben said.

Three buildings around the site will be condemned as a precaution, Kaag said.

"This does not mean they are slated for demolition or uninhabitable," she said. "Simply that there will still be work happening around them as we proceed and they will need to be looked at further by structural engineers."

Borough Fire Chief Chad Moyer said Saturday night that the chance of finding survivors was "decreasing rapidly" due to the explosion's force and the amount of time that had passed. Kaag said officials were "still hopeful to at least get some answers and get some recoveries so that people have that reassurance and that closure."

Officials said they had no update on the condition of a woman pulled alive from the rubble early Saturday. Kaag said she had apparently been on the second floor and was found in a "hopeful circumstance," calling out to rescuers despite her injuries after a dog located her.

Officials also reported no updates on the conditions of those taken to hospitals. Reading Hospital said it received 10 patients and transferred two to other facilities, while two others were admitted in good and fair condition respectively and the others had been discharged.

R.M. Palmer said in a statement Saturday afternoon that everyone at the company was "devastated" and it was reaching out to employees and their families through first responders and disaster recovery organizations because its communication systems were down.

Kaag, a volunteer firefighter herself, said rescue crews had been working 12- to 16-hour shifts and were so dedicated to continuing the search that "you have to pull them away at this point" to swap out and get some rest.

Gov. Josh Shapiro visited the site Saturday and vowed support from the state.

Kaag said some residents have reported damage to windows from the blast, and she asked people to "take a walk around your house" and report any damage.

State and local fire investigators are continuing to examine the scene to try to determine the cause of the blast.

## Daunting recovery underway in tornado-devastated Mississippi

By MICHAEL GOLDBERG and EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

ROLLING FORK, Miss. (AP) — Help began pouring into one of the poorest regions of the U.S. after a deadly tornado tore a path of destruction for more than an hour across a long swath of Mississippi, even as furious new storms Sunday struck across the Deep South.

At least 25 people were killed and dozens of others were injured in Mississippi as the massive storm ripped through more than a half-dozen towns late Friday. A man was also killed in Alabama after his trailer home flipped over several times.

"Everything I can see is in some state of destruction," said Jarrod Kunze, who drove to the hard-hit Mississippi town of Rolling Fork from his home in Alabama, ready to help "in whatever capacity I'm needed."

Kunze was among volunteers working Sunday at a staging area, where bottled water and other supplies were being readied for distribution.

Search and recovery crews resumed the daunting task of digging through flattened and battered homes, commercial buildings and municipal offices after hundreds of people were displaced.

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The storm hit so quickly that the sheriff's department in Rolling Fork barely had time to set off sirens to warn the community of 2,000 residents, said Mayor Eldridge Walker.

"And by the time they initiated the siren, the storm had hit and it tore down the siren that's located right over here," Walker said, referring to an area just blocks from downtown.

The mayor said his town was devastated.

"Sharkey County, Mississippi, is one of the poorest counties in the state of Mississippi, but we're still resilient," he said. "We've got a long way to go, and we certainly thank everybody for their prayers and for anything they will do or can do for this community."

President Joe Biden issued an emergency declaration for Mississippi early Sunday, making federal funding available to hardest hit areas.

"Help is on the way," Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves said at a news conference with local, state and federal leaders.

Recovery efforts in Mississippi were underway even as the National Weather Service warned of a new risk of more severe weather Sunday — including high winds, large hail and possible tornadoes in Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

A tornado touched down early Sunday in Troup County, Georgia, near the Alabama border, according to the Georgia Mutual Aid Group. Affected areas included the county seat of LaGrange, about 67 miles (108 kilometers) southwest of Atlanta

About 100 buildings were damaged, with at least 30 uninhabitable, and five people suffered minor injuries, officials said. Many roads, including Interstate Highway 85, were blocked by debris.

Two tigers briefly escaped from their enclosures at Wild Animal Safari in Pine Mountain, Georgia, after the park sustained extensive tornado damage. "Both have now been found, tranquilized, and safely returned to a secure enclosure," the park said on Facebook. None of its employees or animals were hurt, it said.

Outside of Rolling Fork, a tornado ripped apart the home where Kimberly Berry lived in the Delta flatlands. The twister left only a foundation and a few belongings — a toppled refrigerator, a dresser and nightstand, a bag of Christmas decorations, some clothing.

Berry said she and her 12-year-old daughter huddled and prayed inside a nearby church as the storm roared outside.

"I didn't hear nothing but my own self praying and God answering my prayer. I mean, I can get another house, another furniture. But literally saving my life — I'm thankful," she said.

Following Biden's declaration, federal funding will be available for recovery efforts in Mississippi's Carroll, Humphreys, Monroe and Sharkey counties, including temporary housing, home repairs, loans covering uninsured property losses and other individual and business programs, the White House said in a statement.

The twister flattened entire blocks, obliterated houses, ripped a steeple off a church and toppled a municipal water tower.

Based on early data, the tornado received a preliminary EF-4 rating, the National Weather Service office in Jackson said in a tweet. An EF-4 tornado has top wind gusts between 166 mph and 200 mph (265 kph and 320 kph).

In Rolling Fork, the tornado reduced homes to piles of rubble and flipped cars on their sides. Other parts of the Deep South were digging out from damage caused by other suspected twisters.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency said 25 people were confirmed killed in Mississippi, 55 people were injured and 2,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. High winds, hail and strong storms were expected for parts of Alabama and Georgia on Sunday, the National Weather Service said.

The tornado that slammed into Rolling Fork tore across Mississippi for about 59 miles (95 kilometers) over a period that lasted more than one hour, the National Weather Service said in a preliminary report Sunday. The tornado was an estimated three-quarters of a mile wide at some points, according to the preliminary estimate.

The supercell that produced the deadly twister also appeared to produce tornadoes causing damage in northwest and north-central Alabama, said Brian Squitieri, a severe storms forecaster with the weather

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service's Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma.

In Georgia, Rachel McMahon awoke Sunday to news from her father that the Troup County motel he'd been staying in was destroyed. She said her dad, who is disabled, took shelter in the bathtub when the tornado hit.

He was badly shaken up, but not injured. She had to walk the last half-mile to his motel because of downed trees.

"SO thankful my dad is ok," she posted on Facebook, along with photos and videos of the damage: houses with gaping holes in roofs, massive tree trunks snapped in half and powerlines dangling every which way.

Associated Press journalists Leah Willingham in Charleston, West Virginia; Jim Salter in O'Fallon, Missouri; Lea Skene in Baltimore; Jeff Martin in Woodstock, Georgia; Christopher Weber in Los Angeles, and Nicole Winfield in Rome contributed to this report.

## San Diego State muscles past Creighton, makes 1st Final Four

By GARY B. GRAVES AP Sports Writer

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Darrion Trammell had shot enough free throws in practice to believe at least one would fall when it mattered.

San Diego State's 5-foot-10 senior guard was fouled by Creighton's Ryan Nembhard when he put up a floater near the free-throw line with 1.2 seconds left in a rugged NCAA Tournament East Region final that was tied at 56-all.

Trammell's first free throw clanged off the rim, but he knocked down the second, and that was enough to push the defense-first Aztecs into their first Final Four with a 57-56 victory on Sunday.

Lamont Butler scored 18 points and Trammell had 12 for fifth-seeded San Diego State (31-6), which slowed down high-scoring, sixth-seeded Creighton (24-13) and became the first Mountain West Conference team to reach the national semifinals.

The experienced Aztecs, in their sixth season under coach Brian Dutcher, will play the surprising East Region champion, ninth-seeded Florida Atlantic, on Saturday in Houston for a spot in the national title game.

"Here we are," said Dutcher, a longtime assistant to his predecessor, Steve Fisher. "We're making the next step and it's something we've always talked about. I'm sure there were people that doubted we could do it, but we never doubted for a minute."

"Not to say it's easy to get there or that we would ever get there. But we're there now, and we're going to go and try to win the thing."

In the final seconds, Trammell dribbled from the perimeter and elevated for the potential winning shot. A chasing Nembhard got his hand on Trammell's hip and was whistled for the foul, sending Trammell to the line for the first time in the game.

"I feel like I've shot probably a thousand free throws in the last week," said Trammell, who was named the region's most outstanding player. "And then today, I feel like I put in the work to be able to step up and have confidence that I'm going to make 'em."

Make one, anyway.

Creighton couldn't get a shot off on its final, desperation play. Baylor Scheierman threw the ensuing inbound pass the length of the floor. San Diego State's Aguek Arop and Creighton's Arthur Kaluma both jumped for it and the ball deflected out of bounds. Officials reviewed the play and determined that time had expired, and the celebration was on for the Aztecs.

"I wasn't given an explanation other than there was no time on the clock," Creighton coach Greg McDermott said. "They made no call on the floor but officiating is part of the game and we're not gonna go there."

Scheierman had tied the game at 56-all when he stole an inbounds pass and converted a layup with 34 seconds remaining.

Ryan Kalkbrenner scored 17 points and Scheierman and Kaluma had 12 apiece for the Bluejays, who

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went 2 of 17 from 3-point range.

The Aztecs, who got this far thanks to defense and physical play, held the Bluejays to 23 second-half points on 28% shooting as they won for the 14th time in 15 games. Creighton shot 40% overall.

San Diego State shot 38% but got clutch baskets from Nathan Mensah, whose jumper gave the Aztecs a 56-54 lead with 1:37 left, and Arop, who made two straight shots before that for a 54-50 advantage with 3:03 remaining.

"I've done that a thousand times throughout the season, so it was just another shot for me," Arop, who had six points, said of his go-ahead jumper. "Obviously, there was a lot more weight to it, but I wasn't thinking like that. I was just thinking, staying in rhythm, getting the shot up and putting my team up front."

Creighton, which beat San Diego State in overtime in the first round of last year's NCAA Tournament, fell just short of joining Big East rival UConn in the Final Four.

The teams didn't appear to share any hard feelings from last year's meeting. They shared a round-trip flight to Hawaii last fall for the Maui Invitational, and there were no dustups during a tight, physical game in which no team led by more than eight points.

## REGION HONORS

Trammell was part of an all-region team that included Butler, Creighton's Kalkbrenner and Scheierman and Princeton's Tasan Evbuomwan.

## PERIMETER DEFENSE

Before muscling past Creighton, San Diego State crafted a similar defensive masterwork against Alabama, the tournament's top overall seed. The Aztecs held Alabama and Creighton to a combined 5 of 44 (11.4%) from 3-point range, the best 3-point percentage defense ever in a regional weekend for a team that advanced to the Final Four.

## DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Kaluma played against his brother, San Diego State's Adam Seiko. Their parents sat a few rows up at midcourt, sitting quietly before joining Seiko to celebrate.

## BIG PICTURE

Creighton's offense started well enough as the Bluejays built a 33-28 halftime lead and extended their advantage to seven in the second half. But Creighton didn't make a single 3-pointer after halftime.

San Diego State proved again that defense matters, especially since the Aztecs also scuffled for points. Their experience and depth showed as Mensah and Arop, who averaged just 6.1 and 4.5 points per game respectively, converted the last three baskets. They and Creighton each grabbed 37 rebounds, but the Aztecs' 13-9 edge offensively proved critical.

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## Twitter: Parts of its source code leaked online

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Some parts of Twitter's source code — the fundamental computer code on which the social network runs — were leaked online, the social media company said in a legal filing on Sunday that was first reported by The New York Times.

According to the legal document, filed with the U.S. District Court of the Northern District of California, Twitter had asked GitHub, an internet hosting service for software development, to take down the code where it was posted. The platform complied and said the content had been disabled, according to the filing. Twitter also asked the court to identify the alleged infringer or infringers who posted Twitter's source code on systems operated by GitHub without Twitter's authorization.

