

Groton Daily Independent

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Ackman Thank You

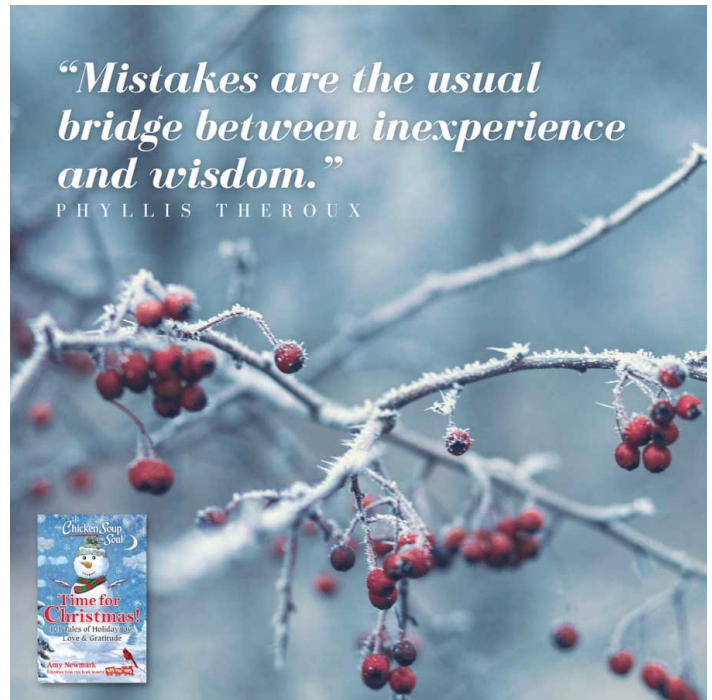
We have been blessed with words and deeds of comfort and we thank you.

May you have a joyous Holiday Season.
Family of Jim Ackman

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

The shop. cans.



Tuesday, Dec. 19

Senior Menu: Sloppy Joe on bun, oven roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, acini depepi fruit salad.
School Breakfast: Monty Cristo sandwich.
School Lunch: Chicken legs, mashed potatoes.
St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.
United Methodist: Angel tree times at church for delivery
Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
Girls Basketball at Aberdeen Roncalli: at the elementary school will be the 8th grade game at 4 p.m. At the High School, C game at 5 p.m. with JV and Varsity to follow.
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Wednesday, Dec. 20

Senior Menu: Goulash, corn, apple crisp, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: French toast.
School Lunch: Chef salad.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.; Longest Night Service, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Pre-school Christmas Program at 7:00 pm

OPEN recycling trailer is located west of the city
It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum

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1440

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Breaking news: At least 111 people were killed and more than 200 injured after a magnitude 6.2 earthquake struck northwestern China midnight local time Monday; see updates here. Separately, a volcano eruption has begun in southwestern Iceland, near the town of Grindavik, which evacuated last month.

An intense storm system battered the northeast coast of the US yesterday with high winds, heavy rain, and flooding, leaving 59 million people from Virginia to Maine under flood watches and knocking out power for more than 700,000 people. At least four people were killed in the storm.

US Steel Corp. agreed to be purchased by Nippon Steel yesterday in an all-cash \$14.9B deal, marking a significant move for the Japanese steel giant in the US. The acquisition is set at \$55 per share and will assume US Steel's debt. The merger, if approved, would retain the US headquarters in Pittsburgh.

Jailed media magnate and pro-democracy activist Jimmy Lai began his long-delayed trial in Hong Kong yesterday for charges under China's 2020 National Security Law. The founder of the city's long-running "Apple Daily" newspaper—which shut down in 2021—has long criticized Chinese policies and faces a life sentence if found guilty.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Actor Jonathan Majors found guilty of assault and harassment, faces up to a year in prison at Feb. 6 sentencing (More) | Majors dropped by Marvel Studios in wake of guilty verdict (More)

UEFA Champions League round of 16 set; see complete schedule and matchups for the knockout stage. Eric Montross, eight-year NBA veteran and former University of North Carolina star, dies of cancer at 52

Dress worn by Princess Diana fetches record-breaking \$1.1M at auction. James McCaffrey, longtime voice actor known for "Max Payne," dies of cancer at 65.

Science & Technology

Apple to halt sales of its Apple Watch Series 9 and Ultra 2 models in the US this week due to trade commission rule in a patent dispute over the devices' blood oxygen sensor technology.

Researchers discover new method Ebola uses to spread inside the body; the deadly virus creates tunnels between cells, evading treatments that may be outside the cell wall.

James Webb Space Telescope captures high-resolution image of Uranus, revealing 13 rings and nine moons.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.5%, Dow +0.0%, Nasdaq +0.6%); Nasdaq closes higher for eighth day (More)

Adobe scraps \$20B deal to buy design-software maker Figma, citing regulatory challenges in Europe and the UK; Adobe to pay \$1B termination fee to Figma. Yogurt maker Chobani acquires coffee shop chain La Colombe for \$900M.

Southwest Airlines to pay record \$140M to settle federal investigation into 2022 holiday service disruptions. Founder and former CEO of electric vehicle startup Nikola sentenced to four years in prison for making fraudulent statements to increase stock price.

From our partners: Big bonus for a big year. This card is offering a rare \$300 welcome bonus. Bonuses like this don't come around that often. That's why thousands are lining up for this card. Learn more now.

Politics & World Affairs

US defense secretary arrives in Israel for talks, including concerns over civilian death toll in Gaza. BP suspends shipments of oil through the Red Sea amid attacks from Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

Appeals court rejects former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows' bid to move his Georgia election interference case to federal court. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) signs law allowing state law enforcement to arrest migrants who cross the border from Mexico illegally. Judge temporarily halts removal of Confederate monument in Arlington National Cemetery.

Pope Francis formally signs off on allowing Roman Catholic priests to administer blessings to same-sex couples, provided the rituals don't resemble the sacrament of marriage.

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Groton Community Transit
205 E 2nd Ave., Downtown Groton
invites you to its
Holiday Bake Sale

Thursday, Dec. 21, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Coffee, cider and Christmas goodies will be served.

Groton Transit wishes you all a Merry Christmas and a Blessed Year!

**If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact
the Groton Transit dispatch office at 605-397-8661.**

Any and all donations are welcome!

2024 DOG LICENSES DUE BY 12/29/2023

Fines start January 1, 2024



Spayed/Neutered
dogs are \$5 per dog,
otherwise \$10 per dog

Proof of rabies shot
information is RE-
QUIRED!!

Email proof to city.
kellie@nvc.net, fax to

(605) 397-4498 or bring a copy to City Hall!!

Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have a dog(s) that were previously licensed!

Questions call (605) 397-8422

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December 19, 2023 - Half-Staff Alert - Entire United States

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor was an American icon, the first woman on our Nation's highest court. She spent her career committed to the stable center, pragmatic and in search of common ground. Defined by her no-nonsense Arizona ranch roots, Justice O'Connor overcame discrimination early on, at a time when law firms too often told women to seek work as secretaries, not attorneys. She gave her life to public service, even holding elected office, and never forgot those ties to the people whom the law is meant to serve. She sought to avoid ideology, and was devoted to the rule of law and to the bedrock American principle of an independent judiciary. Justice O'Connor never quit striving to make this Nation stronger, calling on us all to engage with our country and with one another, and her institute's work to promote civics education and civil discourse has touched millions. She knew that for democracy to work, we have to listen to each other, and remember how much more we all have in common as Americans than what keeps us apart.

As a mark of respect for the memory and longstanding service of Sandra Day O'Connor, retired Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, I hereby order, by the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, that on the day of her interment, the flag of the United States shall be flown at half-staff at the White House and upon all public buildings and grounds, at all military posts and naval stations, and on all naval vessels of the Federal Government in the District of Columbia and throughout the United States and its Territories and possessions until sunset on such day. I also direct that the flag shall be flown at half-staff for the same period at all United States embassies, legations, consular offices, and other facilities abroad, including all military facilities and naval vessels and stations.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this fourth day of December, in the year of our Lord two thousand twenty-three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and forty-eighth.

JOSEPH R. BIDEN JR.

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A FAVORITE CHRISTMAS STORY

This story was published in the following book:

Memories of a Grateful Past, Stories of Family and Friends 1860 to 1985. By Jermitt Krage

This is one of my favorite Christmas stories. My Grandfather, William (Bill) Krage was the town barber whose shop was a haven for storytellers.

When I was eight or nine, Grandpa Bill told me about a friend who was a neighbor. Grandpa said his name was Rummy. Later, I found out the man's name was Harold Romney. Here is Grandpa Krage's story,

"When Rummy was four years old, he traveled by train with his parents from Jackson Michigan to Ordway South Dakota, one of the first train stations of the Dakota Territory. Ordway was located on the Elm River about six miles from Columbia. Harold's dad brought three cows with them, as he had homesteaded a quarter of land (160 acres) for farming near Ordway. Rummy's dad built their home out of sod, as well as parts of an old wagon and a few cottonwood boards covered with prairie grass as a roof. They didn't have roads then, so they traveled in a horse-drawn wagon that had skids or runners made of oak instead of wheels. The oak came from Michigan as South Dakota had no oak trees at the time. Oak was the only wood that would take the punishment traveling across the hard rocky ground or the snow-covered ground. The oak skids could handle both easily".

Now Grandpa Krage went on to tell us the rest of the story.

"When Rummy was nine years old, it had been a very mild winter. It was about five days before Christmas and there was no snow on the ground. The Elm River hadn't frozen over yet. Then on the evening of the fifth day before Christmas started to snow. During the next four days, a good old fashion South Dakota blizzard with loads of snow and high winds came smashing down on them. Finally, on the afternoon of the day before Christmas, the wind died down and it stopped snowing.

Early that evening when it quit snowing and blowing. Rummy's dad was taking advantage of the brief break from the wind and snow. He asked Rummy to take the cows down to the river to could get a drink of water. Rummy dad's had a herd of cows had grown from three cows to seven cows and three calves since they had arrived from Michigan. He had given one calf to Rummy to take care of because the calf's mother had died when the calf was born. Rummy used milk from another cow and fed his little brown and white calf with a baby bottle until the calf was old enough to drink milk from a bucket. Now, eight months later, Rummy's calf who he called Bessie was getting pretty big.

"Rummy did as his dad had told him. He took the cows and calves to the river for water, about a quarter of a mile from their sod house. The snow was pretty deep but it wasn't too bad walking through the deep snow behind the cows and the three calves including Bessie. Once they got to the river, Rummy had to break through a thin coating of ice. He used a sharp branch from a cottonwood tree to create a hole so the cows could get water.

Anyway, while Rummy was at the river and the cattle were drinking water, another storm quickly started. It began snowing heavily and with the wind blowing hard it made it impossible to see. The snowstorm came up so fast that Rummy lost all sense of direction. Rummy wasn't able to get back to the sod house from the trip to the river. Well, to make the story short it soon became dark and Rummy was lost. He was unable to get back home.

Rummy's parents were worried sick. Time had passed, and Rummy didn't get home. It was snowing

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and blowing so hard, that neither his dad nor his mom dared take a chance to try to reach Rummy. They surely would have gotten lost and perished in this *South Dakota blizzard. All they could do was to hope dearly, that Rummy and the cows and calves could find their way back home. By midnight on Christmas Eve, Rummy's parents lost all hope. They knew there was no way for Rummy to have survived this deadly South Dakota blizzard".

"At about eight o'clock on Christmas morning, the blizzard had stopped. Rummy's parents had feared the worst; Rummy had frozen to death. They were sure of that. As soon as they could see, both his mom and dad immediately went down to the river to see if they could find their little son, Rummy. They searched everywhere. There were no signs of them. No sign of Rummy, or the cows or calves, not even tracks, anywhere! There was no body and no tracks along on the trail between the sod house and the River or near the area where the cows were to receive water. Rummy was not to be found.

Then at a distance, they saw seven mounds of snow. When Rummy's mom and dad walked toward the mounds of snow. The cows were covered with snow and looked like big snowbanks. The cows got up and started walking away. Yes, the seven cows lying on the ground were not far from river's frozen edge. The cows were still alive. But where was Rummy and where were the calves? As Rummy's parents continue walking along the river, they saw three more humps of snow. Could those three mounds of snow be the calves? Yes there were the three calves, and there was Rummy, snuggled up against the warm body of Bessie. The blanket of snow protected him as well as Bessie and the other calves from the harsh cold wind from the South Dakota blizzard. Rummy and his calf Bessie were alive and well. It was a very Merry Christmas for Rummy and his parents."

In the 1970's at the age of 90, Mr. Rumrey, was one of the oldest living citizens of Brown County, having lived there since he was three years old.

* South Dakota blizzard: In a South Dakota Blizzard, the wind blows like a tornado. The snow is so thick you can't see three feet in front of your face. You have to keep your face down because the snow stings your face like a snake and your eyes will freeze shut in no time at all. So you can't see or hardly breathe during a South Dakota Blizzard. Anyone attempting to travel by foot during a South Dakota Blizzard is most likely to end up getting lost and dying.

Maggie: A CHRISTMAS TALE (tail).

This story was published in the following book:

Memories of a Grateful Past, Stories of Family and Friends 1860 to 1985. By Jermitt Krage

Part 1.

Maggie is a pretty cool dog. She is a six-year-old yellow Labrador and is always ready to hunt these beautiful male pheasants. Would she be a good hunting dog? We didn't know. When hunting pheasants in prior years, Matt's dog Emma, was the primary hunter. Emma was Maggie's older sister. Maggie mostly followed Emma around in the corn fields and weed patches when Emma was carefully following those quick fleeting birds until they rose with a flare into the sky. Now it was Maggie's turn to shine.

We were driving west to South Dakota from Wisconsin. We talked about previous pheasant and Canada goose hunting trips to South Dakota with our now-deceased hunting dogs like Daffodil, Dakota, Jesse, and Willie.

It was Thursday, the week before Thanksgiving. The weather was mild with just a gentle breeze from the southwest blowing across our faces. If we walked the corn fields or weed patches from east to west, it would be much easier for Maggie to track the scent of the pheasants running through the brush. The gentle breeze made it easier for the hunters to shoot the wiry birds as well. We were excited and looking forward to a successful hunt.

As we started our drive through the first weed patch, everyone was pretty tense. Even Maggie was jumping up and down in the high weeds, looking for pheasants. Soon she had her nose down close to the ground, her tail happily swinging from side to side. Suddenly, a colorful cock, crowing as it rapidly climbed into the air about the weed patch. It was a perfect shot for Betty, who was closest to this fast-flying bird. Boom! The pheasant crumpled and floated to the ground. Maggie was right on it. She quickly retrieved the bird, laying it at Betty's feet. "Good girl, Good girl!" Betty praised Maggie as she took the bird from Maggie and placed it in the back pocket of her hunting coat.

This scene played out time after time as we continued walking through the weed patch until we came to an area where the ground was covered with about two to four inches of water. Maggie continue looking for pheasants in the water-covered ground, still covered with weeds. The hunters had to make a huge circle around the water-soaked weed patch. It was about another one-half mile to the end of the large patch of weeds, now standing in water. The water-covered ground made it difficult even for Maggie. But the two to four inches of water didn't stop her from trying to track the birds, although leaving very little scent for her to follow.

We kept walking west, trying to get through around the water-soaked weed patch. Maggie too seemed to have problems tracking the birds. We decided to turn around and return to where the pick-up truck was



Maggie and Betty

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at the east edge of the weed patch instead of fighting the water-soaked weed patch. So Betty called to her dog, "Here Maggie, here Maggie". We all waited to wait for Maggie to return, but she didn't. "Here Maggid, Here Maggie", Betty continued calling for her dog as we continue to wait. It all seemed so strange. Maggie had always come back to Betty whenever she called. Betty continued calling, but Maggie never returned. We waited, now an hour and then two. Where was Maggie? We decided Maggie must have continued through the water-flooded weed patch even though the water was often much deeper in places. No doubt Maggie was following one or more pheasants through the thick weeds, perhaps continuing going west toward the end of the mile-long weed patch.

After talking through our options, Betty stayed and continue calling, while the rest of us returned to the truck on the east edge of the weed patch. Once we reached the truck, we drove to the west end of the mile-long weed patch. We were pretty sure she must be at the west end of the weed patch if Maggie hadn't returned to Betty,

When we arrived at the end of the mile-long weed patch, Maggie wasn't there either. We called her name a few times just in case she was having trouble finding her way out of the weeds. When our efforts failed to bring her out of the weed patch, we called Betty on her cell phone. It was disappointing to hear from Betty, her wonderful dog had failed to return to her as well. Betty had decided to wait in the area where we last saw Maggie. She told the rest of us to continue with our hunt, as she wasn't going to leave until Maggie returned. One of us decided to stay at the west end of the weed patch as well just in case Maggie showed up, while the rest of us continue our hunt.

Our hunt was extremely difficult trying to flush those pheasants without a dog. We missed having Maggie help us track and flush the pheasants. When hours came and went, we became a little frustrated, as we were able to harvest only two more pheasants. Earlier that morning with Maggie's hunting skills we bagged nearly a dozen birds in less than an hour. We decided to take a walk back through the weed patch and check in with Betty, hoping Maggie had returned by that time.

Unfortunately, that just wasn't the case. Even though Betty continued waiting in the area all afternoon, into the evening, and continued to call her name, Maggie did not return. Some of us decided to continue the walk through the weed patch even if it was soaked with water until we reached the far west of the weed patch. Our efforts were futile, as there was no sign of Maggie.

It was late in the afternoon. With the sun dropping from the sky, darkness was settling in. We had no clue as to where Maggie may be. Our main concern was for Maggie. Was she hurt? Did she get caught in a trap? Did she leave this large swampy area and find a warm dry area where she could find food and a place to rest? We were sure she would return to the area during the night. Certainly, we would find her in the morning.

Part two

Many years ago, when I was hunting with my dad, Willie II, my hunting dog didn't return after the end of a drive (walking a field of corn). Dad and I were hunting with a large group of hunters. Of course, I was concerned and didn't want to leave the area until Willie returned. Dad suggested I leave my hunting coat near where we had started the drive. Dad was sure Willie II would be laying on my coat when we returned. After another second drive a couple of miles away, we returned. I was surprised. Willie was laying on my hunting coat waiting for us to return. Dad was right, just leave an item of clothing so the dog would pick up your scent and stay until you returned.

Before we left the weed patch that evening. I suggested Betty leave her hunting coat in two places; first

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where we last saw Maggie in the large weed patch and second where we first started that drive earlier that morning. I was sure Maggie would be laying on one of her coats in the morning when we returned.

We were up early the next morning to check to see if Maggie was laying on one of Betty's coats. We were greatly disappointed as again, Maggie wasn't there. We decided to leave the coats in place for another day, hoping Maggie would return. We continued to check these areas again and again throughout the second and third days. We also checked the many farms and fields within a five-mile radius to see if anyone may have seen her. We placed an ad in the local paper and with the local radio station. We were very concerned when there was no response to our efforts.

I recalled a time when Willy II, a wonderful hunting dog of mine was stolen from his kennel that was located behind our home in Sioux City, Iowa. It was a year later when I found him at the home of a brother of a friend who had taken Will II from his kennel and kept it as his own. I wondered if that was the case this time. Did someone have Maggie and is keeping her? We didn't know. In a way, it may have been better than to have her lost or to have Maggie badly hurt.

A week went by. We had to return to Wisconsin without Betty's wonderful yellow Labrador, Maggie. We left phone numbers and an address where we could be reached in case Maggie was found. We would drive the 540 miles back to South Dakota to retrieve her if anyone found Maggie. She was, after all, a very special dog.

It was a sad return home for Betty and the rest of us. There were signs of Maggie around the house and the yard. There was her dish for water, and another for food. There were her toys, a hard plastic bone, and her tennis balls, and there were her extra leashes. Betty missed those two-mile morning walks in the morning even with the winter weather. But most of all, she missed Maggie in the evenings while watching TV. Yes, Maggie would stand by the TV, usually during commercials waiting for a dog or dogs or other animals to appear. When an animal or even a cartoon appeared on TV, Maggie would bark at it. When the image was no longer on the TV, Maggie would walk behind the TV or into the other room, looking for that dog or the animals wondering where had they gone.

Final chapter:

After nearly a month of waiting and not hearing anything, Betty felt she had to give up ever seeing Maggie again. Does she continue to wait, or is it time to replace Maggie with another dog, perhaps another yellow Labrador puppy?

When Maggie was just a newborn puppy, Betty visited the home of John and Kimberly who was raising her along with eight other puppies. Maggie was just seven weeks old when Betty first saw her. But even then Maggie seemed to stand out. Betty still had another dog, Jesse, a German Shorthair Pointer, and wasn't sure she could handle another dog, a puppy. She decided not to take her, so she left Maggie, the puppy with John and Kim before returning 70 miles to Roy Lake where she was staying.

Late that same evening, Betty had a change of heart and made the decision. She decided she wanted that little female puppy. But she was going to leave Roy Lake early the next morning for Wisconsin. Was she going to drive the extra 140 miles round trip just to get that puppy? She called John and Kim and told them she wanted this little puppy. John said he would help Betty. He would bring the puppy to Roy Lake the next morning so Betty wouldn't have to drive those extra miles before leaving for Wisconsin.

At 8:00 A.M. the next morning and Betty was ready to leave but John wasn't there. John showed up

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about thirty minutes later with the puppy in a little basket, wrapped up nicely with a blanket, and placed her in the back seat of Betty's car. Betty was thrilled to be taking her little puppy back to Wisconsin.

After driving a hundred miles east toward Wisconsin or about two hours later, Betty stopped at a McDonald' in Morris, Minnesota. She decided to let the little puppy out of the basket to go potty. She was surprised to see the little puppy was a male and not the little female puppy she wanted. How could she or John make such a mistake? She was sure she told John the exact puppy she wanted. She didn't know what to do. Should she keep the little male puppy or should she call John and share what had happened?

She decided to call John. John was very understanding and agreed to return to Roy Lake with the correct puppy, the little female Betty wanted. Betty would return the 100 miles to Roy Lake to exchange the little male puppy for Maggie.

Now Maggie, six years later was gone.

It was a sad Christmas Eve, even with the bright Christmas tree surrounded by gifts to be opened. The conversation was about the many events of the year, including the loss of Maggie. Everyone wondered what could have happened to Maggie that morning while hunting that large weed patch in South Dakota. Would Betty ever know? Would anyone ever know?

It was very early the next morning on Christmas day. A dog was barking at the back door of Betty's home. It was still dark out, but the barking dog caused Betty to wake up. Was Betty just dreaming or did she hear a dog bark? Then she heard the dog barking again. It couldn't be Maggie but it sounded just like her. No, it couldn't be.

Betty rushed to her back door. The dog was a yellow Labrador. Yes, it was Maggie. Maggie was standing at the back door with her tail wagging fiercely. Betty quickly opened the door. Maggie seemed thrilled to see Betty. Betty with tears in her eyes wrapped her arms around Maggie. Maggie had returned home, but how?

It was a very Merry Christmas for everyone, including Maggie.

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CHRISTMAS 1939

This story was published in the following book:

Memories of a Grateful Past, Stories of Family and Friends 1860 to 1985. By Jermitt Krage

Preparation for the Drive to Grandma Jasmer's house.

Dad, Mom, Pudge, and I lived in a very small, three-room house on the bank of the James River on the West edge of Columbia, South Dakota.

Dad was proud of his 1929 Model A Ford. He bought the Model A Ford as a used car from his oldest brother, Walter. He had been working hard at two jobs, Rudy Buntrock's Hardware and Implement Dealership and at George Mole's Garage. He was still having a tough time making enough money to raise my brother and me and provide for a beautiful wife.

Dad was preparing the car for a long trip to Mom's mother's home, 4 miles southwest of Leola SD. He wanted to make sure the car was ready for the Christmas morning drive, 44 miles from our home to "Grandma's House". He went through his mental check-list: Gas tank: full,

Tire pressure: 35 lbs. PSI, Spare tire: pressure 35 lbs. PSI Oil: full, Anti-freeze in Radiator: Good for 50 degrees below zero

Heater: Okay: (A manifold heater off the motor was okay, but was without a fan) Windshield Wipers: Replace old ones with new ones each year before the Christmas drive to Grandma Jasmer's farm Flashlight (make sure the batteries are okay)

Check other winter emergency equipment: Tire chains, jumper cables, scoop shovel, extra boots, cap and mittens, blankets, and water jug all needed in case of an emergency.

In the meantime, Mom was preparing treats for the more than two-hour trip to Grandma Jasmer's, a widow who had lost her husband when she was just 30 years old. In addition, Mom was preparing food for the Christmas dinner for the next day. She knew we needed warm clothes for the ride to Leola, playing in the snow at the farm, and for Uncle Ernie's sleigh ride. She places four bricks into the oven of the cook stove to heat during the night. Now that the preparation for the early Christmas morning drive to Grandma Jasmer's house was finished, we could get ready for the Christmas Evening Church Service.

Christmas Evening Church Service.

St. John's Lutheran Church in Columbia was nearly full when we arrived. It was the biggest night of the year for the congregation. If you didn't arrive early, you didn't get a seat. You would end up standing in the entryway or sitting in the basement during the Christmas Eve ceremony. All parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and many friends would show up for the celebration of Christmas. The highlight of the evening was the children's service.

Each child of the congregation had a role in the Christmas evening ceremony. The children would re-tell the story of baby Jesus lying in a manger in the tiny village of Bethlehem through song, verse, and skits.

My brother Pudge (Orville) who was four and I at age 6 also had a role during the service. Each of us, with children of the same age, would say a verse and sing at least one song in celebrating the birth of Christ. Following the ceremony, the church elders and ushers would hand out a paper bag of goodies including an apple, peanuts in the shell, and hard Christmas candy. With our big bag of goodies, Pudge and I would rush home to see if Santa arrived at our home while we were at church. Sure enough, under the Christmas tree was a sled, just what I wanted from the jolly guy with the white beard and red suit. Pudge and I were sure we heard the sleigh bells of Santa's sleigh as we were running the two blocks home from the Church.

(This was an annual event for each of us until we were confirmed in the church)

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The drive to Grandma's house:

It was really hard for us to sleep with the excitement of the Christmas Eve Service, Santa's arrival, and the anticipation of going to Grandma's house. So we were up early. Dad had the car packed with presents for our relatives, food for Christmas dinner, and cold weather clothes. Mom had two bricks wrapped in a towel for my bother Pudge and two for me. We placed the bricks on the back seat floor of the Model A Ford to keep our feet warm. In addition to the heated bricks, each of us had a quilt to cover our legs, as the heat from the manifold heater, did not reach into the back seat area of the Model A.

Forty-four miles of treacherous road

Dad knew there were two extremely challenging roads that had to be overcome. The first challenge was the eight miles of the South-North Columbia gravel road going north from Columbia past the Sand Lake Refuge to Highway 10. The Columbia road in the winter was always treacherous. The relentless winds from the west would keep piling snow two-foot deep or deeper on road. There was little chance the snowplows would be plowing the Columbia road on Christmas morning, so we could expect the road would be partially blocked. But Dad had a scoop shovel and chains for the tires in case we got stuck. There were sure to be several snowbanks that would appear on the road out of no-where.

The second challenge was the north-south Jasmer road two miles west of Leola S.D, the two miles of country road from Highway 10 to Grandma Jasmer's house.

Dad was right, there were many snow drifts, 3 feet high or higher and some as long as forty or fifty yards. As we approached the first of many snow banks Dad said "I need to get ahead of steam so hang on". He got the car going about 25 miles an hour and plowed into one snowbank after another. The snow would fly up past the windows of the car, as the car hit each snowbank. The model A with the high frame seems to wade its way through the snow, sometimes ending up at a speed of less the two miles per hour as the car reaches the end of the longer and deeper snowbanks. Mom doing some back seat driving would tell Dad to "slow down". But Dad, knowing that with a slower speed, we would end up stuck and he would have to shovel us out and/or add the chains to the tires tried to keep the Model A moving forward. Dad said that if we got stuck on the Columbia road, that would be the end of our Christmas trip to Grandma's house.



Brother Pudge age 4 and me age 6.

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We didn't get stuck but it did take about 30 minutes to drive the first eight miles of the un-maintained road. Once we reached Highway 10, an east-west gravel road, it was less hazardous. Highway 10 was a wider road and more regularly maintained than Columbia road. It was thirty-two miles from the Highway 10 –Columbia Road junction to Leola. If all went well, it would take us about another hour to reach Leola. Dad's top speed with the Model A was around forty mph, but with the snow-filled road, his speed averaged less than 30 mph. Each mile closer to Grandma's house brought more excitement from the back seat riders.

We were traveling along pretty well when the snow started coming down, harder than ever, and the wind out of the west was beginning to draft even across the east-west highway.

Wow! A big barn suddenly appeared in the middle of Highway 10. How were we going to get around that big barn? It was really snowing hard, and it was hard to see, but the barn seemed to stay right in the middle of the road. Dad said "he was concerned someone may be moving a barn down the highway on Christmas morning. If so, with all the snow it would be impossible to get by the movers. "

Dad knew all along that when we got within a quarter of a mile from the barn, the road would take a sharp turn to the left and then to back to the right just in time to go around the barn. But this was a real relief to Pudge and me when we were past the barn.

It was a two-hour ride to reach Leola from Columbia. We were now 4 miles from Grandma's house. We had to travel two more miles west on Highway 10 and then two miles south on the Jasmer township road to the Jasmer farm. Once we got to Leola, we stopped at the Leola Café so Mom could call Uncle Ernie to check on the condition of the Jasmer Road. Uncle Ernie said "the north-south Jasmer Road was totally blocked by drifting snowbanks. There was no way Dad would be able to drive the Model A through the ten to fifteen feet high snowdrifts". He told Mom he would have to harness the horses and pull the Model A the last two miles from Highway 10 to Grandma's house. He suggested that Mom and Dad have a cup of coffee while he got the horses ready and checks the conditions of the road, as it had been snowing hard and the wind was continuing to build the drifts.

The last four miles

Uncle Ernie called just as Mom and Dad finish their cup of coffee and a piece of Kouken and Pudge and I finished a cup of hot chocolate and a couple of cookies. Uncle Ernie said the road was so badly blocked he would be unable to pull the car the last two miles. Instead, we would need to ride the last two miles in the sleigh drawn by his two-horse, Bert and Babe. We drove the two miles west on Highway 10 from Leola to the Jasmer road. Uncle Ernie was there with a sleigh and his two mighty horses, Bert and Babe. We would need to leave the car on the edge of Highway 10. So we loaded all the gifts, food, and clothes and placed them in the sleigh. Dad, Mom, Pudge and I sat on the straw that covered the floor of the sleigh and wrapped ourselves with quilts for the last two-mile ride to Grandma's house.

It became clear to Uncle Ernie that the road had become in-passible even for Bert and Babe pulling the sleigh. Uncle Ernie turned the horses off the road and headed across the pasture and the hayfield. There was less snow build-up on the field and it made it much easier for Bert and Babe to pull the sleigh with all the gifts and with us in it. Without road markers and the wind-driven snow, it was extremely difficult to see where we were going. Mom was afraid that without being on the roadway, we were getting lost. But Bert and Babe knew the way home so wasn't too long before we saw Grandma's house through the blowing snow.

It was great to see our Grandmother Jasmer in her long white apron coming from the house to greet us with her open arms. Aunt Tillie, Aunt Hilda and Uncle Hank were right behind her. Aunt Alvina, Uncle Clade, and their four kids, Violet, Harvey, Arlo and Romeo had arrived the previous day and was there to greet us as well. It had been nearly four hours since we had left our Columbia home and had driven the forty-four miles to Grandma's house.

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Christmas Dinner and a sleigh ride

The women of the house were busy preparing the Christmas dinner. Uncle Ernie butchered a turkey earlier in the week. Grandma Jasmer had the turkey stuffed with dressing and baking in the oven when we arrived there. Mom and her sisters were preparing the rest of the food, while the men were in the living room visiting and drinking a little homemade chokecherry wine. Soon, Christmas dinner was ready. It includes mash potatoes, creamed carrots, buttered peas, homemade bread, cranberries, dill pickles, and homemade cottage cheese. Desert included apple, pumpkin, and cherry pie, spice and chocolate cake, and peach and strawberry jello. The family prayed a prayer of thanks for the food and for the safe arrival of the members of the family. Uncle Ernie poured a glass of Morgan David Grape wine for all of the adults and gave a toast for good health and long life.

The children had their own dining table located in the living area, near the Christmas tree. After the children's plates were filled with food, we would sit around our table as our parents, Grandma Jasmer, Aunts and Uncles join together around the dining table located in the kitchen.

Immediately after dinner was finished and the kitchen was cleaned up, gifts were shared and opened, starting with the youngest member of the family. Names were drawn earlier at the family gathering during the Thanksgiving holiday to determine who would buy you a present. The name of each child was placed in a hat and adults in another hat. Each child would draw a name from the "children's hat", and adults from the "adult hat". The name of the person you have drawn from the hat is the person for whom you brought a gift. So it was always exciting to know who had your name and what your gift might be. It was, perhaps, more exciting to see how your gift might be appreciated by the person whose name I had drawn. But the highlight of the day was yet to come.

Once the sharing of gifts was completed, Uncle Ernie went to the barn and harnessed Bert and Babe. He included a strap of bells that were wrapped in each of the horse's neck. Even Bert and Babe seemed excited. They knew they would be pulling the sleigh, with Uncle Ernie at the reigns and happy children riding on a sleigh full of straw, across the hayfield, full of white fluffy snow. When the sleigh hit the four and five-foot snowdrifts, the snow would cover the riders as we sang Jingle Bells, laughing all the way. It seemed like a very short ride, but it was more than three hours before we started our way back to the farm. It was nearly dark when we returned to Grandma's house.

After the evening meal, Uncle Ernie added the lanterns to the sleigh and the adults took a sleigh ride to the various neighbors' homes. Our moms and dads were warmly greeted with a hug, a laugh, and a hot toddy or a glass of wine at each neighbor's home. When they arrived back to Grandma's house, it was a Merry Christmas for everyone that day.

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Groton Senior Citizens

November 13, 2023

Groton Seniors met for their potluck Thanksgiving dinner. Thirteen members were present. President Sarge Likness led the flag pledge and table prayer. Bingo was played after dinner. Pat Larson and Tony Goldade won black out. Cards were played after bingo. Door prizes went to David Kleinsausser, Darlene Fischer, Julie Shilhank. Ice Cream was served before going home.

November 20, 2023

Groton Seniors met two times in November with seven members present. Cards were played by the winners of the games. Pinochle- Sarge Likness, Canasta- Eunice McColister. Marilyn Thorson's birthday was celebrated with cake and ice cream. Door prizes went to Marilyn Thorson, Pat Larson, Tony Goldade.

December 11, 2023

Groton Seniors met for their potluck Christmas dinner. Twelve members were present. Bingo was played after dinner. David Kleinsausser, Marilyn Thorson and Bev Sombke won black out. Door prizes went to Ruby Donovan, Dick Donovan and Sarge Likness. Elda Stange's 100th birthday was celebrated with a cake by Bev Sombke and ice cream. Happy Birthday was sung.

Thank you

A special thank you to friends and family that came to help me celebrate my 100th birthday. Also for all the cards I received through the mail. God Bless you. Elda Stange

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Groton Area
Tigers

7 p.m., Tuesday, Dec. 19

City Council Meeting

7 p.m., Wed., Dec. 20

St. John's Lutheran

Christmas Program

1 p.m., Thurs., Dec. 21

Elementary

Christmas Program

Aberdeen Roncalli Cavaliers

Tuesday, Dec. 19: Girls at Aberdeen Roncalli

C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity game to follow

Thursday, Dec. 21: Boys hosting Aberdeen Roncalli

C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity game to follow

If you are not a GDI subscriber, purchase your \$5 ticket at GDILIVE.COM

The Life of Gordon Nelson

Gordon C. Nelson, 78, Groton, died on December 16, 2023, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Funeral services will be on Friday, December 22, 2023, 2 p.m., at St. John's Lutheran Church, Groton, with Pastor Jeremy Yeadon officiating. Visitation will be at the church one hour prior to the service. Burial will be at Sunset Memorial Gardens, Aberdeen, SD, following the service.

Gordon was born in Aberdeen, SD, on March 30, 1945, to Clarence and Margaret (Stefan) Nelson. He was educated at River Side Country School and graduated from Aberdeen Central High School in 1963.

He married Dorene Sager on June 29, 1963. To this union two children were born, Carmel in 1964 and Corey in 1970. He was a dedicated family man who especially enjoyed his children and his four grandchildren (who he would get in trouble with) and their activities.

Gordon and Dorene frequently traveled to Minnesota to attend their grandchildren's birthday parties, music concerts, Christmas programs, graduation ceremonies, weddings, and other important events.