Twitter, based in San Francisco, noted in the filing that the postings infringe copyrights held by Twitter. The leak creates more challenges for billionaire Elon Musk, who bought Twitter last October for \$44



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billion and took the company private. Since then, it has been engulfed in chaos, with massive layoffs and advertisers fleeing.

Meanwhile, the Federal Trade Commission is probing Musk's mass layoffs at Twitter and trying to obtain his internal communications as part of ongoing oversight into the social media company's privacy and cybersecurity practices, according to documents described in a congressional report.

## Final Four newcomers: Grab your name tag at the door

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

Everyone's heard of UConn. All these other guys? They'll need name tags at the Final Four.

When they travel to Houston next week to play for the national title, Florida Atlantic, San Diego State and Miami will be making their first appearances at college basketball's grand finale, the first time since 1970 that three first-timers all showed up in the same year.

If the unfamiliar names — to say nothing of the seedings — are any indication, fans might look back on 2022-23 as the season when true parity finally sunk down deep into the bones of America's favorite basketball tournament and turned March Madness into a total free-for-all, all the way to the last weekend.

There will be no No. 1 seed at the Final Four for the first time since 2011. Instead, there will be a 9 seed in Florida Atlantic, a pair of 5 seeds in SDSU and Miami, and a 4 seed in UConn. The combined seed total of the four teams is 23, the second-highest total since the seeding began in 1979. This marks the first time that not a single top-3 seed made it.

The matchups for Saturday: San Diego State against FAU, in a not-so-classic 5-vs-9 matchup. (San Diego State, a 57-56 winner over Creighton on Sunday, is a 1.5-point favorite, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.) Who saw that coming?

In the later game, it's the Hurricanes as 5 1/2-point underdogs against UConn, which is the prohibitive favorite, at minus-135, to bring a fifth national title home.

If UConn does win, it will join Kentucky, North Carolina and Kansas as the fourth school to win the championship under three or more coaches. Dan Hurley would join Jim Calhoun and Kevin Ollie in the winner's circle for the Huskies.

In the past, some of the upheaval in the brackets could have been pinned on the single-elimination format and the tournament selection committee, which sometimes overvalues its top seeds — this year, that included first-round loser Purdue and seven-loss defending-champion Kansas — while clearly underrating others.

No team got undervalued more than UConn (29-8), which had 25 wins coming in, a No. 8 standing in the NET rankings — which looks at quality wins among other factors — and the still-developing potential of junior Adama Sanogo, who has averaged 20 points and just a touch under 10 rebounds in four tournament games.

But all the other factors upending college sports — namely, NIL deals and the transfer portal — played a role here, too.

Heading into the Elite Eight, Miami coach Jim Larrañaga — who brought George Mason to the Final Four as an 11 seed 17 years ago — said the portal was the basketball equivalent of speed dating. Worked for him. The third- and fourth-leading scorers for the Hurricanes (29-7), Nijel Pack and Norchad Omier, both came to The U from the portal.

Also down in South Florida, FAU got three key players, including 7-foot-1 Russian center Vladislav Goldin, from elsewhere. All moved to the campus in Boca Raton after less-than-successful stays at big-conference schools. No one was quite sure how coach Dusty May would blend all these new faces from different places. Turns out, he did pretty well. At 35-3, nobody has more wins this season than the Owls.

"We already had a good chemistry last year, and the pieces that we added just complemented everything we had going on," said Bryan Greenlee, in his second year at FAU after coming over from Minnesota.

A longtime power in the Mountain West Conference, San Diego State was 30-2 and projected for a No. 1 seed in 2020 when the season was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Three years later, the Aztecs (31-6) are two wins away from the title. Their top two scorers, Matt Bradley and Darrion Trammell, are — you guessed it — products of the transfer portal, though coach Brian Dutcher brought them in as much for defense as scoring. SDSU made it this far behind a defense that held top-seeded Alabama to 32% shooting in the Sweet 16 and held Creighton to 11% from 3-point range in Sunday's win.

Asked what to expect from the Aztecs in Houston next week, Dutcher said, "I would think pretty good defense, to start with."

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## Churches provide solace in tornado-ravaged Mississippi Delta

By MICHAEL GOLDBERG Associated Press

ROLLING FORK, Miss. (AP) — As a deadly tornado tore through the lower Mississippi Delta, the Rev. Mary Stewart clung to a door in the hallway of her Rolling Fork home, shielding herself from the branches and chunks of debris that came flying through her shattered windows.

Friday's storm flattened entire town blocks, but the Rolling Fork Methodist Church withstood the high winds. And so the first Sunday after the twister commenced just like any other Sunday — with congregants reaffirming their faith and finding solace together.

"We are a very religious community," said Laura Allmon, a fourth-generation congregant. "It just means a lot for us to be able to get together and pray and be thankful for what we have."

At least 25 people were killed and dozens were injured late Friday in Mississippi as the storm ripped through one of the poorest regions in the country, carving out a swath of destruction. Elsewhere, a man was killed in neighboring Alabama after his trailer home flipped over several times.

Their homes rendered unlivable, many Rolling Fork residents flocked Sunday to the network of churches dotting the landscape. It is a close-knit farming community bound by intergenerational ties of family and faith that form the social fabric of this rural Southern town of about 2,000.

Wayne Williams, 55, teaches construction skills at a vocational center. He was working with others Sunday to clean up some relatively minor damage at the building. Across the street, a large metal building that had been a community center was ripped apart by the tornado.

"It's going to be a long road to recovery, to rebuild and get over all the devastation," Williams said of his community. "With God in the mix, we will recover."

For Rolling Fork, a rebuilding process now awaits unlike any the town has faced before. But Friday's tornado wasn't the first time residents have had their lives upended by the elements. In 2019, the worst flooding since 1973 drove some from their homes.

Religion is a central way residents of the Delta cope with an unpredictable climate and entrenched poverty.

"So many people here know patience from farm work," Stewart said. "With their dependence on the rain for their crops — their livelihood — and having to leave it in God's hands ... it's a wonderful reaffirmation that God is in control."

Founded nearly 135 years ago, the Rolling Fork Methodist Church has long been a source of support and resilience in hard times, its members said.

Since the church building was without power Sunday morning, roughly two dozen worshipers gathered on its historic steps and bowed their heads while Stewart delivered a short sermon.

"We're grateful, Lord, that you brought us through this storm," she said, standing in sunshine beneath a clear blue sky. "We have a lot to do and a lot of rebuilding, and there are people that we've lost in our town. ... We pray for their families."

Elsewhere, President Joe Biden issued an emergency declaration for Mississippi early Sunday, making federal funding available to the hardest hit areas.

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Based on early data, the tornado received a preliminary EF-4 rating, with top wind gusts between 166 mph and 200 mph (265 kph and 320 kph), according to the National Weather Service office in Jackson. Officials said the twister was on the ground for more than an hour.

Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves issued a state of emergency and vowed to help rebuild as he viewed the damage in the region, which boasts wide expanses of cotton, corn and soybean fields and catfish farming ponds. He spoke with Biden, who also held a call with the state's congressional delegation.

More than a half-dozen shelters were opened in Mississippi to house displaced residents.

Just a few blocks down the road from the Rolling Fork Methodist Church, pastor Britt Williamson spoke from the pulpit at First Baptist Church, addressing rows of weary congregants. During the service, people hugged, shook hands and wiped away tears.

"The Delta is a hard soul for the gospel," Williamson said. "Through the calamity of what happened, God has brought a plow bigger than any of these farmers could have."

He said faith gives people something to hold onto during life's challenges.

"We don't want to help people just to give them a place to live. We don't want to feed them for a day," he said. "We want to give them an eternal home."

Marlon Nicholas, a congregant of the church, said his family's attendance at a local high school prom Friday night meant they stayed safe even as their home was destroyed. He said other relatives also lost their homes but escaped without serious injuries.

"Miracles," he said.

## Philadelphia residents warned about chemical spill in river

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Philadelphia residents are being told that they may want to drink only bottled water following a chemical spill into the Delaware River in neighboring Bucks County.

Bucks County health officials said Sunday that a leak late Friday evening at the Trinseo Altuglas chemical facility in Bristol Township spilled between 8,100 and 12,000 gallons of a water-based latex finishing solution into the river. Officials said it is non-toxic to humans and no known adverse health effects have been reported in the county.

Mike Carroll, deputy managing director for Philadelphia's Office of Transportation, Infrastructure and Sustainability, said there had been no sign of contaminants in city water but officials "cannot be 100% certain" traces won't show up Sunday afternoon. He called health risks from the material "very low if present at all" but said officials wanted people to be aware so they could consider using bottled water to drink or cook with to further minimize any risk.

The city water department said in an update Sunday evening that water "will remain safe to drink and use" at least through Monday, based on the time it takes water to move through treatment and water mains before reaching customers.

Officials said intakes to the city's Baxter Drinking Water Treatment Plant were closed after the spill but they were opened overnight to maintain minimal water levels to avoid damage to equipment and to supply water for fire safety and other other essential needs.

State environmental officials are leading the response. Pennsylvania American Water said its Yardley Water Treatment plant about 15 miles (24 kilometers) upstream of the release remains unaffected. Aqua said it shut off the intake to its Bristol water system to protect customers and had seen no impact from the spill.

Trinseo senior vice president of manufacturing and engineering Tim Thomas told WPVI-TV Saturday that the material posed no risk to the public. "It's like the material you find in paint," he told the station. "It's your typical acrylic paint you have in your house, that's what really this material is, in a water base."

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This story has been corrected to show that officials said water is safe at least through Monday.

## Pray for rain: Spanish farmers hold unique Mass amid drought

By EMILIO MORENATTI Associated Press

L'ESPUNYOLA, Spain (AP) — When Josep Altarriba looks across his parched fields, the Spanish farmer can't remember a time of such widespread drought in Catalonia. If it doesn't rain in the next two weeks, he says there's little chance of saving the harvest.

What can be done? For the mountain villagers of L'Espunyola, the answer is divine intervention.

On Sunday, around 250 residents brought back the faded practice of a special Mass and procession to pray to Our Lady of the Torrents, a local virgin associated with rainfall.

Under mostly sunny skies, worshippers lifted the colorfully painted statue of the Lady of the Torrents from its place of prominence in the stone church. She was then nestled onto a wooden litter filled with green branches and hoisted aloft, to be carried around the village followed by the bishop and parishioners.

"It's not a magic act, it is an act of trust," Bishop Francesc Conesa told The Associated Press.

Three years of very low rainfall and high temperatures put Spain officially into long-term drought, the country's weather agency said this month. Last year was Spain's sixth driest — and the hottest since records began in 1961.

Catalonia, in the country's northeastern corner, is among the worst-affected regions. Agrotourism and farming are the primary sources of income for the 260 inhabitants of L'Espunyola, an hour and a half north of Barcelona.

"If it doesn't rain within two weeks, it's very hard to say what might happen," Altarriba, the farmer, said after celebrating Mass.

Local councilor and firefighter Eduard Perarnau described the special Mass as a last resort. The government has restricted water usage, asking farmers to limit watering crops and trees as much as possible.

All three reservoirs in the area are below a third of their capacity. The nearby La Baells reservoir is down to 25%, and in some places only a trickle of water cuts through the layers of silt that used to be underwater.

The last time the village offered prayers and hymns to Our Lady of the Torrents was in 2008, local media reported. And it worked — residents say the rains came not long after.

But this year, the bishop doesn't guarantee success.

"We have asked with faith, and many people have come and prayed with faith," Conesa said. "The Lord will give us what suits us."

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AP Writer Raquel Redondo in Madrid contributed to this report.

## Army pulls recruiting ads after Jonathan Majors' arrest

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The arrest of actor Jonathan Majors has upended the Army's newly launched advertising campaign that was aimed at reviving the service's struggling recruiting numbers.