Gordon was employed by Milbrandt & Grote Heating and Air Conditioning, Aberdeen, SD, from 1963 – 1970. He worked for Ell's Sheet Metal until 1987 when he and his partner purchased the business, changing the name to

Custom Sheet Metal. They also started an art gallery which focused on wildlife prints. He and his partner eventually sold both businesses with Gordon remaining part-time at the sheet metal shop for many years.

Gordon was involved in many community activities. He taught hunter safety in Aberdeen for over 35 years and was the official scorekeeper for all home boys and girls basketball games in Groton for 25 years. He served on the Groton City Council for several terms, drove the Groton Community Transit bus, and volunteered on the Brown County Fair Board for 6 years. He recently served on the City of Groton's planning and zoning committee.

Gordon loved his cars. He built a new garage for his "toys," and only got it because Dorene insisted on half of it for her woodworking shop. He enjoyed traveling and reading as well as working on jigsaw and crossword puzzles. He took many hunting trips to Canada, Wyoming, and Northern Minnesota as well as several salmon and trout fishing adventures on Lake Superior. He regularly visited with his Transit friends for coffee and to discuss local "news."

He and Dorene traveled with their children to many places in the States. During retirement, they took cruises to Alaska, Hawaii, Canada, the Western Caribbean, and the Baltic Sea countries, including Russia, as well as bus trips to all the Eastern European countries.

Gordon was a member of St. John's Lutheran Church, Groton, having served on the board of education and as an elder several times.

Preceding him in death were his parents, his brother Marvin, and a granddaughter Grace Anne Nelson.

Survivors include his wife, daughter Carmel (Gary) Willett, Carver, MN; son Corey (Brenda) Nelson, Rochester, MN; grandchildren Christopher (Cassie) Willett, Burnsville, MN; Nicholas Willett, Aurora, CO; and Hope and Isaac Nelson, Rochester, MN; sister-in-law Karen Nelson, Watertown, SD.; niece Nicole (Nelson-Williams) Pieske, St. Peter, MO; sister-in-law JoAnn Russ, Pueblo, CO; and two nephews, Ian Russ and Kyle Russ, Pueblo, CO, as well as many cousins and family members.

Pallbearers are Gordon's son-in-law Gary Willett, his grandchildren Christopher Willett, Nicholas Willett, Hope Nelson, and Isaac Nelson, and his nephews Ian Russ and Kyle Russ.

Honorary pallbearers are the members of his coffee group: Tyke Nyberg, Dave Blackmun, Jay Johnson, Marc Johnson, Dave McGannon, Randy Stanley and John Wheeting as well as his friends and co-workers at Custom Sheet Metal.



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It was a busy day at the Groton Community Center with the Feeding South Dakota Truck stopping in to drop off senior boxes. In addition to the boxes this month, they will receive a free T-Shirt and a blanket. Charlotte Martin is pictured here ready to hand out the merchandise. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Diane Warrington and Betty Dunker were packaging up Smoked Sulguni cheese that will be available at The Pantry. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Forces seek to gut public education by Marie Miller

Tough times ahead as certain forces seek to gut public education. An educated population is never the enemy; ignorance is.

Teachers don't want to teach kids what to think; they want to teach kids how to think. I believe everyone wants that. The problem is that, if you're going to think, you need facts to think about. Books are the gateway to facts, and however much you curate what you let kids read, you can't protect them from facts. Kids grow up and discover when you've been lying to them. I did, and I was not impressed.

I graduated from high school 50 years ago, and I'm still not over discovering well after I graduated that we set up concentration camps and threw American citizens into them during World War II, a war that ended less than 10 years before I was born, so it wasn't exactly ancient history at that point. This absolutely should have been taught. I should not have had to discover it by accident. I have not forgiven the generation that decided it would be OK to lie to me about something this big.

Do you seriously think today's kids will grow up to be all that different? You want their respect in the future, then don't lie to them today.

Learning some White people have done bad things is not learning to feel bad about being White any more than learning about the Crusades or the Spanish Inquisition was learning to feel bad about being Catholic. I want my actions in the future to be predicated on a foundation of solid knowledge about the past; otherwise, how can I help to create a more just world? Anyone here opposed to justice?

No??? I didn't think so.

As long as what kids are reading is age-appropriate and true and represents the past honestly, then it's healthy for them to be reading it.

Speaking of truth, this woman speaks truth.

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December 11-17, 2023

Welcome back to another edition of the Weekly Round[s] Up. For the past several weeks, I've talked about the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) in this section and our need to pass it before the end of the year. This past week, we got it done: the NDAA passed

both the Senate and the House, heading to the President's desk to be signed into law. We also continue discussions on border policies to move the supplemental aid bill for Ukraine and Israel forward. Here's my Weekly Round[s] Up:

Meetings this past week: Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine; Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase; Kristen Welker, host of NBC's Meet the Press; Patrick Collison, CEO of Stripe; Bruce Byrd, Executive VP and General Counsel of Palo Alto Networks; and Steve Bowsher, CEO of In-Q-Tel. I also attended several meetings with the Select Committee on Intelligence.

I attended a meeting hosted by my colleague Senator Tim Scott (R-SC) and the American Jewish Committee. We met with a delegation of family members and survivors of the October 7 attacks by Hamas in Israel.

This past week, I hosted our Senate Bible Study in my office again, where we discussed 2 Timothy 3:16-17. We had our Senate Prayer Breakfast, as well. Every year during the holiday season, we have one gathering where we sing Christmas carols instead of having a traditional speaker. It's a good way to bring some Christmas cheer to a Wednesday morning on Capitol Hill!

Votes taken: 11 – many of these were on nominations for judges and one for the National Cyber Director. As I mentioned, we also passed the NDAA, which you can read more about in the next section.

National Defense Authorization Act: The NDAA is a critical piece of legislation that authorizes funding for our national security and our military. The NDAA has passed on a bipartisan basis for 63 consecutive years, with members coming together to support our national security, our service members and their families. I authored 33 provisions in this year's NDAA, which includes several wins for South Dakota and the United States. Here are a few I'm particularly excited about:

Creates a congressional charter for the National American Indian Veterans.

Authorizes the DOD to conduct cyber operations against a range of Mexican transnational criminal organizations, drug cartels chief among them, and requires a related strategy on how to counter them.

Provides a 5.2 percent pay raise for both military service members and DOD civilian workforce.

Authorizes \$269 million for construction projects at Ellsworth Air Force Base, including \$34 million for B-21 Phase Hangar, \$160 million for B-21 Weapons generation facility and \$75 million for B-21 Fuel System Maintenance Dock.

Authorizes \$2.325 billion for B-21 procurement.

Authorizes \$66.8 million for the Long Range Standoff Weapon, which will enable the B-21 to provide even better conventional and nuclear deterrence in a contested environment.

Includes \$5.25 million in funding to complete the construction of the National Guard Readiness Center in Sioux Falls.

Hearings: I attended two hearings in the Select Committee on Intelligence this past week. As always,

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both of these were classified.

Legislation passed: As I mentioned last week, I introduced legislation with Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) to provide backpay to military officers whose promotions were delayed in the Senate. I'm happy to report that this bill unanimously passed the Senate and is now heading to the House of Representatives. The men and women who wear the uniform of the United States of America should not be negatively impacted by political squabbles. You can read more about this legislation and read a full list of cosponsors here.

Headline of the week: Senator Mike Rounds drives major investments and upgrades for Ellsworth Air Force Base in National Defense Authorization Act – KOTA

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen, Alpena, Cottonwood, Fort Pierre, Garretson, Mitchell, Rapid City, Watertown and Wessington Springs.

Steps taken this past week: 48,578 steps or 24.29 miles.

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Meade County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: SD Hwy 79 near Mile marker 120 between Vale and Sturgis, SD

When: 11:22 a.m., Monday, December 18, 2023

Vehicle 1: 2003 Chevrolet Cobalt

Driver 1: Male, 29, Fatal injuries

Vehicle 2: 2010 Peterbilt

Driver 2: Male, 56, Minor injuries

Meade County, S.D.- A 29-year-old man died Monday morning in a two vehicle crash in Meade County.

The names of the persons involved have not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates a man driving a 2003 Chevrolet Cobalt traveling on SD 79 crossed the centerline into oncoming traffic near mile marker 120. An approaching 2010 Peterbilt semi tried to avoid collision by braking and steering into a ditch. The passenger car continued toward the semi until they collided.

The driver of the passenger car suffered fatal injuries. Seatbelt use for the driver is under investigation. The driver of the semi was wearing a seatbelt.

Names Released in Lawrence County: Car vs. Pedestrian Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle vs. Pedestrian fatal crash

Where: US Hwy 16A, Mile Marker 41, within Deadwood city limits

When: 6:23p.m., Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Driver 1: Brittany Sneesby, 26, Lead, SD, Not injured

Vehicle 1: 2011 Hyundai Santa Fe SUV

Pedestrian 1: Brandon Pressley, 38, Lead, SD, Fatal injuries

Lawrence County, S.D.- A Lead, SD man has been identified as the person who died Wednesday evening, December 13, in a car vs. pedestrian crash in Deadwood, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates a 2011 Hyundai Santa Fe was traveling westbound toward Deadwood, SD. The Hyundai traveled through the intersection of US 14A and Main Street and struck a 38-year-old male pedestrian attempting to cross 14A in a crosswalk.

The driver of the 2011 Hyundai Santa Fe, 26-year-old Brittany Sneesby, was not injured. She was wearing a seatbelt. Charges are pending.

The pedestrian, 38-year-old Brandon Pressley, succumbed to his injuries.

Speed and alcohol appear to be factors in the crash.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

That's Life by Tony Bender
Christmas meditation

I fell asleep in front of the television the other night but was awakened by a song—Michael Buble, singing Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas on Saturday Night Live. It was so beautifully rendered, Nat King Cole and Mel Torme in heaven would approve. I watched and listened with rapt attention and felt something long dormant in my soul stirring again. I wasn't sure what it was. I fell drifted off again with the song circling about in my brain, Buble's rich tenor held gently aloft by the orchestra strings

I replayed the performance again this morning and got choked up again when he sang, "if the fates allow." I wondered why the line struck me. I think it is because even as Christmases march forever onward, the faces around the tree slowly, inexorably, change and then disappear, becoming memories we trot out seasonally for the most part. We smile at the memories, mourn a bit and then tuck them back away because life is for the living and the dead are anchors in both the best and worst sense of the word, with the power to hold us down or grant us a foundation upon which to build. The world turns. We breathe deeply, exhale, and then move aside for the next birth.

As I sit in contemplation this morning, a stray cat sits in the flower box watching me through the window. My coffee has gone cold. Perhaps I have the seasons confused, but Christmas has become for me a season for thanks. I've seen enough of them to recognize the inevitable changes and appreciate the present. I witness the joy it brings my children. I overhear whispered secrets. I see packages smuggled in. I try to hold these moments in my hand, but they are like water—they flow through my fingers, and time flows relentlessly on. Yesterday is history; today is all that matters. Tomorrow is just a promise. But Christmas—well, Christmas is eternal.

I gaze into the future for a moment, and for a moment the cosmic dictates are suspended and I catch a glimpse of my children's children and grandchildren celebrating some future Christmas around a tree that has not yet been planted. My blood. Something of me lives within them. They have learned well lessons that reach back generations past me. Everything is connected. I give thanks. The list of reasons is long, impossible to render.

Yesterday, I walked across the dormant grass in jeans and a T-shirt feeling the December sun on my back, the cool bite of winter on my bare arms. Winter's grip has not yet tightened. For now it is but a caress. Snow is scattered lightly like spattered frosting, huddling in the shadows, hiding from the sun. This is nature's way. Balance. The trees stand naked, branches reaching to the sky in defiance of the season.

My old dog lies in the sun sleeping deeply, living in her dreams, flushing birds in that ethereal world. There she is forever young. The stray cats leaps from my pickup bed, startled as I walk by, and then meows at me, rolls on his back as if to let me pet him, but rolls away as I approach, uncertain. A pheasant rises, clucking, from the ditch. The frantic drumbeat of wings. My old dog sleeps through it all. And I walk, giving thanks with each step for this holy day. This earth, my church.

I've changed I realize. Grown wiser, I think, grown sentimental for sure. How is it that Christmas songs can make me weep? Is this a sign of the maudlin that infects the aged or is it an awakening—a rebirth of my soul? If I am wiser, I am not wise enough to know the answer. I smile at the ghosts in my memories as they whisper past. I do not fear them. I do not fear that place. I know have already been blessed, and if it ended today I would be satisfied. Grateful. These are the things I meditate upon in my solitude.

My children return in winter's early nightfall beneath a cool orange moon and brittle stars, hustling secretly, noisily, through the door with packages and wrapping, chattering voices regaling me with the day's adventures. Suddenly the house springs alive in a way not possible when I am alone. My mysterious smile goes unnoticed as they blur past. I struggle to hold the moment, but it is like air in my hand—like sunlight, warm and shining, eternal, life-giving but impossible to contain.

My old dog rises and is rewarded with a treat. The cats circle, curious. The cockatiels scold the noise-makers. It is chaos. I bask in the warmth of their arrival and silently give thanks for the moment.



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'Deepfake' child pornography ban pitched by attorney general

Top state prosecutor also seeks to ban Xylazine, hike price of drug patches for defendants

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 18, 2023 5:25 PM

People who make, possess or distribute computer-generated child pornography would be in line for up to 10 years in prison and a spot on the South Dakota Sex Offender Registry under a bill proposed by Attorney General Marty Jackley.

The digital content ban would include imagery or videos built to resemble real children – “deepfakes,” in internet parlance – as well as imagery and videos that don’t target or resemble specific people, as generated through artificial intelligence or other software programs.

Possession of computer-generated child pornography is legal today under state law. When local investigators discover a tranche of digital child porn, there’s nothing a state’s attorney can do but hand off the investigation materials to federal prosecutors, Jackley said.

That’s happened more often in recent years.

“We’ve had several cases in South Dakota where we’ve had to go to the U.S. Attorney’s Office because we didn’t have a state statute,” the attorney general told South Dakota Searchlight.

In its draft form, the bill would add digital imagery to the state’s existing list of child pornography categories without any downward variation in punishment.

“It has the same addictive qualities, the same effects ... it’s of equal harm,” Jackley said.

The bill is one of four outlined in a Monday press release from Jackley’s office. Also on the docket: A bill to classify Xylazine as a controlled substance.

The anesthetic is commonly used on animals, but humans now lace it with fentanyl to create recreational narcotic cocktails. In May, attorneys general from 39 states and territories urged Congress to place the drug on the controlled substance list, but that’s yet to happen.

Jackley’s bill, as written, would make it a class six felony to possess the drug. Those caught with it on their person or in their system would face up to two years in prison.

The drug has appeared in Sioux Falls, Jackley said, but its legality makes it difficult for law enforcement to estimate its prevalence. Because it’s not tested for, he said, “we just don’t know” how widespread it may be.

The attorney general’s package of bills would also:

Allow deputy state’s attorneys to be a part of the state’s open meetings commission, freeing up busy prosecutors in more populous areas to have a voice on the commission without adding to their personal workload;

Clarify state law regarding the length of time people who have sex with minors before reaching age 21 need to stay on the sex offender registry before being allowed to petition for their name to be removed, and;

Hike the cost of court-ordered drug patches to \$70 a week for defendants, from \$50, to allow counties to conduct costlier tests for fentanyl.

“At \$50, counties are not able to do fentanyl testing without losing money,” Jackley said.

The attorney general’s bills typically appear early on during legislative session. The 2024 session will start on Jan. 9 in Pierre.

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

'Solar for All,' but not South Dakota: State one of six not applying for grants

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 18, 2023 12:32 PM

South Dakota is one of six states that hasn't applied for a federal grant program to support solar energy projects around the nation.

The Solar for All initiative aims to lower utility costs and promote renewable energy. The state governments that have not applied for grants are all led by Republican governors: Florida, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Nevada and South Dakota.

Gov. Kristi Noem's spokesperson, Amelia Joy, noted that 84% of South Dakota's energy comes from renewable resources and that the federal funding could come with strings attached.

"Governor Noem absolutely believes that the federal government's wasteful spending, much of it at the behest of President Biden, is the single largest cause of the inflation crisis that our nation finds itself in," Joy said in an email.

The Inflation Reduction Act, passed by Congress and signed by President Biden in 2022, earmarks \$7 billion for about 60 solar projects in the U.S.

While states such as North Carolina and Texas are pursuing the grants, South Dakota's inaction has frustrated environmental advocates.

Arlene Brandt-Jenson is with SoDak 350, a sustainability and climate change advocacy group. She said the organization is "disappointed in that news, but not surprised," given that Noem's administration has already passed up other federal funding aimed at mitigating heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions, called the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant program.

That program offered \$3 million to create a plan to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and access to a \$4.6 billion fund for implementation.

"In the end, it's the homeowners and residents that are hurt by the state passing up this money," Brandt-Jenson said of the solar grants. "It's just going to go to other states."

Cities could also apply for solar grants, but none in South Dakota did. Two out-of-state nonprofits have submitted applications to advance projects in South Dakota: the American Solar Energy Society and the Coalition for Green Capital.

The federal government funds nearly half of South Dakota's state budget of about \$7 billion. Nevertheless, passing on extra federal funding has become a hallmark of the Noem administration.

In 2020, the administration rejected extra unemployment benefits, provided by an executive measure of then-President Trump during the pandemic. The measure provided an additional \$300 in unemployment benefits per week, but it required states to kick in another \$100.

South Dakota also passed on a share of \$1 billion in nationwide cybersecurity grants for county and city governments, and a federal effort that would have provided \$7.5 million to feed low-income kids last summer in South Dakota through the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer program.

The Solar for All grants range from \$25 million to \$400 million, promising to bring rooftop residential panels, off-site solar projects, and solar installation jobs to areas largely left out of the renewable energy transition thus far. The Environmental Protection Agency expects to award the grants in March, 2024.

The deadline for the state to apply closed on October 12.

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

Census Bureau's proposed changes threaten to undercount people with disabilities, advocates say

One estimate suggests 9.2 million will be left out

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - DECEMBER 18, 2023 3:12 PM

The Census Bureau has proposed a major change to disability questions on its annual American Community Survey that advocates say will reduce the number of people who are counted as disabled by 40%, including millions of women and girls. The change in available data could affect federal funding allocations and the decisions government agencies make about accessible housing, public transit, and civil rights enforcement, they argue.

Catherine Nielsen, executive director of the Nevada Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, said having correct data is vital not only because it helps identify gaps in the system but because it affects federal funding levels.

"Many providers are not reimbursed at 100% for the services they provide," Nielsen said. "When we take into consideration this cut to the data, we're essentially saying we have even less people that will qualify for support. If we have less people that qualify, that in turn tells the Feds they have less of a need to support these programs. The snowball effect of such a significant change will be greater than most can even anticipate at this time."

Although some opponents of the change have said that the ACS disability questions needed revising because the survey currently undercounts the number of disabled people, they say they are worried that the new approach is worse.

Instead of the current yes or no answers to the six disability questions on the survey, respondents will be asked to provide a range of responses on how difficult it is for them to perform certain functions. The Census Bureau is recommending that only people who answer "a lot of difficulty" or "cannot do at all" be considered "disabled" by Federal terms, advocates say.

"Part of the issue with what they proposed is they are asking this scale and then excluding every person who says they have some difficulty in terms of these functions. Even if you say you have some difficulty with all of these functions, you would not be included as disabled," said Kate Gallagher Robbins, senior fellow at the National Partnership for Women & Families. "What does 'some' look like? Is that some of the time or some difficulty all of the time? For my own dad, who had a stroke and walks with a cane and a brace, is that difficulty for when he has those mobility aids or absent those mobility aids?"

The Census Bureau has stated that the revised questions will "capture information on functioning in a manner that reflects advances in the measurement of disability and is conceptually consistent with" the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health framework. The changes "reflect the continuum of functional abilities" and include a new question that includes psychosocial and cognitive disability and problems with speech, according to the notice for public comment.

Time for comment

When a federal agency proposes rules or changes to a standing process, it typically has a public comment period. The Census Bureau goes through a very long process where it tests the questions. Then it asks for public comment from stakeholders. The deadline for comments on the disability questions as well as other changes to the American Community Survey, which include asking about electric vehicles and changing the household roster questions, is Dec. 19. Many organizations focused on civil rights issues, including disability advocacy groups, are weighing in.

The Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities, which includes 100 groups, commented that the new approach will likely miss identifying many people with chronic conditions and mental or psychiatric conditions.

The National Partnership for Women & Families, joined by more than 70 groups, including many state entities such as the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, Disability Rights Iowa, and Nevada Governor's

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Council on Developmental Disabilities, also has commented. They say that there was not enough consultation with the disabled community and that the changes are overly restrictive, which could affect disaster preparedness responses, emergency allocations for the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIEAP), enrollment efforts for Medicaid and funding for State Councils on Developmental Disabilities.

Who will be left out

The National Partnership for Women & Families released an analysis on Dec. 5 that estimated the new questions would leave out 9.6 million women and girls with disabilities. The organization notes that women are more likely to have disabilities related to autoimmune disorders, chronic pain, and gastrointestinal disorders.

Robbins said she's concerned about the effects this will have on people who apply for help paying utility bills or who rely on Medicaid.

"When people go to apply for those [LIEAP] funds, what is going to happen? Are there not going to be enough funds left? Will they do another application?" she said.

States are also going through the process of unwinding a pandemic-related Medicaid policy, which allowed people to stay enrolled in Medicaid without going through a renewal process. People who are no longer eligible for Medicaid or couldn't finish the renewal process are being disenrolled. Robbins said data excluding many people with disabilities could affect efforts to re-enroll people.

"People are losing their Medicaid and we're in a situation where we don't know how to figure out who needs Medicaid and [Children's Health Insurance Program] and direct our efforts to make sure people don't lose health insurance," she said.

Eric Buehlman, deputy executive director for public policy at the National Disability Rights Network, has a disability that includes not having vision from the left side of his face and attention issues, according to the organization's website. He said the new questions could affect him and other people with disabilities who use public transportation if the data doesn't show a need for more paratransit programs.

"I'm not supposed to drive, so I use public transportation to go everywhere. But under these [current] questions, I would have checked yes, for a person with a disability as they currently are. But under the way these [new questions] are, I'm not sure I would consider myself to be incapable of doing any of the six questions listed," he said.

Buehlman said this could hit areas of the country that are more impoverished, which likely have a higher level of people with disabilities, harder than others. The connection between poverty and disabilities have been well documented, including by the Census Bureau. Its Supplemental Poverty Measure shows that in 2019, 21.6% of disabled people were considered poor, compared with just over 10% of people without disabilities. And in 2021, the American Community Survey found that the South had the highest disability rate. Of the five states with the highest poverty rates that year, four were in the South — Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi and West Virginia. The fifth was New Mexico.

"All of a sudden this connection between poverty and disability which does exist out there, doesn't appear like it is (under the new survey). And these are areas of the country that may not have as many resources ... It could have a higher negative impact in areas that are already underfunded," Buehlman said.

Timing of changes particularly bad

The change in the survey questions could also have an impact on civil rights enforcement, said Marissa Ditkowsky, disability economic justice counsel at the National Partnership for Women & Families. Disparate impact claims, which focus on the effect a policy has on a protected class, including people with disabilities, could be affected by a change in data, she said.

"They are literally using math in these disparate impact claims to make these claims," she said. "When you don't have the ability to do that, I can't imagine the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission], [the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services], all of these agencies that enforce civil rights laws, I can't imagine it will make their lives any easier."

Opponents of these changes add that the timing of this new approach is particularly harmful when so many Americans are experiencing disabilities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Long COVID symptoms can include shortness of breath, fatigue, and difficulty thinking and concentrating. In 2021, the Biden administration released guidance on how Long COVID can be a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Ditkowsky, who herself has Long COVID, said it seems counterintuitive to narrow the definitions for people with disabilities at this time.

"We've had one of the biggest mass disabling events in a long time with COVID-19 pandemic," she said. " ... But the questions don't necessarily get at a lot of the issues that Long COVID patients or patients with chronic conditions and people with chronic pain experience."

To comment on the changes to the American Community Survey go to [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov) and click on comment. Deadline to comment is Dec. 19, 2023.

Casey Quinlan is an economy reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. For the past decade, they have reported on national politics and state politics, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, labor issues, education, Supreme Court news and more for publications including The American Independent, ThinkProgress, New Republic, Rewire News, SCOTUSblog, In These Times and Vox.

How a new way to vote is gaining traction in states — and could transform US politics

South Dakota among states to reject ranked choice voting

BY: ZACHARY ROTH - DECEMBER 18, 2023 2:42 PM

With U.S. democracy plagued by extremism, polarization, and a growing disconnect between voters and lawmakers, a set of reforms that could dramatically upend how Americans vote is gaining momentum at surprising speed in Western states.

Ranked choice voting, which asks voters to rank multiple candidates in order of preference, has seen its profile steadily expand since 2016, when Maine became the first state to adopt it. But increasingly, RCV is being paired with a new system for primaries known as Final Five — or in some cases, Final Four — that advances multiple candidates, regardless of party, to the general election.

Together, proponents argue, these twin reforms deliver fairer outcomes that better reflect the will of voters, while disempowering the extremes and encouraging candidates and elected officials to prioritize conciliation and compromise.

Ultimately, they say, the new system can help create a government focused not on partisan point-scoring but on delivering tangible results that improve voters' lives.

Alaska, the only state currently using RCV-plus-Final Four or Final-Five, appears to be seeing some benefits to its political culture already: After years of partisan rancor, both legislative chambers are now controlled by bipartisan majorities eager to find common ground and respond to the needs of voters, say lawmakers in the state who have embraced the new system.

A slew of other states could soon follow in Alaska's footsteps. Last year, Nevada voters approved a constitutional amendment that would create an RCV-plus-Final-Five system — for the measure to take effect, voters must approve it again next year.

Efforts also are underway to get RCV-plus-Final-Five on Arizona's 2024 ballot, and RCV-plus-Final-Four on the 2026 ballots in Colorado and Idaho — where organizers announced Wednesday that they've gathered 50,000 signatures (they need around 63,000 to qualify). Even Wisconsin Republicans, who in the redistricting sphere have fought reform efforts tooth and nail, in December held a hearing for bipartisan legislation that would create RCV-plus-Final-Five, though its prospects appear dim.

Meanwhile, Oregon voters will decide next year whether to adopt RCV alone. And this year, Minnesota

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and Illinois lawmakers passed bills to study RCV, while Connecticut approved a measure that allows local governments to use it.

There are even flickers of interest at the national level. In December alone, two leading Washington, D.C. think tanks that often find themselves on opposite sides — the conservative American Enterprise Institute and the liberal Center for American Progress — each held separate panel discussions that considered RCV-plus-Final-Four/Five.

Katherine Gehl, the founder of the Institute for Political Innovation, and the designer of the Final Four/Five system, calls RCV-plus-Final-Five “transformational.” (Her organization now says advancing five candidates to the general works best, by giving voters more choices.)

“There’s a huge pressure on reformers to say, this is not a silver bullet,” said Gehl. “And OK, I get that.”

But, she added, “I think it’s as close to a silver bullet as you can come.”

Meanwhile, a backlash to reform is brewing, with several Republican-led states banning RCV in recent years. A coalition of national conservative election groups last month warned Wisconsin’s legislative leaders that RCV and Final Five are “intended to dramatically push our politics to the Left.”

Understanding the process

Here’s how RCV-plus-Final-Four/Five works.

In the primary election, candidates from all parties compete against each other, with voters picking only their top choice, as in a conventional election. The top four or five finishers, regardless of party, advance to the general.

In the general, voters use RCV to pick the winner. They fill out their ballot by ranking as many of the candidates as they want, by order of preference.

If no candidate wins a majority of first-place votes, the candidate who finished last is eliminated, and his or her supporters’ second-place votes are allocated. If there’s still no candidate with a majority, the process is repeated with the next-to-last candidate. This continues until someone gains a majority and is declared the winner.

Supporters of the system say the Final Four/Five primary gives a voice to a broader share of voters, while the use of RCV in the general helps ensure a fairer result. Under the current system, two similar candidates together may win a clear majority but split voters between them, allowing a third candidate to win with a minority of votes.

But even more important, many advocates argue, is how the two reforms together can change how candidates and elected officials of all stripes approach their jobs, by adjusting the incentive structure they operate under.

Increasingly, many states and districts are solidly red or blue, meaning the general election is uncompetitive, and the key race takes place in the primary. That’s a problem, because the primary electorate is by and large smaller, more partisan and more extreme than the general electorate.

Right now, with politicians worrying more about the primary than the general, they’re more focused on playing to their base than on reaching beyond it and solving problems, critics argue. It isn’t hard to find evidence for this lately, both in Washington and in state capitals across the country.

By allowing multiple candidates to advance, Final Four/Five shifts the crucial election from the primary to the general. And RCV means the votes of Democrats in red districts and Republicans in blue ones still matter, even if their top choice remains unlikely to win.

Together, it means candidates are rewarded for paying attention to the entire general electorate, not just a small slice of staunch supporters. As a result, it encourages candidates — and elected officials, once in office — toward moderation and problem-solving, and away from extremism.

“People do what it takes to get and keep their jobs,” said Gehl, the Final Four/Five designer. “So if you change who hires and fires, which is to say, November voters instead of primary voters, and you change the system so that there’s real competition in November every time, even once you’re an incumbent, that forces accountability.”

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A success story from the Last Frontier?

The experience of Alaska, whose voters passed an RCV-plus-Final-Four system in 2020, offers an illustration.

At its first use in 2022, U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, an independent-minded Republican distrusted by the party's conservative wing, was reelected. Mary Peltola, a moderate Democrat who kept in place her Republican predecessor's chief of staff, was elected to the U.S. House, defeating Sarah Palin, the conservative Republican former governor. (Murkowski and Peltola endorsed each other).

Meanwhile, voters reelected Gov. Mike Dunleavy, a conservative Republican – suggesting, reformers say, that the system can produce a wide range of outcomes.

And more women ran in 2022 than in the five previous cycles combined — highlighting how allowing anyone to run, regardless of party, can boost opportunities for under-represented groups.

But the effect on how candidates and lawmakers have approached their jobs has been more dramatic still, advocates say.

Senate Majority Leader Cathy Giessel, a Republican, told the Center for American Progress event that, after angering GOP voters by working collaboratively with Democrats, she lost her 2020 primary, held under the old election system, to a staunch conservative. Giessel had been in office since 2011.

Giessel said that when she ran again last year under RCV-plus-Final-Four, her campaign didn't even buy the database showing voters' party affiliations that most candidates rely on to identify supporters, because she needed to target voters of all stripes. Helped by being the second choice of many Democratic voters in the general election, Giessel won back her seat.

"You're requiring us as candidates to be much more authentic," said Giessel of the new system. "We're not speaking to a party platform anymore. We're speaking to the citizens."

Giessel now leads a bipartisan majority coalition, formed within days of the election. Members have focused on consensus issues that are priorities for voters, including boosting education funding, lowering the cost of energy and passing a balanced budget.

"We have seen much more collaboration on the budget," said Giessel. "There's a much more open process now, understanding that everyone needs to have input."

An analysis by the R Street Institute, a center-right Washington, D.C. think tank, found that Alaska's new election system "gave citizens greater choice and elevated the most broadly appealing candidates, in turn improving representation."

Reformers in Nevada — gearing up for next year's campaign to pass RCV-plus-Final-Five a second time after it won with 53% of the vote last year — have noticed Alaska's early success.

Over 40% of all registered voters in the Silver State aren't affiliated with a major party, and the figure is growing. It was these voters' frustration over being denied a voice in the state's taxpayer-funded closed primaries that initially drove the push for reform, said Mike Draper, the communications director for Nevada Voters First, a political action committee that organized the ballot measure.

As in Alaska and elsewhere, there was also a related concern about politicians playing only to their base.

"Candidates and electeds, through no fault of their own, are not incentivized to ... work to solve problems," said Draper. "The primary incentive is to make sure they stay in the good graces either of the party, or of that fringe group that's active in the primaries."

Top figures in both major parties, including Nevada's Republican governor and its two Democratic U.S. senators, oppose reform. A lawsuit brought by Democratic super-lawyer Marc Elias that aimed to keep the measure off the 2022 ballot was rejected by a judge.

'A scheme of the Left?'

Though elected Democrats in Nevada and some other blue states have come out against reform, the most vocal opponents have been red-state Republicans and national conservative groups. They argue it would confuse voters and further reduce confidence in election results.

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Some even see a progressive plot. An October analysis by the conservative Foundation for Government Accountability called RCV a “scheme of the Left to disenfranchise voters and elect more Democrats.”

Florida, Tennessee, Idaho, Montana, and South Dakota — all Republican-controlled states — have passed legislation in recent years to ban RCV. Arizona’s GOP-controlled legislature also passed an RCV ban, but it was vetoed by Gov. Katie Hobbs, a Democrat.

In Alaska, conservatives have launched a campaign to advance a ballot measure repealing their state’s reform. Palin, who has blamed the system for her loss to Peltola last year, calling it “wack,” is playing a prominent role in the effort.

Still, advocates say there are also signs of emerging interest among some Republicans in other states.

Last year, the GOP lost several winnable statewide races after primary voters nominated extremists like Doug Mastriano in Pennsylvania and Kari Lake in Arizona. Now, some in the party think reform could allow them to advance more electable candidates.

“Even among Republicans, I’ve had my fair share of conversations where they are starting to recognize that the system isn’t putting forward candidates who are necessarily the best general election winners,” said Matt Germer, an associate director and elections fellow at the R Street Institute.

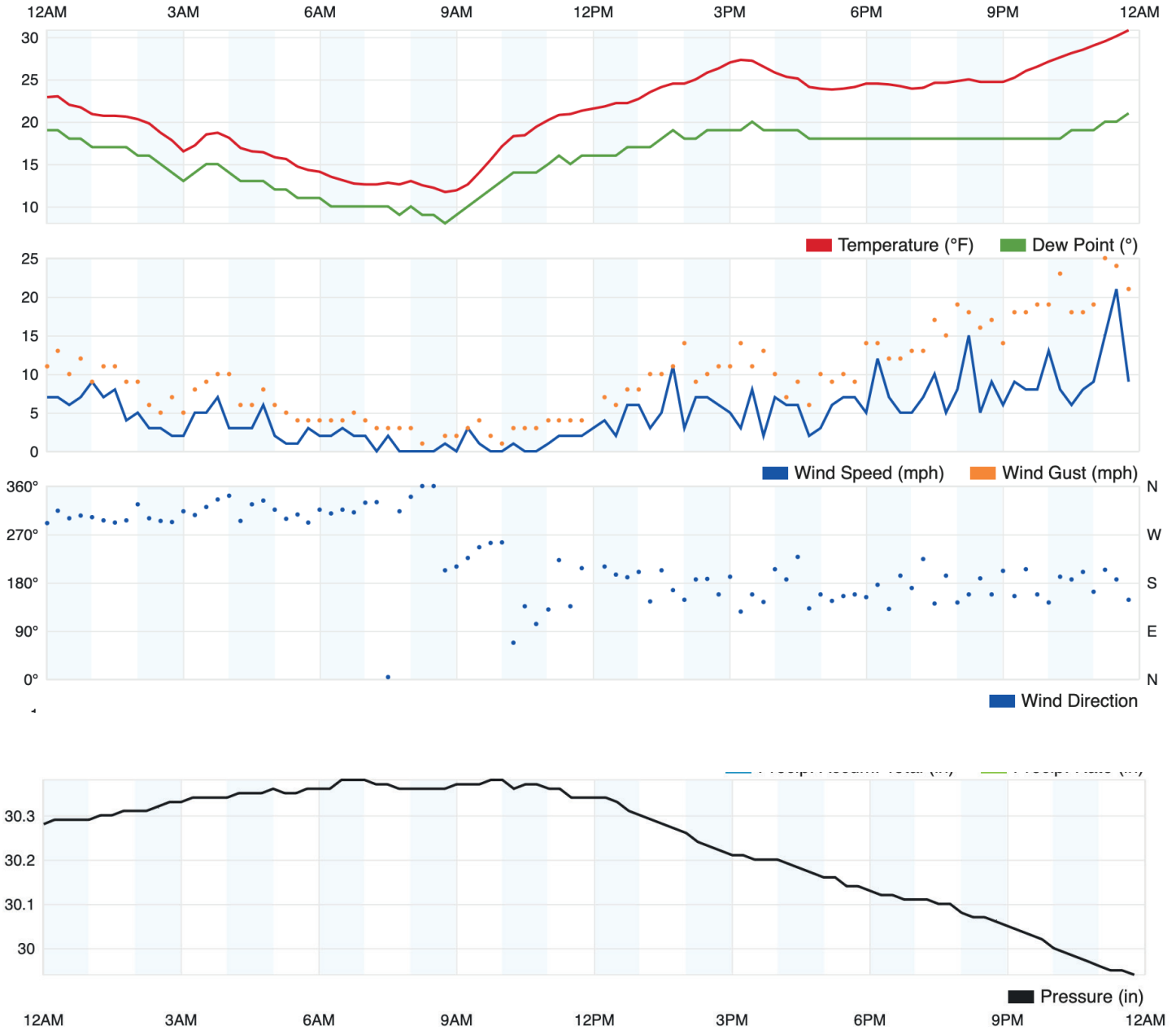
“So there’s even some growing interest among Republican electeds to say, hey, what we’re doing now is not growing our party. And if we really want to change our country, we’re going to need to grow our party, and that means appealing to enough voters to win elections.”