Majors, who authorities said was arrested Saturday in New York on charges of strangulation, assault and harassment, was the narrator of two ads at the heart of a broader media campaign that kicked off at the start of the NCAA's March Madness college basketball tournament.

Army leaders were hopeful that the popularity of the star of the recently released "Creed III" and "Ant-Man and The Wasp: Quantumania," would help them reach the youth audience.

In a statement Sunday, the Army's Enterprise Marketing Office said that the Army was aware of Majors' arrest and was "deeply concerned by the allegations." It added that while Majors "is innocent until proven guilty, prudence dictates that we pull our ads until the investigation into these allegations is complete."

New York City police said the actor was involved in a domestic dispute with a 30-year-old woman. "The victim informed police she was assaulted," a police spokesperson said in a statement.

A lawyer for Majors, Priya Chaudhry, said in a statement Sunday there was evidence clearing Majors and that the actor "is provably the victim of an altercation with a woman he knows."

The Army ads, titled "Overcoming Obstacles" and "Pushing Tomorrow," are part of the plan to revive

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the Army's "Be All You Can be" motto. They highlighted the history of the Army and some of the many professions that recruits can pursue.

The "Be All You Can Be" slogan dominated its recruiting ads for two decades starting in 1981. A nearly two-minute preview video, made available before the campaign rollout in early March, featured soldiers jumping out of airplanes, working on helicopters, climbing obstacle courses and diving underwater. A voiceover said: "We bring out the best in the people who serve, because America calls for nothing less."

In the Army's worst recruiting year in recent history, the service fell 25% short of its goal to enlist 60,000 recruits in 2022. The new ads were a key element in the Army's drive to find creative new ways to attract recruits and ensure that the service has the troops it needs to help defend the nation.

Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said the Army has set a difficult goal for this year: aiming to bring in 65,000 recruits, which would be 20,000 more than in 2022.

## Ukraine demands emergency UN meeting over Putin nuclear plan

By KARL RITTER Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's government on Sunday called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council to "counter the Kremlin's nuclear blackmail" after Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed plans to station tactical atomic weapons in Belarus.

One Ukrainian official said Russia "took Belarus as a nuclear hostage."

Further heightening tensions, an explosion deep inside Russia wounded three people Sunday. Russian authorities blamed a Ukrainian drone for the blast, which damaged residential buildings in a town just 175 kilometers (110 miles) south of Moscow.

Russia has said the plan to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus comes in response to the West's increasing military support for Ukraine. Putin announced the plan in a TV interview that aired Saturday, saying it was triggered by a U.K. decision this past week to provide Ukraine with armor-piercing rounds containing depleted uranium.

Putin argued that by deploying its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, Russia was following the lead of the United States. He noted that Washington has nuclear weapons based in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey.

"We are doing what they have been doing for decades, stationing them in certain allied countries, preparing the launch platforms and training their crews," he said.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry condemned the move in a statement Sunday and demanded an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council.

"Ukraine expects effective action to counter the Kremlin's nuclear blackmail by the U.K., China, the U.S. and France," the statement read, saying these countries "have a special responsibility" regarding nuclear aggression.

"The world must be united against someone who endangers the future of human civilization," the statement said.

Ukraine has not commented on Sunday's explosion inside Russia. It left a crater about 15 meters (50 feet) in diameter and five meters deep (16 feet), according to media reports.

Russian state-run news agency Tass reported authorities identified the drone as a Ukrainian Tu-141. The Soviet-era drone was reintroduced in Ukraine in 2014, and has a range of about 1,000 kilometers (620 miles).

The explosion took place in the town of Kireyevsk in the Tula region, about 300 kilometers (180 miles) from the border with Ukraine. Russia's Defense Ministry said the drone crashed after an electronic jamming system disabled its navigation.

Similar drone attacks have been common during the war, although Ukraine hardly ever acknowledges responsibility. On Monday, Russia said Ukrainian drones attacked civilian facilities in the town of Dzhankoi in Russia-annexed Crimea. Ukraine's military said several Russian cruise missiles were destroyed, but did not specifically claim responsibility.

In December, the Russian military reported several Ukrainian drone attacks on long-range bomber bases

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deep inside Russia. The Russian Defense Ministry said the drones were shot down, but acknowledged that their debris damaged some aircraft and killed several servicemen.

Also, Russian authorities have reported attacks by small drones in the Bryansk and Belgorod regions on the border with Ukraine.

On Saturday, Putin argued that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has long asked to have nuclear weapons in his country again to counter NATO. Belarus shares borders with three NATO members — Latvia, Lithuania and Poland — and Russia used Belarusian territory as a staging ground to send troops into neighboring Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022.

Both Lukashenko's support of the war and Putin's plans to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus has been denounced by the Belarusian opposition.

Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, tweeted Sunday that Putin's announcement was "a step towards internal destabilization" of Belarus that maximized "the level of negative perception and public rejection" of Russia and Putin in Belarusian society. The Kremlin, Danilov added, "took Belarus as a nuclear hostage."

Tactical nuclear weapons are intended for use on the battlefield and have a short range and a low yield compared with much more powerful nuclear warheads fitted to long-range missiles. Russia plans to maintain control over the ones it sends to Belarus, and construction of storage facilities for them will be completed by July 1, Putin said.

Russia has stored its tactical nuclear weapons at dedicated depots on its territory, and moving part of the arsenal to a storage facility in Belarus would up the ante in the Ukrainian conflict by placing them closer to Russian aircraft and missiles already stationed there.

The U.S. said it would "monitor the implications" of Putin's announcement. So far, Washington hasn't seen "any indications Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon," National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said.

In Germany, the foreign ministry called it a "further attempt at nuclear intimidation," German news agency dpa reported late Saturday. The ministry went on to say that "the comparison drawn by President Putin to NATO's nuclear participation is misleading and cannot be used to justify the step announced by Russia."

Kirsten Grieshaber contributed to this report from Berlin.

## Jonathan Majors arrested on assault charge in New York

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — The actor Jonathan Majors was arrested Saturday in New York on charges of strangulation, assault and harassment, authorities said. On Sunday, an attorney for Majors said there's evidence that he is "entirely innocent."

New York City police said that Majors, star of the recently released "Creed III" and "Ant-Man and The Wasp: Quantumania," was involved in a domestic dispute with a 30-year-old woman. Police responded around 11 a.m. Saturday to a 911 call inside an apartment in the Manhattan neighborhood of Chelsea.

"The victim informed police she was assaulted," a spokesperson for the NYPD said in a statement. "Officers placed the 33-year-old male into custody without incident. The victim sustained minor injuries to her head and neck and was removed to an area hospital in stable condition."

A representative for Majors denied any wrongdoing by the actor.

"He has done nothing wrong," the representative said in an email to the AP on Saturday. "We look forward to clearing his name and clearing this up."

On Sunday, an attorney for Majors, Priya Chaudhry, came out more forcefully, saying Majors "is provably the victim of an altercation with a woman he knows" and blamed the incident on the woman having "an emotional crisis."

Chaudhry said there was evidence clearing Majors, including "video footage from the vehicle where this episode took place, witness testimony from the driver and others who both saw and heard the episode, and most importantly, two written statements from the woman recanting these allegations."

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An email seeking additional comment from the NYPD based on Chaudhry's assertions was not immediately returned Sunday.

Majors was arraigned Sunday on a complaint involving misdemeanor charges for assault and aggravated harassment, the Manhattan district attorney's office said. A judge ordered Majors released on his own recognizance on Saturday night with a limited order of protection. He was scheduled to appear in court on May 8.

In the meantime, the U.S. Army suspended its TV ad campaign featuring Majors that was intended to target younger audiences. The Army Enterprise Marketing Office said in a statement Sunday that the U.S. Army is "deeply concerned by the allegations surrounding his arrest."

"While Mr. Majors is innocent until proven guilty, prudence dictates that we pull our ads until the investigation into these allegations is complete," the office said in a statement.

Majors is one of the fastest rising stars in Hollywood. After breaking through in 2019's "The Last Black Man in San Francisco," Majors has starred in "Da 5 Bloods," "The Harder They Fall" and last year's "Devotion." He also stars in the recent Sundance Film Festival entry "Magazine Dreams," which Searchlight Pictures is to release in December.

## UConn's return to prominence has been a family affair

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Basketball Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Dan Hurley got choked up when asked about his dad on the eve of UConn's Sweet 16 game.

Tears flowed again before the Huskies' Elite Eight game, this time from thinking about what he considers his other family.

"I love coaching this team. I've gotten emotional," Hurley said after UConn steamrolled Gonzaga Saturday night. "I just can't think about coaching this group for the last time. It makes me sad."

Hurley will get to coach them at least one more game, next week in Houston.

UConn has blitzed its way through the bracket so far, winning each of its four NCAA Tournament games by at least 15 points.

The Huskies turned what was supposed to be a dream Elite Eight game into a nightmare for Gonzaga.

UConn dominated at both ends, beating the Zags 82-54 in the fourth-most lopsided Elite Eight game since the NCAA Tournament expanded to 64 teams in 1985.

That puts the Huskies in the Final Four for the first time since winning the 2014 national title and back on track to once again being an elite program.

UConn will play Texas or Miami next Saturday in Houston.

"I saw them in November and I just thought they were such a complete team there," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. "They've got great size. They have depth. Their bigs are different. So they bring different qualities."

The run has been a gratifying one for Hurley.

His father, Bob, is one of the few high school coaches to be inducted into the Naismith Hall of Fame, a demanding coach who led St. Anthony High School to 26 New Jersey state titles.

Bobby Hurley, Dan's brother, won two national titles as a player at Duke and led Arizona State to its third NCAA Tournament since 2018 this season.

Dan played at Seton Hall before working his way up the coaching ladder. He spent two years at Wagner before leading Rhode Island to consecutive NCAA Tournaments.

Tasked with returning UConn to national prominence, Hurley gradually rebuilt the program, leading the Huskies to their first NCAA Tournament berth in five years in 2021.

The knock on Hurley: he couldn't win in March. UConn got bounced out of the NCAA Tournament's first round each of the previous two seasons, including to No. 12 seed New Mexico State last year.

The Huskies looked like national title contenders early this season, went through a funk, then started playing their best basketball at the perfect time.

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After the win over Gonzaga, Dan now has some bragging rights of his own and celebrated with hugs from his family after clinching a Final Four spot Saturday night along The Strip in Las Vegas.

"We're just blessed that we grew up in Jersey City and found basketball and had a dad that pushed us," Hurley said. "And I'm just proud that he's been able to travel with us and now I get to take my dad to a Final Four."

And he's taking that other family with him.

Collegiate athletics create a unique experience, the countless hours spent together chasing a common goal. College basketball players spend up to 11 months a year with each other between the season and offseason workouts, so bonds come naturally.

Some teams are closer than others. These Huskies are a tight-knit pack.

"You truly are — you're family," Hurley said. "And to do this together is special, not just the great moments, but having to pick each other up after great failures. Just doing it all together, the roller coaster ride. It's like it's a bond that you have with other people that most people don't get to experience."

Next up for Hurley and the Huskies is a truly unique experience: playing in the Final Four.

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)

## Biden's Justice Dept. keeps hard line in death row cases

By MICHAEL TARM and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Rejon Taylor hoped the election of Joe Biden, the first U.S. president to campaign on a pledge to end the death penalty, would mean a more sympathetic look at his claims that racial bias and other trial errors landed him on federal death row in Terre Haute, Indiana.

But two years on, Justice Department attorneys under Biden are fighting the Black man's efforts to reverse his 2008 death sentence for killing a white restaurateur as hard as they did under Donald Trump, who oversaw 13 executions in his presidency's final months.

"Every legal means they have available they're using to fight us," said the 38-year-old's lawyer, Kelley Henry. "It's business as usual."