Zachary Roth is the National Democracy Reporter for States Newsroom.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Tue Dec 19	Wed Dec 20	Thu Dec 21	Fri Dec 22	Sat Dec 23	Sun Dec 24	Mon Dec 25
40°F 21°F	41°F 26°F	43°F 28°F	44°F 30°F	50°F 39°F	47°F 31°F	39°F 25°F
S 9 MPH	NE 8 MPH	SE 7 MPH	SSW 6 MPH	SE 12 MPH	ESE 14 MPH 50%	NE 12 MPH 50%

More Above Average Temps

Tonight

Lows: 17-24°F

Tuesday

Highs: 39-49°F

Wednesday

Highs: 38-43°F

Aberdeen, SD
weather.gov/aberndeen

Temperatures through the rest of the week are expected to be as much as 20 to 25 degrees above average in most locations (I know, bummer for those wanting snow, sorry). Expect some clear skies Tuesday and a few clouds on Wednesday.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 30 °F at 11:29 PM

Low Temp: 12 °F at 8:49 AM

Wind: 25 mph at 11:13 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 57 in 1893

Record Low: -29 in 1916

Average High: 27

Average Low: 7

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.36

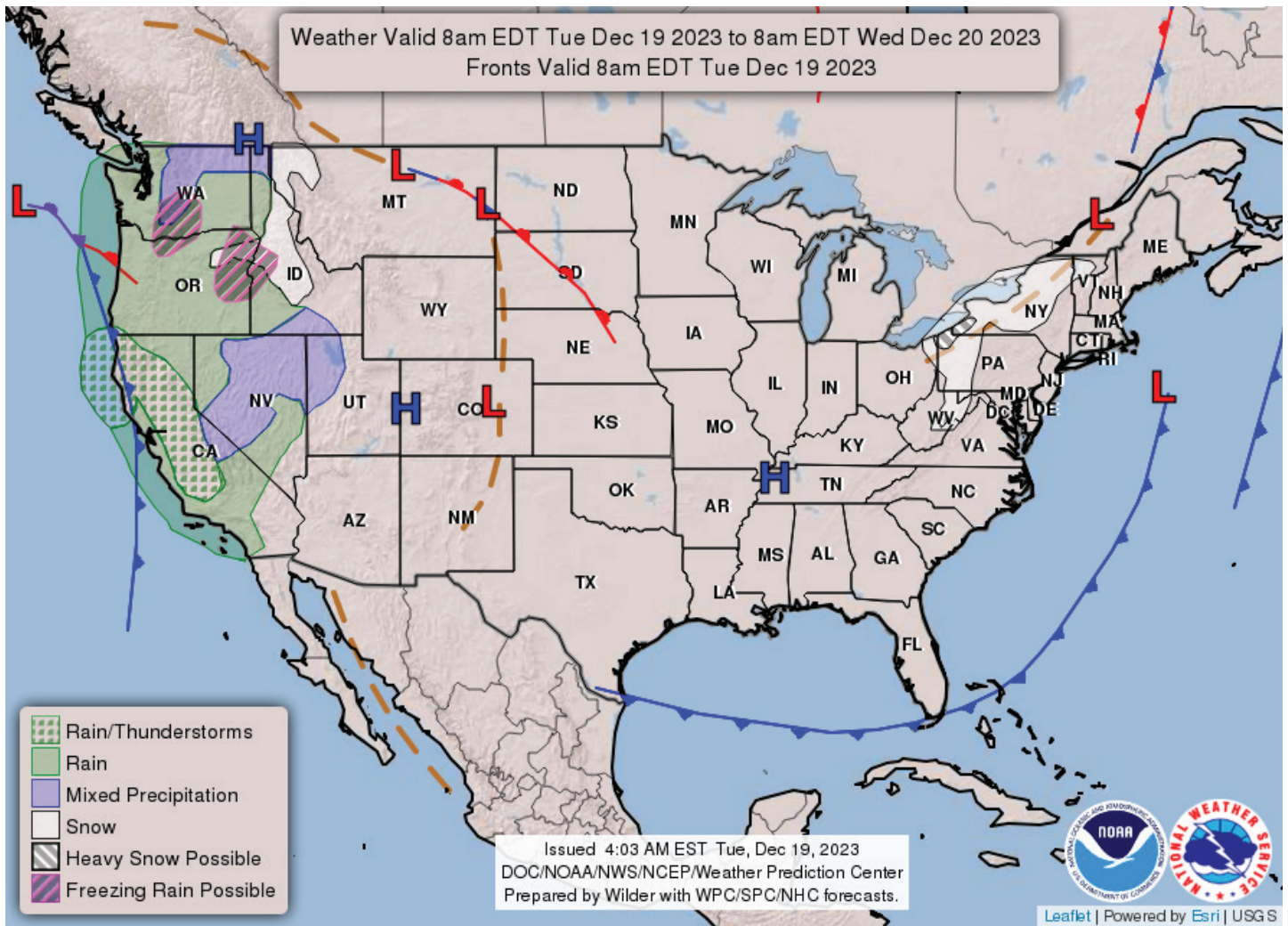
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.57

Precip Year to Date: 23.17

Sunset Tonight: 4:52:40 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:06:50 am



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Today in Weather History

December 19, 1968: Snow and near-blizzard conditions existed across west-central Minnesota, with 5 to 7 inches of new snow reported. Heavier snowfall amounts were reported further to the southeast in Minnesota. Six inches of snow was reported in Artichoke Lake in Big Stone County.

December 19, 1990: Snow began to fall over the northwest part of Minnesota by early afternoon on the 19th, and fell heavily during the night into the early afternoon of the 20th, spreading over the entire northern 2/3 of the state and into some of northeastern South Dakota overnight. By mid-morning, a swath of snow of 6 inches or more was deposited over much of the northern half of the state, or north of a line from Elbow Lake to Garrison to near Two Harbors. In west-central Minnesota, Wheaton received 6 inches, Browns Valley received 4 inches, and Artichoke Lake received 3 inches. In South Dakota, Webster reported 8 inches, Britton reported 7 inches, Sisseton reported 5 inches, and Aberdeen reported 4 inches.

1777: George Washington led his hungry and weary from long marches men to Valley Forge on this day. The winds greeted the 12,000 Continentals as they prepared for the winter.

1924 - The Riverside Ranger Station in Yellowstone Park, WY, reported a low of 59 degrees below zero, a December record for the U.S. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1957 - A tornado, 200 yards in width, killed two persons along its 15-mile path from near Waldo to near Bueana Vista in southwestern Arkansas. People from one house were carried 250 yards, and cars were said to have been carried 600 yards. (The Weather Channel)

1967 - A record 83 inches of snow covered the ground at Flagstaff, AZ. The heavy snows inflicted great hardships on reservations. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds in eastern Texas and the Lower Mississippi Valley. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 90 mph at Venus TX and Providence LA. Rain prevailed from the Southern Plains to the Middle Mississippi Valley. Small stream flooding was reported around Columbia MO. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure and a trailing cold front in the central U.S. brought snow and high winds to parts of the Rocky Mountain Region. Winds in Colorado gusted to 67 mph at La Junta. Thunderstorms along the same cold front produced wind gusts to 65 mph at Kansas City MO. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2008 - A snow and ice storm on December 19 affected parts of the U.S. Midwest. Over 220,000 homes and businesses across Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio were left without electric services. No fatalities were reported (Reuters).

2009: Snowfall totals from 1 to 2 feet were commonplace in what will go down as one of the biggest snowstorms in history on the East Coast and the first of four snowstorms for the Mid-Atlantic during the winter of 2009-10. The 15 inches of snow measured at Reagan International Airport on Dec. 19th was the third-highest daily snowfall on any calendar day at Washington, DC, since snowfall records began in 1884. The total storm snowfall of 16.4 inches on Dec 18-19 2009 marks the 6th highest two-day snowfall record for Washington, DC putting it just below the second President's Day storm in 2003 and ahead of the Jan 1996 storm. Baltimore Washington Airport saw 20.5 inches of snow and went down as the fifth-highest daily snowfall on any calendar day in Baltimore since snowfall records began in 1893. The total storm snowfall of 21.0 inches on Dec 18-19 2009 marks the 6th highest two-day snowfall record for Baltimore. The daily snowfall records for Dec 19 were smashed for the most snowfall for any calendar day during December at the following stations. Reagan National Airport's new record was 15.0 inches, old record 11.5 in 1932. Baltimore Washington Airport's new record was 20.5 inches, old record 11.5 in 1932. This was the biggest December snowstorm on record and setting a record for the snowiest December for Baltimore, MD. Dulles Airport's new record was 16.0 inches, old record 10.6 in 1982. Richmond International Airport had a total of 6.4 inches. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, reported its second greatest daily snowfall total on record with 22.9 inches. It also was the single most significant December snowfall for the city of Philadelphia, PA. Roanoke, Virginia, recorded 17.8 inches setting a record for the greatest 24-hour snowfall in December. Washington, DC, reported 16.4 inches of snowmaking 2009 the snowiest December on record, all in one storm. In New York, Upton on Long Island recorded 26.3 inches, the biggest snowstorm on record.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

NO ROOM, BUT...

The annual church Christmas program was rapidly approaching, and Mrs. Adams was assigning roles to the children in her Sunday school class. "Albert," she said, "I'd like you to be the innkeeper this year."

"No way, not me, absolutely not!" said Albert. "I'm not going to be the one who turned Mary and Joseph away from a good night's rest."

"Oh, please," she begged. "I really need you to do this. We won't be able to have the play without you," she pleaded. Finally, he agreed.

On the night of the performance, Joseph went to the door and knocked. "Who's there?" he asked.

"My name's Joseph, and Mary and I need a place to sleep," was the reply.

"I'm sorry," he said politely. "We have no rooms available." And then added kindly, "But if you'd like you can rest awhile, and I'll get you some cookies and milk."

There are many, like Albert, who would gladly give our Lord some "cookies and milk" but would never allow Him to come into their hearts and change their lives. It's enjoyable to visit the manger, sing a few carols, read the story of His birth, and then exchange gifts. But to make Him a permanent resident? Not likely!

See Him now: Patiently standing. Gently knocking. Carefully listening. Waiting hopefully. Wanting desperately to save us and give us eternal life.

Prayer: We thank You, Father, for wanting to be our Savior and to fellowship with us. Come, dwell within us and make our hearts Your home. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Revelation 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.



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 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 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
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 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
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/08/2023 Family Fun Fest 3:30-5:30pm
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/09-10/2023 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 09/10/2023 Emmanuel Lutheran Church Sunday School Rally 9:00am
- 09/10/2023 7th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 4-6pm
- 09/15/2023 Homecoming Parade
- 10/13/2023 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/05/2023 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church Fall Dinner, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- 11/11/2023 Groton American Legion Annual Turkey Party 6:30 pm.
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 11/26/2023 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/02/2023 Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.15.23

10 20 28 40 54 12

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$41,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 29 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.18.23

2 3 12 33 40 6

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,950,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 44 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.18.23

9 11 17 32 33 6

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 59 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.16.23

2 7 9 13 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$97,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.18.23

2 8 11 25 51 9

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 28 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.18.23

5 8 19 34 39 26

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$572,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 28 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the Associated Press

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Dell Rapids St. Mary 46, De Smet 35
Iroquois-Lake Preston 52, Estelline-Hendricks 42
Marshall, Minn. 50, Harrisburg 48
Sisseton 100, Richland, N.D. 12
Strasburg, N.D. 43, North Central Co-Op 36

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Dell Rapids St. Mary 60, De Smet 56
Hanson 59, Kimball/White Lake 45
Howard 58, Freeman 36
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 62, Arlington 51
West Central 69, Garretson 25

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

US moves to protect old growth forests as climate change threatens their survival

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Biden administration is moving to conserve groves of old-growth trees on federal land by revising management plans for national forests and grasslands across the U.S. as climate change amplifies the threats they face from wildfires, insects and disease.

Agriculture Sec. Tom Vilsack said the goal was to provide an “ecologically-driven” approach to older forests — an arena where logging interests have historically predominated. It would be the first nationwide amendment to U.S. Forest Service management plans in the agency’s 118-year history, he said.

Details were obtained by The Associated Press in advance of Tuesday’s public release of the proposal.

It follows longstanding calls from environmentalists to preserve older forests that offer crucial wildlife habitat and other environmental benefits. The timber industry has fought against logging restrictions on government-owned lands.

President Joseph Biden’s administration appears to be aiming for a middle ground: It would sharply limit commercial timber harvests in old growth forests while allowing logging to continue on “mature forests” that have not yet reached old growth stage.

“This creates a commitment to resiliency, a commitment to restore and protect the existing old growth that we have from the threats that we see,” Vilsack said in an interview.

Old growth forests, such as the storied giant sequoia stands of northern California, have layer upon layer of undisturbed trees and vegetation.

There’s wide consensus on the importance of preserving the oldest and largest trees — both symbolically as marvels of nature, and more practically because their trunks and branches store large amounts of carbon that can be released when forests burn, adding to climate change.

Underlining the urgency of the issue are wildfires in California that killed thousands of giant sequoias in recent years. The towering giants are concentrated in about 70 groves scattered along the western side of the Sierra Nevada range.

“This is a step in the right direction,” said Chris Wood, president of Trout Unlimited and a former Forest

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Service policy chief. "This is the first time the Forest Service has said it's national policy will be to protect old growth."

Yet experts say there's no simple formula to determine what's old. Growth rates among different tree types vary greatly — and even within species, depending on their access to water and sunlight and soil conditions.

Groves of aspen can mature within a half century. For Douglas fir stands, it could take 100 years. Wildfire frequency also factors in: Ponderosa pine forests are adapted to withstand blazes as often as once a decade, compared to lodgepole pine stands that might burn every few hundred years.

The results earlier this year from the government's first-ever national inventory of mature and old-growth forests on federal land revealed more expanses of older trees than outside researchers had recently estimated. The Forest Service and federal Bureau of Land Management combined oversee more than 50,000 square miles (129,000 square kilometers) of old growth forests and about 125,000 square miles (324,000 square kilometers) of mature forests, according to the inventory.

Most are in Western states such as Idaho, California, Montana and Oregon. They're also in New England, around the Great Lakes and in Southern states such as Arkansas, Kentucky and West Virginia, according to the Forest Service.

But representatives of the timber industry and some members of Congress have been skeptical about Biden's ambitions to protect older forests, which the Democrat launched in 2021 on Earth Day. They've urged the administration to instead concentrate on lessening wildfire dangers by thinning stands of trees where decades of fire suppression have allowed undergrowth to flourish, which can be a recipe for disaster when fires ignite.

"Let's be real about who the groups asking for this are: They have always opposed commercial timber harvests on the national forest system," said Bill Imbergamo with the Federal Forest Resource Coalition, a timber industry group. "Is that the correct emphasis right now when most of the old growth losses are coming from insects, fire and climate change stressors working in tandem?"

The proposal to revise management plans for 128 national forests and national grasslands is expected to be completed by early 2025. However, it's uncertain if the change would survive if Biden loses his 2024 re-election bid.

Under former President Donald Trump, federal officials sought to open up millions of acres of West Coast forests to potential logging. Federal wildlife officials reversed the move in 2021 after determining political appointees under Trump relied on faulty science to justify drastically shrinking areas of forest that are considered crucial habitat for the imperiled northern spotted owl.

Asked about the durability of Tuesday's proposal, Vilsack it would be "a serious mistake for the country to take a step backwards now that we've taken significant steps forward."

Pentagon announces new international mission to counter attacks on commercial vessels in Red Sea

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

MANAMA, Bahrain (AP) — The U.S. and a host of other nations are creating a new force to protect ships transiting the Red Sea that have come under attack by drones and ballistic missiles fired from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Tuesday in Bahrain.

The seriousness of the attacks, several of which have damaged vessels, has led multiple shipping companies to order their ships to hold in place and not enter the Bab el-Mandeb Strait until the security situation can be addressed.

The U.S. military's Central Command reported two more of the attacks on commercial vessels Monday. A strike by an attack drone and a ballistic missile hit a tanker off Yemen, at roughly the same time a cargo ship reported an explosive detonating in the water near them, the military said.

"This is an international challenge that demands collective action," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement released just after midnight in Bahrain. "Therefore today I am announcing the establishment

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of Operation Prosperity Guardian, an important new multinational security initiative.”

There are about 400 commercial vessels transiting the southern Red Sea, an area roughly the size of Washington D.C. to Boston, at any given time, a senior military official told reporters who are traveling with Austin in the region.

Under the new mission, the military ships will not necessarily escort a specific vessel, but will be positioned to provide umbrella protection to as many as possible at a given time, the official said on the condition of anonymity to provide additional details not made public on how the new operation will work.

Mohammed Abdel-Salam, the Houthis’ chief negotiator and spokesman, on Tuesday, challenged the U.S.-created coalition, saying the Iranian-backed rebels would continue targeting Israel-linked vessels off Yemen.

“The American-formed coalition is to protect Israel and militarize the sea without any justification, and will not stop Yemen from continuing its legitimate operations in support of Gaza,” he wrote on social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

He said the Houthis’ attacks “are not a show of force nor a challenge to anyone,” adding, “Whoever seeks to expand the conflict must bear the consequences of his actions.”

On Tuesday the shipping company Maersk announced that for now, it had decided to re-route its ships that have been paused for days outside the strait and Red Sea, and send them around Africa through the Cape of Good Hope instead — a much longer and less efficient passage. Maersk said it welcomed the international security effort, but at the present time, the much longer route would provide “more predictable outcomes” for its customers.

In the last four weeks, Houthi militants have attacked or seized commercial ships 12 times and still hold 25 members of the MV Galaxy Leader hostage in Yemen, Austin said in remarks Tuesday in a ministerial meeting on the new maritime mission. The U.S. is still actively seeking member countries to join the mission, and increase the number of navies present and participating.

The United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain have joined the new maritime security mission, Austin said. Some of those countries will conduct joint patrols while others provide intelligence support in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

One notably absent participant is China, which has warships in the region, but those ships have not responded to previous calls for assistance by commercial vessels, even though some of the ships attacked have had ties to Hong Kong, the military official said.