Death penalty opponents expected Biden to act within weeks of taking office to fulfill his 2020 campaign promise to end capital punishment on the federal level and to work at ending it in states that still carry out executions. Instead, Biden has taken no steps toward fulfilling that promise.

But it's not just inaction by Biden. An Associated Press review of dozens of legal filings shows Biden's Justice Department is fighting vigorously in courts to maintain the sentences of death row inmates, even after Attorney General Merrick Garland temporarily paused executions. Lawyers for some of the over 40 death row inmates say they've seen no meaningful changes to the Justice Department's approach under Biden and Trump.

"They're fighting back as much as they ever have," said Ruth Friedman, head of the defender unit that oversees federal death row cases. "If you say my client has an intellectual disability, the government ... says, 'No, he does not.' If you say 'I'd like (new evidence),' they say, 'You aren't entitled to it.'"

Administration efforts to uphold death sentences for white supremacist Dylann Roof, who killed nine Black church-goers, and Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev are better known. Lower-profile cases, like Taylor's, have drawn less scrutiny.

The Justice Department confirmed that since Biden's inauguration it hasn't agreed with a single claim of racial bias or errors that could lead to the overturning of a federal death sentence.

It's a thorny political issue. While Americans increasingly oppose capital punishment, it is deeply entrenched. And as Biden eyes a 2024 run, it's unlikely he'll make capital punishment a signature issue given his silence on it as president.

In announcing the 2021 moratorium, Garland noted concerns about how capital punishment disproport-



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tionately impacts people of color and the "arbitrariness" — or lack of consistency — in its application. He hasn't authorized a single new death penalty case and has reversed decisions by previous administrations to seek it in 27 cases.

Garland recently decided not to pursue death for Patrick Crusius, who killed nearly two dozen people in a racist attack at a Texas Walmart. His lawyers have said he had "severe, lifelong neurological and mental disabilities." He could still be sentenced to death under state charges.

Garland also took the death penalty off the table for a man accused in 11 killings as part of a drug trafficking ring.

Defense lawyers say that makes it all the more jarring that Garland's department is fighting to uphold some death sentences. In one case, Norris Holder was sentenced to death for a two-man bank robbery during which a security guard died, even though prosecutors said Holder may not have fired the fatal shot.

Prosecutors decide before trial whether or not to seek the death penalty, and current death row inmates were all tried under previous administrations. Prosecutors have less leeway after a jury's verdict than before trial.

Court challenges after trials are also often not about whether it was appropriate to pursue the death penalty, but whether there were legal or procedural problems at trial that make the sentence invalid.

"It's a very different analysis when a conviction has been entered, a jury has spoken," said Nathan Williams, a former Justice Department lawyer who prosecuted Roof. "There has to be a respect for the appellate process and the legal approaches that can be taken."

A Justice Department spokesman said prosecutors "have an obligation to enforce the law, including by defending lawfully obtained jury verdicts on appeal." The department is working to ensure "fair and even-handed administration of the law in capital-eligible cases," he said.

Inmate lawyers dispute that prosecutors have no choice but to dig in their heels, saying multiple mechanisms have always existed for them to fix past errors.

Justice officials announced this month that they wouldn't pursue death in the resentencing of Alfonso Rodriguez Jr., convicted of killing North Dakota student Dru Sjodin. But that only happened after a judge vacated the original death sentence.

Notably in 2021, the department agreed with lawyers for Wesley Coonce, sentenced to death for killing a fellow inmate in a mental health unit, that lower courts should look again at intellectual disability questions in his case. But the Supreme Court disagreed, declining to hear his case or remand it to lower courts.

Seven federal defendants are still facing possible death sentences.

The first federal death penalty case tried under Biden ended this month. The jury was divided, meaning the life of Sayfullo Saipov, who killed eight people in a terrorist attack on a New York bike path, will be spared. Trump made the decision to seek death and Garland allowed the case to move forward.

Garland's criteria for letting some capital cases proceed isn't clear, though the department often consults victims' families. Some feel strongly that suspected or convicted killers should face death.

Inmate attorneys have asked for all capital cases to get a fresh look. Garland has appeared to take one step in that direction.

The department this year restored written guidance emphasizing that staff can be proactive in fixing egregious errors in capital cases, though none has invoked that option. Garland also re-set processes in which capital defendants can, in certain circumstances, ask the department to consent to their bids for relief.

Taylor was charged with killing restaurant owner Guy Luck in 2003. His lawyers say the 18 year old "discharged his gun in a panic" as Luck tried to grab a gun inside a van in Tennessee.

The prosecution described Taylor to his almost entirely white jury as a "wolf" whom they had an "obligation" to kill. An alternate later said some jurors were determined to get Taylor, recalling: "It was like, here's this little Black boy. Let's send him to the chair."

An appeals court rejected Taylor's bias claims in 2016, though a dissenting judge said courts must be especially diligent to guard against bias when a defendant is Black and the victim white. She also said Taylor didn't seem to be among the worst of the worst, for whom death sentences are reserved.

Taylor revived the bias claims, though the department hasn't directly addressed them. It has rejected

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many of his separate claims.

As the 2024 election looms — and with the chance of someone even less sympathetic to their claims entering the Oval Office — death row inmates know the clock is ticking.

"Trump ran out of time during his killing spree," Taylor told the AP via a prison email system. If elected again, "I don't think he'd waste any time in continuing where he'd left off."

Richer reported from Boston. Associated Press reporter Colleen Long in Washington contributed.

## 'John Wick: Chapter 4' comes out blazing with \$73.5M

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — "John Wick: Chapter 4," the fourth installment in the Keanu Reeves assassin series, debuted with a franchise-best \$73.5 million at the box office, according to studio estimates Sunday.

The Lionsgate film, starring Reeves as the reluctant-but-not-that-reluctant killer John Wick, exceeded both expectations and previous opening weekends in the R-rated franchise. Since first launching in 2014 with "John Wick" (\$14 million on its opening weekend), the Chad Stahelski-directed series has steadily grown as a ticket-seller with each sequel. The 2017 follow-up opened with \$30.4 million, and the 2019 third chapter, "Parabellum," debuted with \$56.8 million.

But "Chapter 4," running two hours and 49 minutes and costing at least \$100 million to produce, is the biggest film yet in the once-lean action series. Critics also said it was a franchise high point, scoring 95% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes. The film, which drew a 69% male audience, added \$64 million overseas. It's Lionsgate's biggest success of the pandemic era.

"When you make a fourth in an action franchise, you have to expect it to go down. That is the nature of these franchises," said Joe Drake, chairman of Lionsgate Motion Picture Group. "But we kept seeing signals and it was wonderful to see the movie they delivered. We saw the audience wanting more."

Though "John Wick" has been bigger at the box office with each new release — an enviable and rare trajectory among Hollywood franchises — "Chapter 4" brings some finality to Reeves' character. The actor hasn't entirely dismissed continuing the series, telling interviewers "never say never."

Regardless, the franchise is set to keep humming. A spin-off titled "Ballerina" starring Ana de Armas and co-starring Reeves has already been shot. The miniseries "The Continental," with Mel Gibson, is upcoming on Peacock.

"Chad and Keanu have created this world and that world continues to expand. I don't know what all the edges of that world are, still," said Drake. "As best they can, they'll continue to try to seduce Keanu to come back and do things. He gets beat up in these shows. He really does. And at the end he's like, 'I'm not doing it anymore.' Then you watch him sit in the theater and feel that audience."

"So we're going to continue to look for ways to meet that demand."

The release of "John Wick: Chapter 4," which included a surprise premiere at SXSW, was also bittersweet. Lance Reddick, who plays the Continental Hotel concierge, Charon, in the films, unexpectedly died at the age of 60 a week before the film's release.

But the success of "John Wick: Chapter 4" adds to a strong start in 2023 for Hollywood. After ticket sales rebounded to about 67% of pre-pandemic levels last year, the release lineup is steadier and more packed this year. Sequels have led the way, including "Creed III" and "Scream VI." Ticket sales are up 28% from last year, according to data firm Comscore.

But there have been some exceptions. After its disappointing \$30.5 million debut last weekend, the superhero sequel "Shazam! Fury of the Gods" slumped to second place with \$9.7 million in its second weekend. The Warner Bros. release dropped steeply, tumbling 68% from its launch.

"Scream VI" took third place with \$8.4 million in its third weekend, bringing its total thus far to \$90.4 million domestic and \$139.3 million worldwide. "Creed III" followed in fourth with \$8.4 million. Michael B. Jordan's sequel is up to \$140.9 million domestic.

The weekend's other new releases were more modest.

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Zach Braff's "A Good Person," starring Florence Pugh and Morgan Freeman, opened on 530 theaters. The MGM release grossed \$834,000. IFC Films' "The Lost King," with Sally Hawkins and Steve Coogan, debuted with \$575,000 in 753 locations.

Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore. Final domestic figures will be released Monday.

1. "John Wick: Chapter 4," \$73.5 million.
2. "Shazam! Fury of the Gods," \$9.7 million.
3. "Scream VI," \$8.4 million.
4. "Creed III," \$8.4 million.
5. "65," \$3.3 million.
6. "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania," \$2.4 million.
7. "Cocaine Bear," \$2.1 million.
8. "Jesus Revolution," \$2 million.
9. "Champions," \$1.5 million.
10. "Avatar: The Way of Water," \$1.4 million.

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

## Veto puts Kentucky in thick of fight over transgender rights

By BRUCE SCHREINER Associated Press

FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) — Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear's veto of a bill aimed at transgender health care puts the state in the middle of a national fight, but with more immediate consequences as the state's looming election offers an early test on the state-by-state assault on gender-affirming care for minors.

The veto issued Friday set off competing messages likely to be repeated until the November election — when Bluegrass State voters will decide whether to reward the Democratic governor with a second term or hand over the governor's office to a Republican. No one seems to know yet how much weight voters will put on the transgender issue with the general election more than seven months away.

The legislation in Kentucky is part of a widespread movement, with Republican state lawmakers in other states approving extensive measures that restrict the rights of LGBTQ+ people this year, from bills targeting trans athletes and drag performers to measures limiting gender-affirming care.

Beshear framed the Republican-backed bill in Kentucky as an example of government overreach into parental rights. The sweeping bill would ban gender-affirming care for minors — one of many provisions that would affect the lives of young transgender people.

"At the end of the day, this is about my belief — and, I think, the belief of the majority of Kentuckians — that parents should get to make important medical decisions about their children, not big government," Beshear told reporters soon after his veto.

Kentucky's GOP-dominated legislature passed the bill by lopsided margins. Lawmakers will reconvene Wednesday for the final two days of this year's session, when they could vote to override the veto.

Republicans took immediate aim at the governor's veto, saying he veered too far for most Kentuckians. Republican Party of Kentucky spokesperson Sean Southard asked: "Is Andy Beshear the governor of Kentucky or California?" He predicted the governor will pay a political price for his action.

"Once this campaign is over, today may very well be remembered as the day Andy Beshear lost his bid for reelection," Southard said Friday.

Republicans could try to capitalize on the political divide over transgender rights to motivate socially conservative voters to flock to the polls in November, when state constitutional offices are on the ballot. Several leading GOP contenders for governor were aligned in condemning Beshear's veto.

"If the Republicans choose to make this a centerpiece of the campaign against Beshear, it's going to hurt him," said Scott Jennings, a Kentucky-based Republican political commentator.

Beshear cited his own religious faith as a factor in rejecting the bill, saying: "I believe every single child

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is a child of God.”

Twelve candidates in all are competing for the Republican nomination for governor in the state’s May primary. Beshear’s bid for a second term is drawing national attention to see if the popular incumbent can win again in the Republican-trending state. Beshear has won praise for his responses to devastating tornadoes and flooding, as well as a series of economic development successes.

The bill’s opponents say they’ve got the public on their side and predict Beshear will benefit. They pointed to statewide polling released last month showing a majority of Kentuckians believe decisions over a transgender teen’s health care should be left with the parent, not determined by the state.

“Folks who have never been involved with politics or legislation have been activated by the Kentucky General Assembly’s all-out war on LGBTQ kids,” said Chris Hartman, executive director of the Kentucky-based Fairness Campaign.

Social conservatives in Kentucky were dealt a setback in last year’s general election when statewide voters rejected a ballot measure aimed at denying any constitutional protections for abortion.

The transgender health care bill sparked emotional responses from opponents as it was fast-tracked to legislative passage by GOP supermajorities in mid-March. It would ban gender-affirming care for transgender minors. It would outlaw gender reassignment surgery for anyone under 18, as well as the use of puberty blockers and hormones, and inpatient and outpatient gender-affirming hospital services.

Doctors would have to set a timeline to “detransition” children already taking puberty blockers or undergoing hormone therapy. They could continue offering care as they taper a child’s treatments if removing them from the treatment immediately could harm the child.

The bill’s supporters say they’re trying to protect children from undertaking gender-affirming treatments they might regret as adults. Research shows such regret is rare. Gender-affirming medical treatments have long been available in the U.S. and are endorsed by major medical associations.

The bill would require school districts to devise bathroom policies that, “at a minimum,” would not allow transgender children to use the bathroom aligned with their gender identities. And it would allow teachers to refuse to refer to transgender students by the pronouns they use and would require schools to notify parents when lessons related to human sexuality are going to be taught.

Debates over transgender rights garnered considerable attention throughout Kentucky’s legislative session, but in Pike County in eastern Kentucky, the issue has been a non-factor, said Pike County Judge-Executive Ray Jones II, a Democrat who supports Beshear.

“It’s not even been an issue up here,” said Jones, a former state senator. “People are worried about inflation, they’re worried about the economy, they’re worried about jobs. Nobody’s called my office to discuss transgender issues.”

Summing up the potential political fallout from the veto, Jones said: “People who would vote because of the governor’s veto would likely not vote for him anyway.”

## **In Ghana, Kamala Harris ‘excited about the future of Africa’**

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

ACCRA, Ghana (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris was greeted by schoolchildren, dancers and drummers as she arrived Sunday in Ghana for the start of a weeklong visit to Africa intended to deepen U.S. relationships amid global competition over the continent’s future.

“We are looking forward to this trip as a further statement of the long and enduring very important relationship and friendship between the people of the United States and those who live on this continent,” Harris said.

The children cheered and waved Ghanaian and American flags as she stepped off her plane after an overnight flight. She smiled broadly and placed a hand on her heart as she passed by the dancers.

“What an honor it is to be here in Ghana and on the continent of Africa,” Harris said. “I’m very excited about the future of Africa.” She said she wanted to promote economic growth and food security and welcomed the chance to “witness firsthand the extraordinary innovation and creativity that is occurring

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on this continent.”

Ghana is one of the continent’s most stable democracies, but Harris is arriving at a time of severe challenges for the West African nation. Its economy, among the fastest growing in the world before the COVID-19 pandemic, faces a debt crisis and soaring inflation that is driving up the cost of food and other necessities.

A country of 34 million people that’s slightly smaller than Oregon, Ghana is also wary of threats from instability in the region. Burkina Faso and Mali have each endured two coups in recent years, and local offshoots of al-Qaida and the Islamic State group operate in the area known as the Sahel, which is north of Ghana. Thousands of people have been killed and millions more have been displaced.

The fighting has created an opening for the Russian mercenary outfit known as Wagner, which maintains a presence in Africa despite participating in the invasion of Ukraine as well. Mali welcomed Wagner after it pushed out French troops that were based there, and there are fears that Burkina Faso will do the same.

The economic and security challenges will likely be discussed on Monday when Harris meets with Ghana’s president, Nana Akufo-Addo. They also are expected to hold a joint news conference.

The two leaders have met twice before, both times in Washington.

During their first meeting, in September 2021, Akufo-Addo said “our big challenge — and it is a challenge of all those who want to develop democratic institutions on our continent — is to ensure and reassure our people that democratic institutions can be a vehicle for the resolution of their big problem — that is economic development as the means to eradicate poverty on the continent.”

Harris is the highest-profile member of President Joe Biden’s administration to visit Africa this year. After Ghana, she plans to visit Tanzania and Zambia. She returns to Washington on April 2.

The expanded outreach is intended to counter China’s influence, which has become entrenched in recent years through infrastructure initiatives, lending money and expanding telecommunications networks. Ghana, for example, reached a \$2 billion deal with a Chinese company to develop roads and other projects in return for access to a key mineral for producing aluminum.

Most of Harris’ events in Ghana will focus on young people. Africa’s population has a median age of 19.

On Monday, she plans to visit a skate park and co-working space that has a recording studio for local artists. Her husband, Doug Emhoff, who is accompanying her on the trip, will hold a town hall meeting with actors from a local television show and attend a girls basketball clinic.

In the evening, they will attend a state banquet with the Ghanaian president and first lady.

On Tuesday, Harris will give a speech and visit Cape Coast Castle, where enslaved Africans were once loaded on ships bound for the Americas.

Before leaving for Tanzania on Wednesday, Harris will meet with women entrepreneurs and Emhoff will tour a chocolate company that was founded by two sisters. The name of the company, ‘57 Chocolate, is a reference to when Ghana became independent.

Cameron Hudson, an Africa expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said Ghana has been “a bright spot in the region” but “it’s facing some very stiff headwinds.”

He noted that the country’s south, where the capital of Accra is located, is primarily Christian, while the northern area is mostly Muslim, and there are fears that militants could expand their operations there.

“These terrorist groups are able to prey on existing fault lines within these societies,” he said.

Hudson said Ghanaian authorities have intercepted weapons shipments and human smugglers. Sometimes there are bursts of violence, and the number of incidents spiked last year.

## Honduras establishes ties with China after Taiwan break

BEIJING (AP) — Honduras established diplomatic ties with China on Sunday after breaking off relations with Taiwan, which is increasingly isolated and now recognized by only 13 sovereign states.

Foreign ministers from China and Honduras signed a joint communique in Beijing — a decision the Chinese Foreign Ministry hailed as “the right choice.”

The diplomatic victory for China comes as tensions rise between Beijing and the United States, including

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over China's increasing assertiveness toward self-ruled Taiwan, and signals growing Chinese influence in Latin America. The new China-Honduras relationship was announced after the Honduran and Taiwanese governments made separate announcements that they were severing ties.

China and Taiwan have been locked in a battle for diplomatic recognition since they split amid civil war in 1949, with Beijing spending billions to win recognition for its "one China" policy.

China claims Taiwan is part of its territory, to be brought under its control by force if necessary, and refuses most contacts with countries that maintain formal ties with the island democracy. It threatens retaliation against countries merely for increasing contacts.

China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang said the establishment of ties proved that adhering to "one China" policy is winning people's hearts and is "the general trend."

"We inform sternly the Taiwan authorities that engaging in separatist activities for Taiwan independence is against the will and interests of the Chinese nation and against the trend of history, and is doomed to a dead end," he said.

The Honduran Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Twitter that its government recognizes "only one China in the world" and that Beijing "is the only legitimate government that represents all of China."

It added that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory, and as of today, the Honduran government has informed Taiwan of the severance of diplomatic relations, pledging not to have any official relationship or contact with Taiwan."

Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu told a news conference Sunday that Taiwan had ended its relations with Honduras to "safeguard its sovereignty and dignity."

Wu said that Honduran President Xiomara Castro and her team always had a "fantasy" about China and had raised the issue of switching ties before the presidential election in Honduras in 2021. Relations between Taiwan and Honduras were once stable, he said, but China had not stopped luring Honduras.

Honduras had asked Taiwan for billions of dollars of aid and compared its proposals with China's, Wu said. About two weeks ago, the Honduran government sought \$2.45 billion from Taiwan to build a hospital and a dam, and to write off debts, he added.

"The Castro government dismissed our nation's longstanding assistance and relations and carried out talks to form diplomatic ties with China. Our government feels pained and regretful," he said.

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen said her government would not "engage in a meaningless contest of dollar diplomacy with China."

"Over these past few years, China has persistently used various means to suppress Taiwan's international participation, escalate military intrusion, and disrupt peace and stability in the region," she said in a recorded video.

Her office spokesperson Olivia Lin said in a statement that relations between the sides had lasted for more than 80 years.

Analysts have warned over the implications of the newly formed ties between China and Honduras. Political analyst Graco Pérez in Honduras said Beijing's narrative would highlight the benefits, including investment and job creation, "but that is all going to be illusory."

Pérez noted that some other countries have established such relations, but "it didn't turn out to be what had been offered."

For decades China has funneled billions of dollars into investment and infrastructure projects across Latin America. That investment has translated to rising power for China and a growing number of allies.

In Honduras, it has come in the form of construction of a hydroelectric dam project in central Honduras built by the Chinese company SINOHYDRO with about \$300 million in Chinese government financing.

Honduras is the ninth diplomatic ally that Taipei has lost to Beijing since the pro-independence Tsai first took office in May 2016.

Taiwan still has ties with Belize, Paraguay and Guatemala in Latin America, and Vatican City. Most of its remaining partners are island nations in the Caribbean and South Pacific, along with Eswatini in southern Africa.

Some of these diplomatic recognitions were earned through Taiwan's financial and technical aid in the

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1980s and '90s following its exceptional economic growth, Lorenzo Maggiorelli, a professor at the political science and international relations department of Jorge Tadeo Lozano University in Bogotá, Colombia, wrote in his research.

In 1998, Taiwan set up a \$240 million aid fund for its Central American allies in a hope of retaining their support. Taiwanese businesses were also encouraged to invest in Central America to consolidate political ties, Maggiorelli wrote.

Tsai is set to begin a 10-day trip on Wednesday with visits to Guatemala and Belize. Her delegation will also stop in New York and Los Angeles, Lin said last week. Taiwan's Vice Foreign Minister Alexander Yui earlier said the purpose of Tsai's trip is to highlight the island's friendship with the two Latin American countries.

Wu said he did not have any evidence that the timing of the announcement was related to Tsai's trip but noted "China seems to be doing this intentionally."

Despite China's campaign of isolation, Taiwan retains robust informal ties with more than 100 other countries, most importantly the United States. The U.S. doesn't have diplomatic relations with Taiwan but has maintained that Taipei is an important partner in the Indo-Pacific.

## States' divisions on abortion widen after Roe overturned

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A group of Tennessee Republicans began this year's legislative session hoping to add narrow exceptions to one of the strictest abortion bans in the country, armed with the belief that most people — even in conservative Tennessee — reject extremes on the issue.

Tennessee law requires doctors to prove in court that they were saving a woman's life when they performed an abortion. Surely, the lawmakers thought, they could win concessions that would allow doctors to use their good faith judgment about when abortion is necessary to save a woman's life. But after a key anti-abortion group stepped in, the lawmakers had to settle for a stricter legal standard that moves the needle very little.

Like lawmakers in several GOP-led states who started the year thinking about moderating the nation's toughest abortion laws, Tennessee's lawmakers found no appetite among their colleagues for loosening the rules.

During the first legislative sessions in most states since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, lawmakers on both sides are dug in. Republicans are moving to make abortion restrictions tougher. Democrat-dominated states are moving to protect access for their residents and, now, for the residents of other states arriving for care.

"Abortion is one of the most stark examples of the political divide between red states and blue states, even when we know that people generally favor the middle on abortion," said Gretchen Ely, a professor in the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee.

Last year's overturning of the 1973 Roe decision meant that state laws banning or restricting abortion if such a ruling arrived took effect. Many were met with legal challenges. Currently, bans on abortion at all stages of pregnancy are in place in 13 states and on hold in another four because of court injunctions.