Several other countries have also agreed to be involved in the operation but prefer not to be publicly named, a defense official said on the condition of anonymity to discuss additional details of the new mission that have not been publicly announced.

The new maritime security mission will be coordinated by the already existing Combined Task Force 153, which was set up in April 2022 to improve maritime security in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. While the task force has primarily provided a headquarters structure to date, the goal of the new mission is to provide ships and other assets to carry out the protection. There have been 39 member nations in CTF 153, but officials were working to determine which of them would participate in this latest effort.

Separately, the United States has also called on the United Nations Security Council to take action against the attacks.

In a letter to council members obtained Monday by The Associated Press, U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said Houthi attacks targeting commercial vessels legally transiting the international waterways continue to threaten “navigational rights and freedoms, international maritime security, and international commerce.”

The 15 council members discussed the Houthi threat behind closed doors Monday but took no immediate action.

Two U.S. warships — the USS Carney and the USS Mason, Navy destroyers — are currently moving through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to help deter and respond to attacks from the Houthis.

The move to set up the expanded operation came after three commercial vessels were struck by missiles fired by Iranian-back Houthis in Yemen on Dec. 3. Those attacks were part of an escalating campaign of

violence that also included armed and other drones launched in the direction of U.S. warships.

To date, the U.S. has not struck back at the Iranian-back Houthis operating in Yemen or targeted any of the militants' weapons or other sites. On Monday Austin did not answer a question as to why the Pentagon had not conducted a counterstrike.

An earthquake in northwestern China kills at least 126 people in nation's deadliest quake in 9 years

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A strong overnight earthquake rattled a mountainous region of northwestern China, authorities said Tuesday, destroying homes, leaving residents out in a below-freezing winter night and killing 126 people in the nation's deadliest quake in nine years.

The magnitude 6.2 earthquake struck just before midnight on Monday, injuring more than 700 people, damaging roads and knocking out power and communication lines in Gansu and Qinghai provinces, officials and Chinese media reports said.

As emergency workers searched for the missing in collapsed buildings and at least one landslide, people who lost their homes were preparing to spend a cold winter night in tents at hastily erected evacuation sites.

"I just feel anxious, what other feelings could there be?" said Ma Dongdong, who said in a phone interview that three bedrooms in his house had been destroyed and a part of his milk tea shop was cracked wide open.

Afraid to return home because of aftershocks, he spent the night in a field with his wife, two children and some neighbors, where they made a fire to stay warm. In the early morning, they went to a tent settlement that Ma said was housing about 700 people. As of mid-afternoon, they were waiting for blankets and warm clothing to arrive.

The earthquake struck at a relatively shallow depth of 10 kilometers (6 miles) in Gansu's Jishishan county, about 5 kilometers (3 miles) from the provincial boundary with Qinghai, the China Earthquake Networks Center said. The United States Geological Survey measured the magnitude at 5.9.

State broadcaster CCTV said 113 were confirmed dead in Gansu and another 536 injured in the province. Thirteen others were killed and 182 injured in Qinghai, in an area north of the epicenter, a local Communist Party official said at a news conference.

There were nine aftershocks by 10 a.m. — about 10 hours after the initial earthquake — the largest one registering a magnitude of 4.1, the Gansu official said.

Emergency authorities in Gansu issued an appeal for 300 additional workers for search and rescue operations, and Qinghai officials reported 20 people missing in a landslide, according to Chinese state-owned media.

The earthquake was felt in much of the surrounding area, including Lanzhou, the Gansu provincial capital, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) northeast of the epicenter. Photos and videos posted by a student at Lanzhou University showed students hastily leaving a dormitory building and standing outside with long down jackets over their pajamas.

"The earthquake was too intense," said Wang Xi, the student who posted the images. "My legs went weak, especially when we ran downstairs from the dormitory."

The death toll was the highest since an August 2014 quake that killed 617 people in southwest China's Yunnan province. The country's deadliest earthquake in recent years was a 7.9 magnitude quake in 2008 that left nearly 90,000 dead or presumed dead and devastated towns and schools in Sichuan province, leading to a yearslong effort to rebuild with more resistant materials.

Li Haibing, an expert at the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences, said that the relatively high number of casualties in the latest quake was in part because it was shallow. "Therefore, it has caused greater shaking and destruction, even though the magnitude was not large," he said.

Other factors include the quake's mainly vertical movement, which causes more violent shaking; the lower quality of buildings in what is a relatively poor area; and the fact that it happened in the middle of

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the night when most people were home, Li said.

The epicenter was about 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) southwest of Beijing, the Chinese capital. The remote and mountainous area is home to several predominantly Muslim ethnic groups and near some Tibetan communities. Geographically, it is in the center of China, though the area is commonly referred to as the northwest, as it is at the northwestern edge of China's more populated plains.

Tents, folding beds and quilts were being sent to the disaster area, state broadcaster CCTV said. It quoted Chinese leader Xi Jinping as calling for an all-out search and rescue effort to minimize the casualties.

The overnight low in the area was minus 15 to minus 9 degrees Celsius (5 to 16 degrees Fahrenheit), the China Meteorological Administration said. The Beijing Youth Daily, a Communist Party newspaper, quoted an unnamed rescue coordinator saying there was a need for generators, long coats and fuel for stoves, among other items. The coordinator recommended sending halal food because of the ethnic makeup of the affected population.

At least 4,000 firefighters, soldiers and police officers were dispatched in the rescue effort, and the People's Liberation Army Western Theatre set up a command post to direct its work.

A video posted by the Ministry of Emergency Management showed emergency workers in orange uniforms using rods to try to move heavy pieces of what looked like concrete debris at night. Other nighttime videos distributed by state media showed workers lifting out a victim and helping a slightly stumbling person to walk in an area covered with light snow.

Two residents of Jishishan county told The Associated Press that there were cracks in their walls but that their buildings did not collapse. They were unsure whether it was safe to stay in their homes and figuring out where to spend the night.

Middle school student Ma Shijun ran out of his dormitory barefoot without even putting on a coat, according to a Xinhua report. It said the strong tremors left his hands a bit numb, and that teachers quickly organized the students on the playground.

Earthquakes are somewhat common in the mountainous area of western China that rises up to form the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

In September 2022, 93 people were killed in a 6.8 magnitude earthquake that shook China's southwestern province of Sichuan, triggering landslides and shaking buildings in the provincial capital of Chengdu, where 21 million residents were under a COVID-19 lockdown.

Israel strikes south Gaza and raids a hospital in the north as war grinds on with renewed US support

By NAJIB JOBAIN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli strikes killed at least 28 Palestinians in southern Gaza and troops raided one of the last functioning hospitals in the north as the country pressed ahead with its offensive against Hamas on Tuesday with renewed backing from the United States, despite rising international alarm.

The offensive, launched in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into Israel, has killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians, displaced some 1.9 million, demolished much of northern Gaza and sparked attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets across the region.

Attacks on ships in the Red Sea by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels have led major shipping companies — as well as the oil and gas giant BP — to suspend trade through the vital waterway, prompting the U.S. and its allies to launch a new mission to counter the threat.

But after meeting with Israeli officials Monday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said he was "not here to dictate timelines or terms."

His remarks signaled that the U.S. would continue shielding Israel from growing international calls for a cease-fire as the United Nations Security Council was set to hold another vote Tuesday, and that Washington would keep providing vital military aid for one of the 21st century's deadliest air and ground wars.

A strike on a home in Rafah where displaced people were sheltering killed at least 25 people, including

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women and children, and another killed at least three people, according to Associated Press journalists who saw the bodies arrive at two local hospitals early Tuesday.

Rafah, which is in the southern part of Gaza where Israel has told Palestinians to seek shelter, has been repeatedly bombarded in recent days, as Israel has struck what it says are militant targets across the territory, often killing large numbers of civilians.

Fierce battles raged in northern Gaza, where Hamas continues to put up still resistance across what is now a battered wasteland seven weeks after Israeli tanks and troops stormed in.

HOSPITAL RAID

Israeli forces raided the Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City overnight and into Tuesday, according to the church that operates it, destroying a wall at its front entrance and detaining most of its staff.

Also known as the Baptist Hospital, it was the scene of an explosion early in the war that killed dozens of Palestinians, and which an Associated Press investigation later determined was likely caused by a misfired Palestinian rocket.

Don Binder, a pastor at St. George's Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem, which runs the hospital, said the raid left just two doctors, four nurses and two janitors to tend to over 100 seriously wounded patients, with no running water or electricity.

"It has been a great mercy for the many wounded in Gaza City that we were able to keep our Ahli Anglican Hospital open for so long," Binder wrote in a Facebook post late Monday. "That ended today."

He said an Israeli tank was parked on the rubble at the hospital's entrance, blocking anyone from entering or leaving.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military. Forces have raided other hospitals across Gaza, accusing Hamas of using them for military purposes. Hospital staff have denied the allegations and accused Israel of endangering critically ill and wounded civilians.

In November, after raiding and largely emptying Shifa Hospital — Gaza's largest — the military revealed what it said was a militant hideout beneath the facility and other evidence that Hamas fighters had been inside the compound. It has yet to substantiate its allegations that Shifa was a major Hamas command center, which would weigh on the question of whether it was protected under international law.

Shifa is once again treating hundreds of wounded patients and sheltering tens of thousands of displaced people under harsh conditions, according to the World Health Organization, which described its emergency room as a "bloodbath." Witnesses said an Israeli strike hit the medical compound Monday, killing and wounding several people.

INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS

The U.N. Security Council delayed to Tuesday a vote on an Arab-sponsored resolution calling for a halt to hostilities to allow unhindered access to humanitarian aid. Diplomats said negotiations were taking place to get the U.S. to abstain or vote "yes" on the resolution after it vetoed an earlier call for a cease-fire.

France, the United Kingdom and Germany — some of Israel's closest allies — joined global calls for a cease-fire over the weekend. In Israel, protesters have called for negotiations with Hamas to facilitate the release of scores of hostages still held by the group.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that Israel will keep fighting until it ends Hamas rule in Gaza, crushes its military capabilities and frees all the hostages taken during the Oct. 7 attack. For now, at least, he seems to have full U.S. support for a campaign that could last months or years.

Speaking alongside Austin, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said only that "the war will take time."

Militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, on Oct. 7 and abducted 240 others. Nearly half were released in November during a weeklong cease-fire, in exchange for Israel releasing 240 Palestinian prisoners. Those released on both sides were mainly women and children.

HOSTAGE TALKS

CIA Director William Burns met in Warsaw with the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency and the prime minister of Qatar on Monday, the first known meeting of the three since the cease-fire, which they had played a key role in brokering. But U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the talks were not "at a point where another deal is imminent."

Aiming to increase public pressure on the Israeli government, Hamas released a video late Monday showing three older Israeli hostages pleading for Israel to bring them home.

The comments were likely made under duress, but the video signaled Hamas wants to move on to discussions of releasing sick and old men. Israel has said it wants around 19 women and two children freed first. Hamas says the women include soldiers, for whom it is expected to make greater demands.

Hamas and other militants are still holding an estimated 129 captives.

More than 19,400 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the war, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza, which has said that most are women and minors and that thousands more are buried under rubble. The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths.

Israel's military says 131 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. It says it has killed thousands of militants, without providing evidence. Israel blames civilian deaths on Hamas, saying it uses them as human shields, but the military rarely comments on individual strikes.

These kids want to go to school. The main obstacle? Paperwork

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AP Education Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — It's unclear to Tameka how — or even when — her children became unenrolled from Atlanta Public Schools. But it was traumatic when, in fall 2021, they figured out it had happened.

After more than a year of some form of pandemic online learning, students were all required to come back to school in person. Tameka was deeply afraid of COVID-19 and skeptical the schools could keep her kids safe from what she called "the corona." One morning, in a test run, she sent two kids to school.

Her oldest daughter, then in seventh grade, and her second youngest, a boy entering first grade, boarded their respective buses. She had yet to register the youngest girl, who was entering kindergarten. And her older son, a boy with Down syndrome, stayed home because she wasn't sure he could consistently wear masks.

After a few hours, the elementary school called: Come pick up your son, they told her. He was no longer enrolled, they said.

Around lunchtime, the middle school called: Come get your daughter, they told her. She doesn't have a class schedule.

Tameka's children — all four of them — have been home ever since.

PARENTS MUST PROVE RESIDENCY, REPEATEDLY

Thousands of students went missing from American classrooms during the pandemic. For some who have tried to return, a serious problem has presented itself. A corrosive combination of onerous re-enrollment requirements, arcane paperwork and the everyday obstacles of poverty — a nonworking phone, a missing backpack, the loss of a car — is in many cases preventing those children from going back.

"One of the biggest problems that we have is kids that are missing and chronic absenteeism," says Pamela Herd, a Georgetown University public policy professor. She studies how burdensome paperwork and processes often prevent poor people from accessing health benefits. "I'm really taken aback that a district would set forth a series of policies that make it actually quite difficult to enroll your child."

In Atlanta, where Tameka lives, parents must present at least eight documents to enroll their children — twice as many as parents in New York City or Los Angeles. One of the documents — a complicated certificate evaluating a child's dental health, vision, hearing and nutrition — is required by the state. Most of the others are Atlanta's doing, including students' Social Security cards and an affidavit declaring residency that has to be notarized.

The district asks for proof of residency for existing students every year at some schools, and also before beginning sixth and ninth grades, to prevent students from attending schools outside of their neighborhoods or communities. The policy also allows the district to request proof the student still lives in the attendance zone after an extended absence or many tardy arrivals. Without that proof, families say their children have been disenrolled.

"They make it so damned hard," says Kimberly Dukes, an Atlanta parent who co-founded an organization

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to help families advocate for their children.

During the pandemic, she and her children became homeless and moved in with her brother. She struggled to convince her children's school they really lived with him. Soon, she heard from other caregivers having similar problems. Last year, she estimates she helped 20 to 30 families re-enroll their children in Atlanta Public Schools.

The school district pushed back against this characterization of the enrollment process. "When parents inform APS that they are unable to provide updated proof of residence, protocols are in place to support families," Atlanta communications director Seth Coleman wrote by email. Homeless families are not required to provide documentation, he said.

Tameka's kids have essentially been out of school since COVID hit in March 2020. She and her kids have had a consistent place to live, but nearly everything else in their lives collapsed during the pandemic. (Tameka is her middle name. The Associated Press is withholding her full name because Tameka, 33, runs the risk of jail time or losing custody of her children since they are not in school.)

ECHOES OF A PARTNER'S DEATH

Tameka's longtime partner, who was father to her children, died of a heart attack in May 2020 as COVID gripped the country.

His death left her overwhelmed and penniless. Tameka never graduated from high school and has worked occasionally as a security guard or a housecleaner for hotels. She has never gotten a driver's license. But her partner worked construction and had a car. "When he was around, we never went without," she says.

Suddenly, she had four young children to care for by herself, with only government cash assistance to live on.

Schools had closed to prevent the spread of the virus, and the kids were home with her all the time. Remote learning didn't hold their attention. Their home internet didn't support the three children being online simultaneously, and there wasn't enough space in their two-bedroom apartment for the kids to have a quiet place to learn.

Because she had to watch them, she couldn't work. The job losses put her family even further below the median income for a Black family in Atlanta — \$28,105. (The median annual income for a white family in the city limits is \$83,722.)

When Tameka's children didn't return to school, she also worried about the wrong kind of attention from the state's child welfare department. According to Tameka, staff visited her in spring 2021 after receiving calls from the school complaining her children were not attending online classes.

The social workers interviewed the children, inspected their home and looked for signs of neglect and abuse. They said they'd be back to set her up with resources to help her with parenting. For more than two years, she says, "they never came back."

When the kids missed 10 straight days of school that fall, the district removed them from its rolls, citing a state regulation. Tameka now had to re-enroll them.

Suddenly, another tragedy of her partner's death became painfully obvious. He was carrying all the family's important documents in his backpack when he suffered his heart attack. The hospital that received him said it passed along the backpack and other possessions to another family member, Tameka says. But it was never found.

The backpack contained the children's birth certificates and her own, plus Medicaid cards and Social Security cards. Slowly, she has tried to replace the missing documents. First, she got new birth certificates for the children, which required traveling downtown.

After asking for new Medicaid cards for over a year, she finally received them for two of her children. She says she needs them to take her children to the doctor for the health verifications and immunizations required to enroll. It's possible her family's cards have been held up by a backlog in Georgia's Medicaid office since the state agency incorrectly disenrolled thousands of residents.

When she called for a doctor's appointment in October, the office said the soonest they could see her children was December.

"That's too late," she said. "Half the school year will be over by then."

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She also needs to show the school her own identification, Social Security cards, and a new lease, plus the notarized residency affidavit.

She shakes her head. "It's a lot."

CALLS FROM THE SCHOOL — TO A DISCONNECTED PHONE

Some of the enrollment requirements have exceptions buried deep in school board documents. But Tameka says no one from the district has offered her guidance.

Contact logs provided by the district show social workers from three schools have sent four emails and called the family 19 times since the pandemic closed classrooms in 2020. Most of those calls went to voice-mail or didn't go through because the phone was disconnected. Records show Tameka rarely called back.

The only face-to-face meeting was in October 2021, when Tameka sent her kids on the bus, only to learn they weren't enrolled. A school social worker summarized the encounter: "Discussed students' attendance history, the impact it has on the student and barriers. Per mom student lost father in May 2020 and only other barrier is uniforms."

The social worker said the school would take care of the uniforms. "Mom given enrollment paperwork," the entry ends.

The school's logs don't record any further attempts to contact Tameka.

"Our Student Services Team went above and beyond to help this family and these children," wrote Coleman, the district spokesperson.

Inconsistent cell phone access isn't uncommon among low-income Americans. Many have phones, as Tameka's family does, but when they break or run out of prepaid minutes, communication with the phones becomes impossible.

So in some cities, even at the height of the pandemic, social workers, teachers and administrators checked on families in person when they were unresponsive or children had gone missing from online learning. In Atlanta, Coleman said, the district avoided in-person contact because of the coronavirus.

Tameka says she's unaware of any outreach from Atlanta schools. She currently lacks a working phone with a cell plan, and she's spent long stretches over the last three years without one. An Associated Press reporter has had to visit the family in person to communicate.

The logs provided by Atlanta Public Schools show only one attempt to visit the family in person, in spring 2021. A staff member went to the family's home to discuss poor attendance in online classes by the son with Down syndrome. No one was home, and the logs don't mention further attempts.

The details of what the district has done to track down and re-enroll Tameka's children, especially her son with Down syndrome, matter. Federal laws require the state and district to identify, locate and evaluate all children with disabilities until they turn 21.