Lawmakers in most states have introduced abortion-related legislation this year. Republican-backed measures include funding for counseling centers that discourage abortion, bans on medication abortions and other restrictions. Democrats' bills include expanding insurance coverage for abortion and knocking back restrictions implemented in the past.

The legislative action comes after voters in six states — conservative, moderate and liberal -- voted in referendums last year and abortion access proponents prevailed in all of them. Polling has shown the public was unhappy with the overturning of Roe even as they also support some abortion restrictions.

But Mary Ziegler, a legal historian at the University of California, Davis School of Law, said anti-abortion groups are anticipating that abortion rights support will gradually diminish.

"There's a belief that people will be more open to more and more stringent bans the further we get

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away from Roe v. Wade being the law," she said.

Kelsey Pritchard, a member of the state affairs staff at Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, said those ballot measure losses motivated anti-abortion groups to get their message out more strongly. "It was a wakeup call for how much work we have to do," she said.

The ban currently implemented in Tennessee is among the most stringent. Instead of an exception for abortions to save the life of the woman, it includes an "affirmative defense" for doctors, placing the burden on them to prove an abortion was medically necessary.

Now, a scaled-back proposal is moving through the Legislature. It removes the affirmative defense language but still doesn't grant access to abortions in the cases of "medically futile pregnancies" and lethal fetal anomalies. Doctors warned the new exemption will do little to relieve worries about being prosecuted.

Tennessee Right to Life had already revoked its endorsement of one GOP lawmaker — seen as a key tool for winning over conservative voters — after Republican Sen. Richard Briggs called for changes while admitting that he voted in favor of the state's so-called trigger ban because he didn't believe Roe would actually be overturned. Now the lobbying group warned that it could do the same with others who tried to weaken the ban.

"This new amended bill only allows a woman to access an abortion if she's damn near on her deathbed," said Democratic Sen. London Lamar, who experienced her own near-fatal pregnancy loss several years ago.

In Kentucky, a Republican bill to allow abortion in the case of pregnancies caused by rape or incest also made no headway.

Other red states are looking to tighten the bans and restrictions already in place.

Florida, which currently bans abortions after 15 weeks, is considering banning them at six weeks' gestation — a move backed by Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who is expected to announce his candidacy for president in the coming months.

Wyoming recently adopted a ban on abortions throughout pregnancy — though its enforcement was halted last week by a judge — as well as a separate law specifically to bar medication abortions, which are the most common method of ending pregnancies in the U.S.

And South Carolina raised eyebrows when more than 20 GOP lawmakers sponsored a bill classifying abortion as homicide — opening the door for women to face the death penalty, a step no state has yet taken. The bill has since stalled in the House amid backlash, with nine sponsors removing their names as supporters. Instead, lawmakers are advancing an abortion ban with some exceptions.

In blue states, the push to protect abortion access continues.

In liberal Oregon, there are no legal restrictions on when abortions can be provided. But the Legislature is considering a sweeping measure that would allow someone to bring a civil lawsuit against a government agency for interfering with reproductive health rights and also for minors to access certain gender-affirming care services without parental involvement. Dozens of people gave emotional testimony last week on the bill.

With both chambers of the Minnesota legislature now under Democratic control, the state adopted a law to codify abortion rights that were protected under a 1995 state Supreme Court decision. Lawmakers have also pushed ahead with a measure to prohibit enforcement of laws, subpoenas, judgements or extradition requests from other states against people who get, perform or assist with abortions in Minnesota.

Several other blue states enacted similar measures last year through laws or executive orders, including Hawaii, whose governor signed one last Wednesday.

That brand of protections came largely in response to a 2021 Texas law that relies on private lawsuits to enforce abortion bans.

Ballot measures to approve or ban abortions could also go to voters this year or next in several states, including Maryland and Missouri.

But in at least one case, anti-abortion groups are playing a long game with those efforts.

In Ohio, they're trying to keep a ballot question to guarantee the right to abortion off the ballot in November — all while trying to get another question on the ballot. That question would amend the state constitution to require ballot measures have at least 60% approval to be adopted, rather than the current standard of more than half, making it harder for abortion rights amendments in the future to pass.



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Mulvihill reported from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. AP reporters James Pollard in Columbia, South Carolina, Bruce Schreiner in Louisville, Kentucky, and Julie Smyth in Columbus, Ohio, also contributed. Pollard is a member of the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit service program that places journalists in newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

## Gap grows between TikTok users, lawmakers on potential ban

By HALELUYA HADERO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — On the one side are dozens of lawmakers on Capitol Hill issuing dire warnings about security breaches and possible Chinese surveillance.

On the other are some 150 million TikTok users in the U.S. who just want to be able to keep making and watching short, fun videos offering makeup tutorials and cooking lessons, among other things.

The disconnect illustrates the uphill battle that lawmakers from both sides of the aisle face in trying to convince the public that China could use TikTok as a weapon against the American people. But many users on the platform are more concerned about the possibility of the government taking away their favorite app.

TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew said during a nearly six-hour congressional hearing Thursday that the platform has never turned over user data to the Chinese government, and wouldn't do so if asked.

Nevertheless, lawmakers, the FBI and officials at other agencies continue to raise alarms that Chinese law compels Chinese companies like TikTok's parent company ByteDance to fork over data to the government for whatever purposes it deems to involve national security. There's also concern Beijing might try to push pro-China narratives or misinformation through the platform.

"I want to say this to all the teenagers out there, and TikTok influencers who think we're just old and out of touch and don't know what we're talking about, trying to take your favorite app," said Republican Rep. Dan Crenshaw during the hearing. "You may not care that your data is being accessed now, but you will be one day."

Many TikTok users reacted to the hearing by posting videos critical of lawmakers who grilled Chew and frequently cut him off from speaking. Some called a potential TikTok ban, as some lawmakers and the Biden administration has reportedly threatened, the "biggest scam" of the year. And others blamed the surge of scrutiny on the platform on another tech rival, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

But few expressed fear of possible Chinese surveillance or security breaches that lawmakers continue to amplify as they look to rein in TikTok.

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., whose district is in the heart of Silicon Valley, said he is mindful of the value that platforms like TikTok provide to young people as an outlet for creative expression and building community. "But there's absolutely no reason that an American technology company can't do that," said Khanna, the top Democrat on the cyber subcommittee on House Armed Service. "America has the most innovative technology companies in the world."

He added that Congress should move forward with a proposal that would force platform's sale to an American company for continued access for its millions of users while "ensuring that the platform isn't subject to Chinese propaganda or compromises people's privacy."

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of Americans aged 13 to 17 use TikTok, and 16% of all teens say they use it almost constantly. It's because of TikTok's large user base that Lindsay Gorman, a former tech adviser for the Biden administration who now works as a senior fellow for emerging technologies at the German Marshall Fund, says the Biden administration will likely pursue every option short of a ban first. That would include the option for the app's Chinese owners to divest, which the Biden administration is reportedly demanding from TikTok if it wants to avoid a nationwide ban.

TikTok itself has been trying to leverage its popularity. On Wednesday, it sent dozens of influencers to Congress to lobby against a ban. It has also ramped up a broader public relations campaign, plastering ads all over Washington that tout its promises of securing users' data and privacy and creating a safe platform for its young users.

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Some popular TikTokers who speak out against a ban are concerned — and angered — about how it might impact their personal lives. Many earn income from their videos and have inked brand partnerships to market products to their audiences — another stream of revenue that could be wiped away if the platform disappears. They would also lose the social capital that comes from having a large following on the trend-setting app.

Demetrius Fields, a standup comedian who amassed 2.8 million followers on TikTok from posting comedy sketches, said he spent a long time building his career and followership on the platform. He has one active deal with the fast fashion retailer Fashion Nova, which allows him to earn an income along with the videos he posts on TikTok.

If the app is taken away, he said building an audience on another platform would be challenging for him due to the competition to grab user attention.

“The financial implications for me would be pretty terrible,” Fields said. “I would probably have to go back to working a desk job.”

Sarah Pikhit, an 18-year-old student at Penn State University, said she used to use TikTok a lot, but started cutting back when she realized how much time she spent scrolling through videos on the app. She still uses it, but mostly to post her own content, which she says she can do on other platforms. She said she wouldn't care if TikTok gets banned — but her friends would.

“They like the excessive scrolling,” Pikhit said.

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Associated Press writer Farnoush Amiri in Washington contributed to this report.

## Planets on parade: 5 will be lined up in night sky this week

By MADDIE BURAKOFF AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Keep an eye to the sky this week for a chance to see a planetary hangout.

Five planets — Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Uranus and Mars — will line up near the moon.

WHERE AND WHEN CAN YOU SEE THEM?

The best day to catch the whole group is Tuesday. You'll want to look to the western horizon right after sunset, said NASA astronomer Bill Cooke.

The planets will stretch from the horizon line to around halfway up the night sky. But don't be late: Mercury and Jupiter will quickly dip below the horizon around half an hour after sunset.

The five-planet spread can be seen from anywhere on Earth, as long as you have clear skies and a view of the west.

“That's the beauty of these planetary alignments. It doesn't take much,” Cooke said.

DO I NEED BINOCULARS?

Maybe. Jupiter, Venus and Mars will all be pretty easy to see since they shine brightly, Cooke said. Venus will be one of the brightest things in the sky, and Mars will be hanging out near the moon with a reddish glow. Mercury and Uranus could be trickier to spot, since they will be dimmer. You'll probably need to grab a pair of binoculars.

If you're a “planet collector,” it's a rare chance to spot Uranus, which usually isn't visible, Cooke said. Look out for its green glow just above Venus.

DOES THIS HAPPEN OFTEN?

Different numbers and groups of planets line up in the sky from time to time. There was a five-planet lineup last summer and there's another one in June, with a slightly different makeup.

This kind of alignment happens when the planets' orbits line them up on one side of the sun from Earth's perspective, Cooke said.

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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.

## **GOP states press voter photo ID rules, with unclear effects**

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — As Ohio's primary approaches, a strict new photo ID requirement is stirring concerns for military veterans and out-of-state college students, in Amish communities and among older voters.

Other Republican-led states are moving in the same direction as they respond to conservative voters unsettled by unfounded claims of widespread fraud and persistent conspiracy theories over the accuracy of U.S. elections. Critics characterize such requirements as an overreaction that could end up disenfranchising eligible voters.

Ruth Kohake is among those caught up in the confusion over Ohio's law, which is going into effect this year. The retired nurse from Cincinnati gave up her driver's license and her car in 2019. Now 82, she thought she might never have to step foot in another state license agency.

But Ohio now requires an unexpired photo ID in order for someone to vote, and she'll have to get that at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. The law adds passports as valid ID, but eliminates nonphoto documentation such as a bank statement, government check or utility bill for registration and in-person voting. Military IDs also are no longer acceptable when registering to vote.

"I'm very, very, very concerned that people are not going to know. They're going to come to vote and they're not going to be able to, or they're going to have to vote provisional," she said. "It's just a very upsetting time. Us old people, we have other things to worry about."

Of 35 states that request or require a photo ID to vote, Ohio is now the ninth Republican-controlled state to move to a strict law allowing few to no alternatives, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Fifteen states allow other ways voters can verify their identify, such as an electric bill, bank statement or signature match.

The number of states where voters face strict photo ID requirements is poised to rise in the coming months.

Nebraska lawmakers are in the process of establishing a new photo ID program after voters approved a requirement in November. In North Carolina, a photo ID requirement declared unconstitutional just three months ago could be revived by the state Supreme Court that has a new Republican majority. Meanwhile, a new Idaho law, which prohibits students from using college IDs at the polls, drew a recent legal challenge.

Wendy Weiser, vice president for democracy at the Brennan Center for Justice, said the new Ohio law undercuts the Republican narrative about the state having a record of clean and well-run elections.

"Ohio election officials have long been adamant that this wasn't needed, that Ohio had a good system for vetting and rooting out any fraud and the proof was in the pudding," she said.

Republican state Sen. Theresa Gavarone, a supporter of the law, said the change will make it harder to cheat.

It already has led to frustration and confusion, in part because of the fast-approaching state primary on May 2.

Republican Secretary of State Frank LaRose ordered counties to begin implementing the fast-tracked law so it would be in effect for the primary, though its start date falls within the early voting period. Waiting until fall, LaRose said, "would result in a clear violation of Ohio law."

That decision is not without complications. The free state photo IDs the law provides won't be available until April 7, the law's effective date, despite military and overseas voting already having begun and early, in-person voting set to start April 4.

At the same time, a legal challenge to the law by a Democratic law firm remains unresolved. The lawsuit alleges the law creates "needless discriminatory burdens," including by requiring photo IDs, making it harder to correct minor mistakes on ballots and restricting mail balloting.

Veterans' organizations and county recorders, particularly in the populous, Democratic-leaning counties that include Columbus, Cleveland and Cincinnati, have been vocal about the law excluding county-issued veteran photo IDs, though it does allow military IDs, to vote. They cost less and are valid longer — 10 years — than a driver's license.

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"People find reasons to fix something that doesn't need to be fixed," said Larry Anderson, 85, a veteran from Columbus who has found the veteran ID card a convenience. "Veterans could come back from the wars and not have a driver's license and not drive a car, and it just creates more problems for them."

AMVETS Executive Director Don McCauley said the issue has been brought to lawmakers' attention and he hopes to see it resolved before the next election.

Access issues also have arisen among the roughly 37,000 Amish in Ohio's Holmes County, where the largely conservative voters reject being photographed and often lack other forms of government ID.

Lawmakers allowed for religious exceptions through an affidavit that the law's supporters say will be easy to use, but Holmes County Elections Director Lisa Welch is worried that confusion and extra paperwork could add to the workloads of already stressed boards of elections.

"My biggest concern is the first time through, we get a whole bunch of provisionals (that must be processed separately later)," she said. "I'm the only full-time person in the office right now, and we can't do everything."

Holmes County Commissioner Joe Miller fears the new process could deter some voters.

"I want honest voting, I understand that, but a lot of the Amish don't have the photo ID and won't do a photo ID," he said. "So what the Amish do usually — they're pacifists, they don't fight anybody — they just walk away."

Ohio State University has advised its roughly 16,000 out-of-state students against voting in person on Election Day — for fear that obtaining the necessary state ID card could invalidate their driver's license in their home state and disrupt their financial aid and residency status. The schools suggests such students casting Ohio ballots do so by mail.

Backers of the photo ID requirements have widely moved away from the argument that such laws prevent voter fraud, which happens only rarely. The conservative Heritage Foundation's database lists only 26 convictions for voter impersonation fraud — the type deterred by photo ID requirements — anywhere in the U.S. between 2004 and 2022. In presidential elections alone, Americans cast more than 645 million votes during that period.

Jason Snead, executive director of the conservative group Honest Elections Project Action, told reporters in a recent policy briefing that robust voter turnout and Democrats' unexpectedly strong performance in the 2022 midterm elections disprove the idea that election security enhancements suppress voters.

"I would submit that, actually when you look at the sort of election integrity laws that are advancing through state legislatures and actually getting passed, what is happening in conservative states is far more mainstream than what we're seeing happen in liberal states," Snead said.

Liz Avore, senior adviser to the Voting Rights Lab, which tracks voting legislation in the states, said voters have made the opposite choice when they've had a say on excessively strict photo ID laws. Arizona voters rejected an effort to enact a stricter photo ID law last fall, for instance, and Michigan voters protected the vote there from photo ID restrictions.

So far this year, photo ID proposals also have failed in Virginia and Wyoming.

"A really critical distinction to draw is, yes, it's true that the majority of Americans are in favor of voter ID laws, and it's also true that the majority of voter ID laws are set up to allow people who don't have an ID available to still cast a ballot," she said.

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## California looks to spend some Medicaid money on housing

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — At the start of 2022, Thomas Marshall weighed 311 pounds. He had been hospitalized 10 times in five years, including six surgeries. He had an open wound on his left leg that refused to heal — made worse by living in a dirty, moldy house with five other people, two ball pythons,

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four Chihuahuas and a cage full of rats.

More than a year later, Marshall has lost nearly 100 pounds. His wound has healed. His blood pressure has returned to normal levels. His foot, which had nerve damage, has improved to the point he goes on regular walks to the park.

Lots of factors are at play in Marshall's dramatic turnaround, but the one he credits the most is finally having stable housing, after the nonprofit Sacramento Covered helped him get a one-bedroom, 500 square-foot (46.4-square-meter) apartment in a downtown high rise. He has hardwood floors, white pine cabinets and a glass jar on the counter filled with Bit-O-Honeys.

"To me it's the most important 500 square feet I've ever had," he said. "Living here has just improved my well-being in every possible way."

Marshall's story is part of a radical rethinking of the relationship between housing and health care in the U.S. For decades, Medicaid, the joint state and federal health insurance program for people with disabilities or low incomes, would only pay for medical expenses. But last year the Biden administration gave Arizona and Oregon permission to use Medicaid money for housing — a nod to reams of research showing people in stable housing are healthier.

Now California wants to join those states, building on the success of programs like the one that got Marshall housing. Gov. Gavin Newsom has proposed spending more than \$100 million per year in the state's Medicaid program to pay for up to six months of housing for people who are or risk becoming homeless; are coming out of prison or foster care; or are at risk for hospitalization or emergency room visits.

It would be the biggest test yet of using Medicaid money for housing. California has the nation's largest Medicaid program, with more than 13 million patients — or about a third of the state's population. California also has nearly a third of the nation's homeless population, according to federal data.

"It's a huge step toward breaking down the silos that have gotten in the way of taking care of the whole person rather than limb by limb and illness by illness," said Anthony Wright, executive director of Health Access California, a consumer advocacy group.

It would also be an expensive step. California is expected to have a \$22.5 billion budget deficit this year, and it could get bigger in years to come. Meanwhile the state's Medicaid spending is projected to increase by \$2.5 billion over the next three years, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office.

"What we're really doing is expanding the welfare state, which is going to become just a huge financial problem," said Wayne Winegarden, senior fellow at the Pacific Research Institute, a group that advocates for free-market policies.

California experimented with using Medicaid money for some housing-related expenses in 2016 when it launched a pilot project in 26 counties. While Medicaid did not pay for rent, it paid for things like security deposits and furniture.

In Marshall's case, he pays his own rent, using some of the \$1,153 per month he gets from Social Security and Supplemental Security Income. But Medicaid paid for his security deposit, bed, sofa, table, chairs and nearly 3 1/2 gallons of Pine Sol. Marshall said keeping his apartment clean is one thing that helped his leg wound to finally heal.

Over five years the program has reduced expensive hospital stays and emergency room visits for people on Medicaid, saving taxpayers an average of \$383 per patient per year, according to an analysis by researchers at UCLA.

Now California wants to go further by using Medicaid money to directly pay some people's rent. Democratic Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula, who chairs the budget subcommittee that will vet Newsom's proposal, said lawmakers are supportive. Arambula spent a decade as an emergency room doctor.

"I became very good at being able to get cockroaches out of people's ears," Arambula said. "The living conditions of many of our communities, especially in our rural communities, really can affect a person's ability to get adequate sleep, to be prepared for the next day and to stay healthy."

Advocates for homeless people say they welcome such programs but spending more money on rent isn't enough, noting the state still has a massive shortage of affordable housing.

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Kelly Bennett, founder and CEO of Sacramento Covered, said that during California's first experiment with using Medicaid money for housing services, it would often take up to eight months for workers to place a patient in an apartment. In some cases, people have waited for years to find a place.

"Even when you have the deposit money and you have some rental subsidy, it's still very, very challenging to find units — and to find units where the landlords will lease to our clients," Bennett said.

Marshall said he grew up in Sacramento and got a degree in dietic technology and culinary arts. But a 30-year addiction to meth landed him on the streets from the late 1990s through about 2006. He camped at an old landfill, often eating leftovers from people's picnics at a nearby park.

He applied for apartments at multiple subsidized housing buildings, but never made it off the wait list. It took him about a year to get his current apartment, where he pays \$186 per month with the help of a subsidy.

"I feel like I'm electric. ... I have power and ability to do things that I could not do for a very long time," Marshall, 64, said. "Whatever years I've got left now, I'm going to spend them up here in the glass tower."

## Factory or farm? Oregon may alter land use for chipmakers

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

NORTH PLAINS, Ore. (AP) — Aaron Nichols walked past rows of kale growing on his farm, his knee-high brown rubber boots speckled with some of the richest soil on earth, and gazed with concern toward fields in the distance. Just over the horizon loomed a gigantic building of the semiconductor chipmaker Intel.

For exactly 50 years, the farms and forests that ring Oregon's metropolitan centers have been protected from urban sprawl by the nation's first statewide law that placed growth boundaries on cities. Cities cannot expand beyond those borders unless they make a request and justify it. Approval by cities and counties can take months or even a few years (larger expansions also need approval by the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development).

But now, a bill being considered in Oregon's Legislature could authorize the governor to unilaterally expand those boundaries as part of Oregon's quest to lure chip companies and provide land for them to build their factories. The measure would also provide \$200 million in grants to chipmakers.

Farmers and conservationists are deeply worried about the proposal and what it will mean for a state that cherishes its open spaces.

"One of the reasons we bought our farm right here is that we knew that for 50 years we'd be farms, and everyone around us would be farms," Nichols said. "And now we're not so sure. Now it's up to one decision by the governor. And that's a scarier place to be."

State officials and lawmakers, on the other hand, are eager to bring more semiconductor factories to Oregon while billions of dollars of federal funding to promote the industry is available.

They were stung by Intel's decision last year to build a massive \$20 billion chipmaking complex in Ohio, and not in Oregon where suitable zoned land is scarce.

Oregon has its "Silicon Forest" — a counterpoint to California's Silicon Valley — and has been at the center of semiconductor research and production for decades. But Oregon is competing with other states to host multibillion-dollar microchip factories, called fabs. The competition heated up after Congress passed the CHIPS Act in 2022, providing \$39 billion for companies constructing or expanding facilities that will manufacture semiconductors and those that will assemble, test and package the chips.

Dramatically expanding semiconductor design and manufacturing in Oregon would create tens of thousands of high-paying construction jobs and thousands of manufacturing and supply chain jobs, the Oregon Semiconductor Competitiveness Task Force, said in a report in August.

But the task force warned that Oregon needs more buildable industrial land near infrastructure, talented workers and specialized suppliers to attract and retain semiconductor businesses, and called for "urgent legislative attention."

"This is about generational change," Democratic state Sen. Janeen Sollman, a chief sponsor of the bill, said during a recent tour of an HP Inc. campus in Corvallis, Oregon. "This is the opportunity that students

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will have for their future in going into these types of jobs.”

Today, thanks to a former Republican governor, you can drive from many cities in Oregon and within minutes be in farm or ranch country, unlike many states where cities are surrounded by expanses of shopping centers and housing developments.

Tom McCall, who served as Oregon’s governor from 1967 to 1975, had successfully championed protections for Oregon’s beaches to ensure they remained public. In 1973, he urged lawmakers to push for a tough new land-use law.

“Sagebrush subdivisions, coastal ‘condomania’ and the ravenous rampage of suburbia here in the Willamette Valley all threaten to mock Oregon’s status as an environmental model of this nation” McCall said in a speech before the Legislature in 1973.

The Legislature complied, passing a bill that established the nation’s first statewide urban growth boundary policy.