One government agency has been able to reach Tameka. A new social worker from the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, the same agency that came years earlier, made another visit to her home in October.

The department offered to organize a ride for her and her children to visit the doctor. But without an appointment, Tameka didn't see the point.

The social worker also shared a helpful tip: Tameka can enroll her children with most of the paperwork, and then she would have 30 days to get the immunizations. But she should act fast, the social worker urged, or the department might have to take action against her for "educational neglect."

RESIDENCY CRACKDOWN WORKS AGAINST PARENTS

To many observers, Tameka's troubles stem from Atlanta's rapid gentrification. The city, known for its Black professional class, also boasts the country's largest wealth disparity between Black and white families.

"It looks good from the curb, but when you get inside you see that Black and brown people are worse off economically than in West Virginia — and no one wants to talk about it," says Frank Brown, who heads Communities in Schools of Atlanta, an organization that runs dropout-prevention programs in Atlanta Public Schools.

Atlanta's school board passed many of its enrollment policies and procedures back in 2008, after years of

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gentrification and a building boom consolidated upper-income and mostly white residents in the northern half of the city. The schools in those neighborhoods complained of “overcrowding,” while the schools in the majority Black southern half of the city couldn’t fill all of their seats.

The board cracked down on “residency fraud” to prevent parents living in other parts of town from sending their children to schools located in those neighborhoods.

“This was about balancing the number of students in schools,” says Tiffany Fick, director of school quality and advocacy for Equity in Education, a policy organization in Atlanta. “But it was also about race and class.”

Communities such as St. Louis, the Massachusetts town of Everett and Tupelo, Mississippi, have adopted similar policies, including tip lines to report neighbors who might be sending their children to schools outside of their enrollment zones.

But the Atlanta metro area seems to be a hotbed, despite the policies’ disruption of children’s educations. In January, neighboring Fulton County disenrolled nearly 400 students from one of its high schools after auditing residency documents after Christmas vacation.

The policies were designed to prevent children from attending schools outside of their neighborhood. But according to Dukes and other advocates, the increased bureaucracy has also made it difficult for the poor to attend their assigned schools — especially after the pandemic hit families with even more economic stress.

OTHER ATLANTA PARENTS, SIMILAR BATTLES

The Associated Press spoke to five additional Atlanta public school mothers who struggled with the re-enrollment process. Their children were withdrawn from school because their leases had expired or were month to month, or their child lacked vaccinations.

Candace, the mother of a seventh grader with autism, couldn’t get her son a vaccination appointment when schools first allowed students to return in person in spring 2021. There were too many other families seeking shots at that time, and she didn’t have reliable transportation to go further afield. The boy, then in fourth grade, missed a cumulative five months.

“He wasn’t in school, and no one cared,” said Candace, who asked AP not to use her last name because she worries about losing custody of her child since he missed so much school. She eventually re-enrolled him with the help of Dukes, the parent advocate.

Many parents who have struggled with the enrollment policies have had difficulty persuading schools to accept their proof of residency. Adding an extra burden to those who don’t own their homes, Atlanta’s policy allows principals to ask for additional evidence from renters.

Shawndrea Gay was told by her children’s school, which is located in an upper-income neighborhood, that her month-to-month lease was insufficient. Twice, investigators came to her studio apartment to verify that the family lived there. “They looked in the fridge to make sure there was food,” she says. “It was no joke.”

Then, in summer 2022, the school unenrolled her children because their lease had expired. With Dukes’ help, Gay was able to get them back in school before classes started.

Tameka hasn’t reached out for help returning her kids to school. She doesn’t feel comfortable asking and doesn’t trust the school system, especially after they called the child welfare department. “I don’t like people knowing my business,” she says. “I’m a private person.”

On a typical school day, Tameka’s four children — now 14, 12, 9 and 8 — sleep late and stay inside watching television or playing video games. Only the youngest — the girl who’s never been to school — has much interest in the outside world, Tameka says.

The girl often plays kickball or runs outside with other kids in their low-income subdivision. But during the week, she has to wait for them to come home from school at around 3 p.m.

The little girl should be in second grade, learning to master chapter books, spell, and add and subtract numbers up to 100. She has had to settle for “playing school” with her three older siblings. She practices her letters and writes her name. She runs through pre-kindergarten counting exercises on a phone.

But even at 8, she understands it’s not the real thing.

“I want to go to school,” she says, “and see what it’s like.”

Google to pay \$700M in antitrust settlement reached with states before recent Play Store trial loss

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

Google has agreed to pay \$700 million and make several other concessions to settle allegations that it had been stifling competition against its Android app store — the same issue that went to trial in another case that could result in even bigger changes.

Although Google struck the deal with state attorneys general in September, the settlement's terms weren't revealed until late Monday in documents filed in San Francisco federal court. The disclosure came a week after a federal court jury rebuked Google for deploying anticompetitive tactics in its Play Store for Android apps.

The settlement with the states includes \$630 million to compensate U.S. consumers funneled into a payment processing system that state attorneys general alleged drove up the prices for digital transactions within apps downloaded from the Play Store. That store caters to the Android software that powers most of the world's smartphones.

Like Apple does in its iPhone app store, Google collects commissions ranging from 15% to 30% on in-app purchases — fees that state attorneys general contended drove prices higher than they would have been had there been an open market for payment processing. Those commissions generated billions of dollars in profit annually for Google, according to evidence presented in the recent trial focused on its Play Store.

Consumers eligible for a piece of the \$630 million compensation fund are supposed to be automatically notified about various options for how they can receive their cut of the money.

Another \$70 million of the pre-trial settlement will cover the penalties and other costs that Google is being forced to pay to the states.

Google also agreed to make other changes designed to make it even easier for consumers to download and install Android apps from other outlets besides its Play Store for the next five years. It will refrain from issuing as many security warnings, or "scare screens," when alternative choices are being used.

The makers of Android apps will also gain more flexibility to offer alternative payment choices to consumers instead of having transactions automatically processed through the Play Store and its commission system. Apps will also be able to promote lower prices available to consumers who choose an alternate to the Play Store's payment processing.

Washington D.C. Attorney General Brian Schwalb hailed the settlement as a victory for the tens of millions of people in the U.S. that rely on Android phones to help manage their lives. "For far too long, Google's anticompetitive practices in the distribution of apps deprived Android users of choices and forced them to pay artificially elevated prices," Schwalb said.

Wilson White, Google's vice president of government affairs and public policy, framed the deal as a positive for the company, despite the money and concessions it entails. The settlement "builds on Android's choice and flexibility, maintains strong security protections, and retains Google's ability to compete with other (software) makers, and invest in the Android ecosystem for users and developers," White wrote in a blog post.

Although the state attorneys general hailed the settlement as a huge win for consumers, it didn't go far enough for Epic Games, which spearheaded the attack on Google's app store practices with an antitrust lawsuit filed in August 2020.

Epic, the maker of the popular Fortnite video game, rebuffed the settlement in September and instead chose to take its case to trial, even though it had already lost on most of its key claims in a similar trial targeting Apple and its iPhone app store in 2021.

The Apple trial, though, was decided by a federal judge instead of the jury that vindicated Epic with a unanimous verdict that Google had built anticompetitive barriers around the Play Store. Google has vowed to appeal the verdict.

But the trial's outcome nevertheless raises the specter of Google potentially being ordered to pay even

more money as punishment for its past practices and making even more dramatic changes to its lucrative Android app ecosystem.

Those changes will be determined next year by U.S. District Judge James Donato, who presided over the Epic Games trial. Donato also still must approve Google's Play Store settlement with the states.

Google faces an even bigger legal threat in another antitrust case targeting its dominant search engine that serves as the centerpiece of a digital ad empire that generates more than \$200 billion in sales annually. Closing arguments in a trial pitting Google against the Justice Department are scheduled for early May before a federal judge in Washington D.C.

Elf Bar and other e-cigarette makers dodged US customs and taxes after China's ban on vaping flavors

By MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In only two years, a small, colorful vaping device called Elf Bar has become the most popular disposable e-cigarette in the world, generating billions in sales and quickly emerging as the overwhelming favorite of underage U.S. teens who vape.

Last week, U.S. authorities publicly announced the first seizure of some of the company's products, part of an operation confiscating 1.4 million illegal, flavored e-cigarettes from China. Officials pegged the value of the items at \$18 million, including brands other than Elf Bar.

But the makers of Elf Bar and other Chinese e-cigarettes have imported products worth hundreds of millions of dollars while repeatedly dodging customs and avoiding taxes and import fees, according to public records and court documents reviewed by The Associated Press.

Records show the makers of disposable vapes routinely mislabel their shipments as "battery chargers," "flashlights" and other items, hampering efforts to block products that are driving teen vaping.

Elf Bar is the lead product of Shenzhen iMiracle, a privately held company based in Shenzhen, the sprawling Chinese manufacturing hub.

In the U.S., iMiracle recently abandoned the Elf Bar name due to a trademark dispute and efforts by regulators to seize its imports. Instead, its products are sold as EB Create.

A spokesman for iMiracle said the company stopped shipping Elf Bar to U.S. earlier this year and is trying to comply with regulators.

When asked about EB Create e-cigarettes he said: "I can't tell you anything about that."

Details on the company's U.S. sales and activities are beginning to emerge in court documents.

At a 2022 court hearing in the case over the company's name, U.S. distributors described skyrocketing sales.

Jon Glauser of Demand Vape told a federal judge his company had sold more than \$132 million worth of Elf Bar products last year.

"We were selling it faster than we could get it in," Glauser said, according to the court transcript.

Glauser attributed Elf Bar's quick rise to its profit margin. Sellers make about a 30% profit, double that of other disposable e-cigarettes.

iMiracle's parent company, Heaven Gifts, previously described how it could help customers evade import fees and taxes. Heaven Gifts' website advertised "discreet" shipping methods to buyers, including not mentioning e-cigarettes or its company name "anywhere on the package."

"We also mark a lower value to avoid tax," the website stated.

In June, Heaven Gifts announced on it would "go offline," after the FDA directed customs officials to begin seizing shipments from the company.

Neither Heaven Gifts nor iMiracle appear in customs data reviewed by the AP and compiled by Import-Genius, an analytics company.

The seizure announced last week suggests part of the answer: The shipments arrived at Los Angeles International Airport, and air carriers are not required to disclose the same details about their cargo as ocean vessels.

Ships docking in the U.S. must provide information on suppliers, recipients and types of cargo they are carrying. But importers can obscure their identities and products.

For example, recipient information is listed as "not available" for roughly 45 of over 100 shipments of e-cigarettes from China this year, according to ImportGenius data. U.S. companies can avoid disclosure by using third-party shippers, called freight forwarders.

It's likely most disposable e-cigarettes coming into the U.S. aren't even declared as vaping products.

Esco Bars, one of Elf Bars' chief rivals, imported 30 shipments from China this year labeled "atomizers," a generic type of hardware that turns a liquid into a spray.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection did not make officials available for interviews, but pointed to the agency's recent operation in Los Angeles with the FDA.

"The rise in illicit e-commerce demands that our agencies remain vigilant in intercepting shipments that could pose serious health risks to the public," Troy Miller, a senior official with the border agency, said in a release.

FDA Commissioner Robert Califf said that agency was "committed to continuing to stem the flow of illegal e-cigarettes."

China's vaping sector is estimated to be worth \$28 billion, and the U.S. accounts for nearly 60% of the country's vape exports, according to the China Electronics Chamber of Commerce.

Chinese authorities have encouraged those exports while at the same time curtailing the country's domestic vaping business.

The government brought vaping companies under control of its state-run tobacco administration last year, banning all flavors except tobacco.

Authorities cited "safety issues around unsafe additives," and other risks. But experts point to another cause. The China National Tobacco Corp. is the largest tobacco company in the world. In cooperation with its regulatory arm, the Tobacco Monopoly Administration, the entity controls the manufacture of all cigarettes made in China.

"The tobacco administration says, 'Well, every e-cigarette sold means one less cigarette smoked,' so they are going to regulate the hell out of them now," said Dr. Ray Yip, a former director of the Gates Foundation's China program.

Hu Leng, manager at a vape manufacturer said: "There is no future in the domestic market. All of our products are sold to Europe."

Elf Bar-maker Shenzhen iMiracle is among the companies that have built their entire business on exports.

In late 2021, the company began shipping to the U.S. to exploit a regulatory loophole: The FDA had prohibited kid-appealing flavors from reusable vapes, such as Juul, but not disposable ones.

A spokesperson for China's tobacco administration did not respond to requests for comment, but the country's tobacco regulations state that exported vapes "should comply with the laws, regulations and standards of the destination country." Since the FDA has declared Elf Bar illegal, iMiracle would seem to be violating Chinese law.

But experts say such rules go unenforced.

"China basically couldn't care what happens to the products if they're selling for export," said Patricia Kovacevic, an attorney specializing in tobacco regulation.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, first woman on the Supreme Court, to be laid to rest at funeral Tuesday

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, an Arizona native and consistent voice of moderate conservatism as the first woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, will be laid to rest with funeral services Tuesday.

President Joe Biden and Chief Justice John Roberts are scheduled to speak at the funeral held at Wash-

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ington National Cathedral. O'Connor retired from the high court in 2006 after more than two decades, and died Dec. 1 at age 93.

O'Connor was nominated in 1981 by President Ronald Reagan. A rancher's daughter who was largely unknown on the national scene until her appointment, she would come to be referred to by commentators as the nation's most powerful woman.

O'Connor wielded considerable influence on the nine-member court, generally favoring states in disputes with the federal government and often siding with police when they faced claims of violating people's rights. Her impact could perhaps best be seen, though, on the court's rulings on abortion. She twice helped form the majority in decisions that upheld and reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade*, the decision that said women have a constitutional right to abortion.

Thirty years after that decision, a more conservative court overturned *Roe*, and the opinion was written by the man who took her place, Justice Samuel Alito.

O'Connor was a top-ranked graduate of Stanford's law school in 1952, but quickly discovered that most large law firms at the time did not hire women. She nevertheless built a career that included service as a member of the Arizona Legislature and state judge before her appointment to the Supreme Court at age 51.

When she first arrived, there wasn't even a women's bathroom anywhere near the courtroom. That was soon rectified, but she remained the court's only woman until 1993.

In a speech before her casket lay in repose Monday, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor remembered O'Connor as a trailblazer and a "living example that women could take on any challenge, could more than hold their own in any spaces dominated by men and could do so with grace."

O'Connor retired at age 75, citing her husband's struggle with Alzheimer's disease. She later expressed regret that a woman had not been chosen to replace her, but would live to see a record four women serving on the high court.

President Barack Obama awarded O'Connor the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

She died in Phoenix of complications related to advanced dementia and a respiratory illness. Her survivors include a brother, three sons and grandchildren.

The family has asked that donations be made to iCivics, the group she founded to promote civics education.

Illegal crossings surge in remote areas as Congress, White House weigh major asylum limits

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

LUKEVILLE, Ariz. (AP) — Hundreds of dates are written on concrete-filled steel columns erected along the U.S. border with Mexico to memorialize when the Border Patrol has repaired illicit openings in the would-be barriers. Yet no sooner are fixes made than another column is sawed, torched and chiseled for large groups of migrants to enter, usually with no agents in sight.

The breaches stretch about 30 miles (48 kilometers) on a washboard gravel road west of Lukeville, an Arizona desert town that consists of an official border crossing, restaurant and duty-free shop. The repair dates are mostly since spring, when the flat desert region dotted with saguaro cactus became the busiest corridor for illegal crossings.

A Border Patrol tour in Arizona for news organizations, including The Associated Press, showed improvements in custody conditions and processing times, but flows are overwhelming. Chaotic scenes, including when daily arrivals averaged more than 7,000 across the border a week in December, are catnip for conservatives in Congress who want major limits on asylum. The numbers have nudged the White House and some congressional Democrats to consider major limits to asylum as part of a deal for Ukraine aid.

As Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas left closed-door talks with congressional leaders Friday, dozens of migrants from Senegal, Guinea and Mexico walked along the Arizona border wall built

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during Donald Trump's presidency, looking to surrender to agents. A Mexican woman walked briskly with her two daughters and five grandchildren, ages 2 to 7, after being dropped off by a bus in Mexico and instructed by guides.

"They told us where to go; to go straight," said Alicia Santay, of Guatemala, who waited in a Border Patrol tent in Lukeville for initial processing. Santay, 22, and her 16-year-old sister hoped to join their father in New York.

The dates when wall breaches were fixed are often bunched together, written in white letters against rust-colored steel. One cluster showed five dates from April 12 to Oct. 3. On Friday, agents drove looking for openings and found one on a column that was repaired twice — on Oct. 31 and again Dec. 5.

Smuggling organizations remove a few inches from the bottom of 30-foot (9.1-meter) steel poles, which agents say can take as little as a half-hour. Columns sway back and forth, like a cantilever swing, creating ample space for large groups to walk through. Welders often attach metal bars horizontally across several columns to prevent swinging, but there are plenty of other places to saw.

Agents say it takes up to an hour to drive from Lukeville along the gravel road to discover breaches — a large chunk of time when tending to so many migrants in custody.

"Our officers and agents are responding to large groups of migrants, which means that some of our agents aren't on the line, not really monitoring for some of those cuts," said Troy Miller, U.S. Customs and Border Protection's acting commissioner. "If we don't have anybody to respond, then you're going to see what you're seeing."

The number of daily arrivals is "unprecedented," Miller said, with illegal crossings topping 10,000 some days across the border in December. On Monday, CBP suspended cross-border rail traffic in the Texas cities of Eagle Pass and El Paso in response to migrants riding freight trains through Mexico, hopping off just before entering the U.S. The Lukeville border crossing is closed, as is a pedestrian entry in San Diego, so that more officials can be assigned to the migrant influx.

Arrests for illegal crossings topped 2 million for the first time each of the U.S. government's last two budget years, reflecting technological changes that have increased global mobility and a host of ills prompting people to leave their homes, including wealth inequality, natural disasters, political repression and organized crime.

Miller said solutions go well beyond CBP, which includes the Border Patrol, to other agencies whose responsibilities include long-term detention and asylum screenings. On cuts in the wall, Miller said Mexican authorities "need to step up."

Arrests in the Border Patrol's Tucson sector, which includes Lukeville, topped all nine sectors on the Mexican border from May to October, except June, according to the latest public figures. It is a throwback to the early 2000s before traffic shifted to Texas, but the demographics are much different.