Washington state and Tennessee followed Oregon’s lead. In 1982, a ballot measure called for a repeal in Oregon. McCall, who was dying of cancer, campaigned against it. Voters upheld Oregon’s land-use system by rejecting the measure two months before McCall died.

Under Oregon’s system, an urban growth boundary designates where a city expects to grow over the next 20 years. Once land is included in a UGB, it is eligible for annexation to a city. Those UGB lines are regularly expanded. From 2016 through 2021, 35 were approved, according to the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development.

But the process takes time. McMinnville, in Oregon’s fabled wine country, battled for 20 years to expand its boundary, said Robert Parker, director of strategy at the University of Oregon’s Institute for Policy Research and Engagement.

Obtaining approval can take months or years, depending on its level of controversy, said Gordon Howard, of Oregon’s land conservation department. Appeals to the courts or a state board cause further delays.

That’s too long a wait for chipmaking companies, especially those that want to take advantage of CHIPS Act funding.

“Other states offer a more streamlined approach that is more in sync with the speed of the market,” according to Oregon’s semiconductor task force, whose members included then-Gov. Kate Brown.

Under the bill, the governor may designate up to a maximum of eight sites for UGB expansion: two that exceed 500 acres (202 hectares) and six smaller sites. Any appeals go straight to the state Supreme Court.

The Oregon Farm Bureau, which represents 7,000 family farmers, said the effort should instead focus on lands already within the urban growth boundary.

“The conversion of agricultural lands into paved industrial lands is a permanent destruction of our natural and working lands,” said bureau Vice President Lauren Poor. “Once it’s paved, the soil and its ability to sequester carbon, support our food system and generate income for Oregonians is gone forever.”

Washington County, where Nichol’s farm is located, produces more clover seed crop than anywhere else in the world, thanks to its unique soil and rainy climate, said Nicole Anderson, an associate professor at Oregon State University’s Department of Crop and Soil Science.

“I hope that science and consideration of our land resources are considered when this bill is voted on,” Anderson told the Legislature’s joint committee on semiconductors on March 13.

On Friday, the ways and means committee sent the bill for a vote on the Senate floor. The Senate will consider the priority legislation this week.

“I am thrilled to see this legislation pass out of committee and look forward to seeing it through to the finish line,” said Rep. Kim Wallan, a Republican and a chief sponsor of the bill.

Parker, the land-use expert, doesn’t believe its passage would mark the start of the end of Oregon’s treasured policy.

“Will there be more challenges and bumps in the road ahead? Yeah, I think so,” Parker said. “But I feel like it is so well established in the state at this point that it has the inertia to carry it through those challenges.”

## Tax the rich? Chicago mayoral hopefuls debate city budget

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Ken Kunz used to know everyone in the North Side Chicago neighborhood where he's lived for more than 40 years. But crossing paths with old friends is rare these days because longtime residents have been pushed out by new development and soaring property taxes.

When they do meet, the 64-year-old says, they exchange the same greeting: "I'm so glad you're still here."

Chicago has grown unaffordable for many working- and middle-class people like Kunz who have been "run over by development," as he put it. That's why he voted both in the February mayoral election and the upcoming runoff for Brandon Johnson, a former teacher and union organizer who has called for \$800 million in new taxes on "the ultrarich."

"It seems like he is at least willing to represent someone who makes as much money as I do," said Kunz, who operates his own delivery business and manages the property where he lives, which helps make rent manageable. "I just want as much representation as the developer who's building million-dollar condos around the corner from my house."

How to balance Chicago's steep financial challenges with residents' concerns about the cost of living is among the many issues separating Johnson and Paul Vallas, the former schools CEO and onetime city budget director, before the April 4 runoff. The two Democrats advanced in last month's vote, outdistancing Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

Just as in many major cities, the debate over who should pay what in taxes has taken on increasing prominence post-pandemic. Some see this moment as a chance to rebuild the economy and ensure more equitable futures for residents, many of whom were struggling to get by even before COVID-19 hit. In Chicago, the task is complicated by concerns over violent crime, including homicide rates that spiked in recent years and have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Johnson is a progressive who has been endorsed and heavily funded by the Chicago Teachers Union. He has the backing of Sens. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., along with other lawmakers and groups that have long pushed a tax-the-rich agenda.

Vallas is supported by many business leaders, including groups such as the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce and the Illinois Hotel and Lodging Association. He says he would rely on his budgeting expertise to find ways to cut spending and says Johnson's plan would hurt not just the wealthy but also businesses that provide jobs and industries the city needs to thrive.

"He's imposing taxes that are going to pummel the economy at a time when we could possibly be drifting into recession," Vallas said during a recent debate.

Chicago's fragile recovery is visible throughout the city.

Along the iconic shopping and tourist strip known as the Magnificent Mile, storefronts sit vacant, casualties of the pandemic, crime and retail trends that were moving away from in-person shopping even before COVID-19. In some areas, particularly in the city's predominantly Black neighborhoods, people have left, leaving blocks with boarded-up homes and empty lots.

There are some bright spots on the economic front. Google recently bought a state-owned building in the heart of the Loop to serve as a second headquarters. A long-sought casino was approved and will bring both jobs and revenue.

But Chicago is at a crossroads, dealing with historic inflation, skyrocketing property taxes and the lingering effects of the pandemic, said Jack Lavin, president and CEO of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce.

Lavin and other business leaders credited Vallas for his plan to address crime, a major concern among businesses. The union that represents Chicago police has endorsed Vallas, who wants to hire hundreds of officers, while Johnson has been criticized over past comments in support of "defunding" police — something Johnson insists he will not do. Johnson has called for investing more in areas such as youth jobs and mental health care rather than adding more officers.

"We need to do things that are going to encourage people to come back to the office, encourage people



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to get out and go to shows and conventions to come here, and tourism because that's a big piece of our economy," Lavin said.

Johnson says Chicago needs new revenue to offset a freeze on property taxes while investing in other areas, including housing and schools.

His plan includes reinstating a \$4-a-month-per-employee "head tax" on large companies, charging big airlines "for polluting the air" in Chicago and taxing financial transactions made in the city. He also wants to impose a so-called mansion tax, or real estate transfer tax on high-end home sales, and increase the hotel tax.

Johnson described the additional hotel tax as an extra \$1 per room that most people wouldn't notice. But Michael Jacobson, president of the Illinois Hotel and Lodging Association, said it could add up to serious damage for Chicago's bottom line because, without "palm trees or mountains," most of the city's visitors come for conventions.

Jacobson that when convention planners are shopping around for host cities, an extra charge on large blocks of hotel rooms — on top of already higher-than-average lodging taxes — could mean those planners go elsewhere.

Johnson, who turns 47 on Monday, has criticized Vallas for not laying out how he would handle Chicago's budget deficit without increasing taxes on people who cannot afford it. Johnson has called the 69-year-old Vallas, who was budget director and Chicago schools CEO under then-Mayor Richard M. Daley, part of "the politics of old."

"If he actually had a plan, he'd put forward a plan," Johnson said. "He's not putting forward a budget plan because he's going to raise your property taxes."

Vallas says he would look at the city's entire budget to find efficiencies and "work to avoid" taxes. The one thing he definitely wouldn't do, he said, is propose \$800 million in taxes "right out of the box."

Vallas, who also ran schools in New Orleans, Philadelphia and Bridgeport, Connecticut, says his experience makes him the better choice to handle the city's massive budget amid tumultuous times. He criticized Johnson, who serves on the Cook County Board of Commissioners, as lacking the experience needed for the job.

"Bottom line is, Brandon has run nothing," Vallas said.

But Kunz, the longtime North Side resident, said it's time for Chicago to try a new way forward. While the business community may support Vallas, Kunz doesn't think business has the best interest of the people of Chicago at heart. So, he figures, why not tax the rich?

"Who else are you going to tax, the average person making \$40,000 or \$50,000 a year? They're taxed out. They simply can't afford it," Kunz said. "Let's see what happens."

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Associated Press writer Claire Savage contributed to this report.

## Today in History: March 27, 'Godfather' wins best picture

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, March 27, the 86th day of 2023. There are 279 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 27, 1977, in aviation's worst disaster, 583 people were killed when a KLM Boeing 747, attempting to take off in heavy fog, crashed into a Pan Am 747 on an airport runway on the Canary Island of Tenerife (ten-uh-REEF').

On this date:

In 1513, Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon sighted present-day Florida.

In 1625, Charles I acceded to the English throne upon the death of James I.

In 1794, Congress approved "An Act to provide a Naval Armament" of six armed ships.

In 1912, first lady Helen Herron Taft and the wife of Japan's ambassador to the United States, Viscount-

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ess Chinda, planted the first two of 3,000 cherry trees given to the U.S. as a gift by the mayor of Tokyo. In 1945, during World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower told reporters in Paris that German defenses on the Western Front had been broken.

In 1964, Alaska was hit by a magnitude 9.2 earthquake (the strongest on record in North America) and tsunamis that together claimed about 130 lives.

In 1968, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (gah-GAH'-rihn), the first man to orbit the Earth in 1961, died when his MiG-15 jet crashed during a routine training flight near Moscow; he was 34.

In 1973, "The Godfather" won the Academy Award for best picture of 1972, but its star, Marlon Brando, refused to accept his Oscar for best actor. Liza Minnelli won best actress for "Cabaret."

In 1975, construction began on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which was completed two years later.

In 1980, 123 workers died when a North Sea floating oil field platform, the Alexander Kielland, capsized during a storm.

In 2019, Facebook said it was extending its ban on hate speech to prohibit the promotion and support of white nationalism and white separatism.

Ten years ago: Lawyers for Colorado theater mass shooting suspect James Holmes said he would plead guilty to the attack that killed 12 people and serve the rest of his life in prison to avoid the death penalty. (Prosecutors rejected the offer, but Holmes ended up being sentenced to life in prison anyway.) Former South African President Nelson Mandela was admitted to a hospital for pneumonia (he was discharged 10 days later).

Five years ago: Retired Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, in an essay on The New York Times website, called for the repeal of the Second Amendment to allow for significant gun control legislation. The co-owner of a Kansas water park and a ride designer were charged with reckless second-degree murder in the decapitation of a 10-year-old boy on the ride in 2016. (A judge later dismissed the charges, finding that state prosecutors had shown inadmissible evidence to grand jurors.)

One year ago: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused the West of cowardice as his country fought to stave off Russia's invading troops, making an exasperated plea for fighter jets and tanks to sustain a defense as the war ground into a battle of attrition. "CODA" won best picture at an Oscars ceremony marred by Will Smith's on-stage slap of Chris Rock. Smith would go on to win best actor minutes later. (Smith was later expelled from the movie academy received a 10-year ban from the Oscars.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Julian Glover is 88. Actor Jerry Lacy is 87. Hall of Fame racer Cale Yarborough is 84. Actor-director Austin Pendleton is 83. Actor Michael York is 81. Rock musician Tony Banks (Genesis) is 73. Rock musician Andrew Farriss (INXS) is 64. Jazz musician Dave Koz (kahz) is 60. Movie director Quentin Tarantino is 60. Rock musician Derrick McKenzie (Jamiroquai) is 59. Rock musician Johnny April (Staind) is 58. Actor Talisa Soto is 56. Actor Ben Koldyke is 55. Actor Pauley Perrette is 54. Singer Mariah Carey is 53. Rock musician Brendan Hill (Blues Traveler) is 53. Actor Elizabeth Mitchell is 53. Actor Nathan Fillion is 52. Hip-hop singer Fergie is 48. Jazz musician Tia Fuller is 47. Actor Emily Ann Lloyd is 39. MLB catcher Buster Posey is 36. Actor Brenda Song is 35. Pop singer-songwriter Kimbra is 33. Actor Taylor Atelian is 28. Actor/R&B singer Halle Bailey is 23. Classical crossover singer Amira Willighagen (TV: "Holland's Got Talent") is 19.