Arrests of people in families neared 72,000 in the Tucson sector from Oct. 1 through Dec. 9, more than nine times the same period last year. That's a big change from when almost all migrants were adult men. Arrests of non-Mexicans topped 75,000, nearly quadruple the number from a year ago and more than half of all sector arrests.

Senegalese people accounted for more than 9,000 arrests in Tucson from Oct. 1 to Dec. 9, while arrests of people from Guinea and India each topped 4,000. Agents have encountered migrants from about four dozen Eastern hemisphere countries.

Agents who pick up migrants near the wall drive them to Lukeville to have photos taken on a mobile phone that starts their processing. They drive about 45 minutes to a station in Ajo that was built to detain 100 people but housed 325 on Friday. Some are bused to other Border Patrol sectors but most are sent to Tucson, about two hours away.

At a sprawl of white tents near Tucson International Airport that was built for about 1,000 people, some migrants are flown to the Texas border for processing. Others are released within two days, as mandated by a court order in the Tucson sector. CBP policy limits detention to 72 hours.

Most are released with notices to appear in immigration courts, which are backlogged with more than 3 million cases. Some are detained longer by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

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The tents are a far cry from 2021 in Donna, Texas, where more than 4,000 migrants, largely unaccompanied children, were held in a space designed for 250 under COVID-19 restrictions. Some stayed for weeks, relying on sleeping pads and foil blankets. In 2019, investigators found 900 people crammed in a cell for 125 in El Paso, with detainees standing on toilets for room to breathe. They wore soiled clothing for days or weeks.

Discussions in Congress may produce the most significant immigration legislation since 1996. Potential changes include more mandatory detention and broader use of a rule to raise thresholds for initial asylum screenings. While the higher screening standard has been applied to tens of thousands of migrants since May after entering the country illegally, they are not used in the Border Patrol's Tucson sector due to extraordinarily high flows.

In 2023, the Saudis dove further into sports. They are expected to keep it up in 2024

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

At the dawn of 2023, the specter of Saudi Arabia's growing influence on pro golf — and sports in general — served not only as a moral conundrum for players and their fans, but also, some argued, as an existential threat to the multibillion-dollar professional-sports industry itself.

Twelve months later, it's a different conversation, now virtually devoid of concern about the supposed menace of "sportswashing" and the line between "right" and "wrong," and more fixed on just how rich the Saudis might make all these athletes before they're done investing.

Two major events sparked the change: The June 6 announcement that the PGA Tour was looking to go into business with the very Saudi group that was paying for the kingdom's LIV Golf, which the tour had labeled as a threat. Then, six months later, the decision by the world's third-ranked player and an early resister of LIV, Jon Rahm, to move to that league for a contract reported in the neighborhood of \$500 million.

Making less-dramatic but almost equally important headlines were the continuing talks between the Saudis and leaders in pro tennis — and Saudi Arabia's ongoing push into global soccer, reflected most vividly by a decision that smoothed the way for the Saudis to host the sport's biggest event, the World Cup, in 2034.

"You're investing in sports, which is one of the few growth industries in the world," Dan Durbin, director of the Institute of Sports, Media and Society at USC, said of the Saudi strategy. "It is, as far as we can see, an almost endless growth industry."

The conversation over golf went front-and-center when Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, or PIF, the nation's sovereign wealth fund, was laying the groundwork for LIV in early 2022. Six-time major winner Phil Mickelson's interview, in which he called the Saudis "scary (expletives)" — a reference, in part, to the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi — set the dividing line in what was viewed as a good vs. evil stare down between the status quo and the Saudi disrupters.

All but ignored in the debate was how ingrained Saudi Arabia is in virtually all parts of the world economy — the Saudis gain most of their influence by supplying around 15% of the world's petroleum — and the inroads the kingdom was already making into sports.

One of soccer's biggest stars, Cristiano Ronaldo, had joined a Saudi team backed by the same investment fund that supported LIV in a deal worth a reported \$200 million a year. The Saudis made a reported \$500 million-a-year play to recruit another soccer icon, Lionel Messi, to its upstart domestic league. (Messi turned them down.) The PIF wealth fund owns the Premier League's Newcastle soccer club.

As the calendar turns to 2024, there's no sign of this slowing. The Saudis host a Formula One auto race that has come under scrutiny and had reportedly been considering buying the entire league from Liberty Media Corporation — a deal that didn't take off because Liberty didn't want to sell. They are looking to invest some \$5 billion into cricket's Indian Premier League with an eye on expanding it into other countries.

The ATP, which runs men's professional tennis, has a five-year deal to hold one of its biggest events in the Saudi port city of Jeddah. Talks between the Saudis and the women's tour are reportedly ongoing. In

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a sign of how the conversation has shifted, Billie Jean King, who began the fight for equal pay for women in sports in the 1970s, has said bringing the sport to the kingdom might not be all bad despite its long record of repressing women's rights.

"I don't think you really change unless you engage," she said earlier this year.

Durbin sees the kingdom's embrace of sports as a move for Saudi Arabia to be viewed as more than an oil-producing kingdom with a bad human-rights record. Some might call that the quintessential definition of "sportswashing."

"For decades, sports has been the center of soft diplomacy," he said. "You try to create a positive response and feeling about your ethics because you're holding to the rules of sports."

The end of 2023, and all of 2024, figure to be dominated by the results of months-long negotiations between the PGA Tour and the Saudi investment fund, which will ultimately determine the fate of LIV.

Rahm's move could be seen as a preemptive gamble based on acknowledgment of the reality that golf will eventually come together again (and if that turns out to be the case, there's nothing wrong with having an extra \$500 million in the bank when it does).

One of the Spaniard's biggest worries about moving was that he might get excluded from the Ryder Cup. Golf's prestigious team event — which pits the best from the U.S. against the best from Europe and where none of the players are paid to play — was considered more-or-less off limits to those who defected to LIV, especially on the European side.

Now, even LIV's biggest detractor at the outset, four-time major champion Rory McIlroy, has suggested the Ryder Cup gatekeepers consider easing their stance against LIV players competing for Europe.

His take on Rahm: "You can't judge someone for making a decision that they feel is the best for them," he told Sky Sports earlier this month. "Is it disappointing to me? Yes. But the landscape of golf changed on June 6."

In a telling sign of the impact Saudi Arabia's entrance into the golf scene has made, the top 10 players on the PGA Tour combined made \$86.6 million in prize money in the season that ended in 2022; in 2023, that number rose to \$124.1 million. Meanwhile, the top 10 on the LIV Tour made \$159.4 million in 2023.

It helps explain why, in 2024, the debate in golf and the rest of the sports world doesn't figure to center on whether all this change has been a good thing — but rather, on how big a piece of the sports universe the Saudi kingdom can buy.

"What you find is that when you're lining your pocket with some of that money, then it can't be 'dirty' money anymore," Durbin said.

Elf Bar and other e-cigarette makers dodged US customs and taxes after China's ban on vaping flavors

By MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In only two years, a small, colorful vaping device called Elf Bar has become the most popular disposable e-cigarette in the world, generating billions in sales and quickly emerging as the overwhelming favorite of underage U.S. teens who vape.

Last week, U.S. authorities publicly announced the first seizure of some of the company's products, part of an operation confiscating 1.4 million illegal, flavored e-cigarettes from China. Officials pegged the value of the items at \$18 million, including brands other than Elf Bar.

But the makers of Elf Bar and other Chinese e-cigarettes have imported products worth hundreds of millions of dollars while repeatedly dodging customs and avoiding taxes and import fees, according to public records and court documents reviewed by The Associated Press.

Records show the makers of disposable vapes routinely mislabel their shipments as "battery chargers," "flashlights" and other items, hampering efforts to block products that are driving teen vaping in the U.S.

"The steps toward regulating disposables have been very weak and that has enabled this problem to get bigger and bigger," said Eric Lindblom, a former Food and Drug Administration official.

Fruit-and-candy-flavored disposables began pouring into the U.S. shortly before Chinese regulators banned

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vaping flavors last year. Officials there said they were acting to protect children's health, but vaping executives and health experts note the ban came only after e-cigarettes began threatening sales of traditional cigarettes, which generate \$200 billion annually for China's state-run tobacco monopoly.

Disposable e-cigarettes may soon become the victim of their own success. From Australia to England, governments are moving toward banning the single-use products, citing underage use and environmental impact.

The global backlash could lead vaping entrepreneurs to focus even more on the U.S., where loopholes and lax enforcement make it easy to disguise e-cigarettes among the thousands of daily shipments arriving by sea and air.

'DISCREET' SHIPPING

Elf Bar is the lead product of Shenzhen iMiracle, a privately held company based in Shenzhen, the sprawling Chinese manufacturing hub that produces more than 95% of the world's e-cigarettes.

Elf Bar, Lost Mary and several other iMiracle brands are expected to generate \$3.5 billion to \$4 billion globally this year, according to industry analyst ECigIntelligence.

In the U.S., iMiracle recently abandoned the Elf Bar name due to a trademark dispute and efforts by regulators to seize its imports. Instead, its products are sold as EB Create in flavors like watermelon ice and frozen creamsicle.

A spokesman for iMiracle said the company stopped shipping Elf Bar to U.S. earlier this year and is trying to comply with regulators.

"All the Elf Bar-branded products you see in the U.S. are counterfeit, I'm pretty sure about this," said Jacques Xiang Li, who added that he'd only worked for iMiracle for three months and was still learning about its business.

When asked about EB Create e-cigarettes he said: "I can't tell you anything about that."

Details on the company's U.S. sales and activities are beginning to emerge in court documents.

Earlier this year, iMiracle was forced to drop the Elf Bar name after losing a trademark case to a smaller company that already sold its own products as Elf vapes.

At a 2022 court hearing in the case, U.S. distributors described skyrocketing sales.

Jon Glauser, of Demand Vape in Buffalo, N.Y., told a federal judge his company had sold more than \$132 million worth of Elf Bar products, accounting for a third of its yearly profits.

"We were selling it faster than we could get it in," Glauser said, according to the court transcript.

Glauser attributed Elf Bar's quick rise to its profit margin. Sellers make about a 30% profit, double that of other disposable e-cigarettes, he said.

iMiracle's parent company, Heaven Gifts, previously described how it could help customers evade import fees and taxes. Heaven Gifts' website advertised "discreet" shipping methods to buyers, including not mentioning e-cigarettes or its company name "anywhere on the package." Instead, the company said contents would be labeled as "atomizer, coil, tube, etc."

"We also mark a lower value to avoid tax," the website stated, adding that customers could suggest their own value for the shipment.

In June, Heaven Gifts announced on it would "go offline," shortly after the FDA directed customs officials to begin seizing shipments from the company.

Despite the update, the company's spokesman indicated Heaven Gifts remains in business and staffers continue using email accounts bearing its name. The spokesman did not respond to numerous follow-up questions about the company's business.

Neither Heaven Gifts nor iMiracle appear in customs data reviewed by the AP and compiled by Import-Genius, a global trade analytics company.

The seizure announced last week suggests part of the answer: The shipments arrived at Los Angeles International Airport, and air carriers are not required to disclose the same details about their cargo as ocean vessels. The e-cigarettes were mislabeled as toys, shoes and other items.

Ships docking in the U.S., which account for most Chinese imports, must provide information on suppliers, recipients and types of cargo they are carrying. But importers can obscure their identities and products.

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For example, U.S. recipient information is listed as “not available” for roughly 45 of over 100 shipments of e-cigarettes from China this year, according ImportGenius data. U.S. companies can avoid disclosure by using third-party shippers, called freight forwarders, who handle foreign goods on behalf of importers.

“All of this suggests that these companies are incredibly sophisticated, they know how to game this system and they are intentionally doing so,” said William George, research director for ImportGenius.

It’s likely most disposable e-cigarettes coming into the U.S. aren’t even declared as vaping products.

Esco Bars, one of Elf Bar’s chief U.S. rivals, imported 30 shipments from China this year labeled “atomizers,” a generic type of hardware that turns a liquid into a spray. The Texas-based company received the shipments, weighing about 25,000 pounds each, under its shipping arm, Affiliated Imports LLC. The shipments stopped in May, after the FDA placed Esco Bars on a list of banned imports.

Another disposable maker, Magellan Technology, routinely labeled its imports as “battery chargers,” records show.

Neither company responded to AP’s inquiries.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection did not make officials available for interviews, but pointed to the agency’s recent operation in Los Angeles with the FDA.

“The rise in illicit e-commerce demands that our agencies remain vigilant in intercepting shipments that could pose serious health risks to the public,” Troy Miller, a senior official with the border agency, said in a release.

FDA Commissioner Robert Califf said that agency is “committed to continuing to stem the flow of illegal e-cigarettes into the United States.”

U.S. tobacco companies say their e-cigarettes — which undergo FDA review and don’t come in fruity flavors — can’t compete with lower-priced disposables. In recent weeks both Reynolds American and Altria filed separate legal actions against iMiracle, Esco Bars and other disposable makers.

Documents filed by Reynolds with the U.S. International Trade Commission describe elaborate techniques for smuggling disposables into the country.

In a sworn affidavit, a former FDA investigator now working for Reynolds describes vape exhibitors at a recent conference removing hidden e-cigarettes from flashlights, “which is consistent with the fraudulent practice of Chinese manufacturers declaring the product as flashlights.”

Last week, the commission announced it would open an investigation into the matter.

‘NO FUTURE’ FOR VAPING IN CHINA

The rise of disposable e-cigarettes in the U.S. can be traced to actions by Chinese regulators.

China’s vaping sector is estimated to be worth \$28 billion, and the U.S. accounts for nearly 60% of the country’s vape exports, according to the China Electronics Chamber of Commerce.

Chinese authorities have encouraged those exports while at the same time drastically curtailing the country’s domestic vaping business, which is controlled by several hundred private companies.

The government brought vaping companies under control of its state-run tobacco administration, beginning with a prohibition on online sales in 2019 and culminating in a sweeping ban on all flavors except tobacco.

The flavor ban sent domestic sales for large Chinese manufacturers like RLX Technology plummeting over 50%. Many vape shops and smaller producers also closed, unable to obtain government-issued licenses needed to operate.

Authorities cited concerns over “unsafe additives, leaky e-juice and shoddy batteries.” But experts who have spent years in the country point to another cause: vaping’s encroachment on government tobacco sales.

The China National Tobacco Corp., the state-run monopoly, is the largest tobacco company in the world. In cooperation with its regulatory arm, the Tobacco Monopoly Administration, the pair controls the manufacture, marketing and pricing of all cigarettes made in China.

Between 2017 and 2020, e-cigarette sales increased more than 254%, according to data firm EuroMonitor. Those sales accrued exclusively to vaping entrepreneurs, not the government.

“The tobacco administration says, ‘Well, every e-cigarette sold means one less cigarette smoked,’ so they

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are going to regulate the hell out of them now," said Dr. Ray Yip, a public health consultant and former director of the Gates Foundation's China program.

Euromonitor expects e-cigarette sales of \$822 million this year inside China, down more than 70% from a nearly \$3 billion peak.

"Everyone in the industry has suffered from the government's ban because people like flavored vapes," said Lin Jian, who owns a vape shop in Shenzhen. Jian said he can no longer afford to hire employees to help at the shop, which barely covers his expenses.

Hu Leng, manager of a contract vape manufacturer in Shenzhen said: "There is no future in the domestic market. All of our products are sold to Europe and we're doing well for the time being."

EXPLOITING LOOPHOLES

Elf Bar-maker Shenzhen iMiracle is among the companies that have built their entire business on exports. In late 2021, the company began shipping to the U.S. to exploit a regulatory loophole: The FDA had prohibited kid-appealing flavors from reusable vapes, such as Juul, but not disposable ones.

An entrepreneur, Zhang Shengwei, founded Heaven Gifts in 2004 as an e-commerce platform for e-cigarettes. Over the years he invested in companies up and down the supply chain — makers of batteries, nicotine solutions and other components. Around 2018 the company began manufacturing its own vapes, according to iMiracle's spokesman. (Heaven Gifts and iMiracle share the same building address in Shenzhen.)

Shengwei's holdings now include more than a half-dozen companies, including a Hong Kong subsidiary, iMiracle HK Limited and VapeOnly Technology, which is listed as Elf Bar's manufacturer on some products. The company spokesman declined to make Shengwei available for an interview.

Vaping analysts are quick to separate companies like iMiracle from more established Chinese manufacturers like Smoore International, which have longstanding relationships with regulators and vaping brands around the world.

"This is much more of an opportunistic attempt to generate revenue quickly using the capacity that's there in Shenzhen," said Shane MacGuill, head of nicotine research for Euromonitor. "I would guess that a long-term view is not part of the strategic play here."

A spokesperson for China's tobacco administration did not respond to repeated requests for comment, but the country's tobacco regulations state that exported vapes "should comply with the laws, regulations and standards of the destination country." Since the FDA has declared Elf Bar illegal, iMiracle would seem to be violating Chinese law by shipping to the U.S.

But experts say such rules go unenforced.

"China basically couldn't care what happens to the products if they're selling for export," said Patricia Kovacevic, an attorney specializing in tobacco regulation. "If it's something for export, you are not held to any standard."

GLOBAL BACKLASH

As brands like Elf Bar have traveled around the world, more governments are introducing measures to block their use, often citing the environmental toll of electronic waste.

Australia announced a ban on disposables over the summer. This month, French lawmakers unanimously approved a bill to prohibit disposables.

Perhaps nowhere has the backlash been more drastic than in the U.K., where health authorities have long promoted vaping as a less harmful alternative for adult smokers.

In October, the country's conservative government called for legislation aimed at reducing underage vaping, including a potential ban on disposable products.

Vaping advocates say disposables have "massively" damaged the industry's reputation.

"Six months ago, I had a government that was very pro-vaping. Now I have a prime minister spending his time railing against vaping," said John Dunne, of U.K. Vaping Industry Association. "That to me is a tsunami of change and the only thing that's changed is disposables."

Dunne blamed some of the missteps on "very small, inexperienced teams of employees." He sees an improving picture, noting that iMiracle recently hired regulatory staffers to oversee compliance in Europe

and the U.K. The company also recently said it would drop some of its dessert and soft drink-based flavors. But even as iMiracle appears to be pulling back on disposables in the U.K., the company is already pushing new products.

Last month, vape shops began promoting a new offering from iMiracle's U.K. subsidiary: TACJA nicotine pouches.

The pouches are similar to nicotine gum and less messy than traditional chewing tobacco. They come in colorful, plastic containers displaying their flavor, strength and the tagline: "powered by Elf Bar."

One Instagram post is typical of the new advertising pitch: "Enjoy next level of satisfaction and unrivalled convenience, all with the same great Elf Bar taste you know and love."

Texas governor signs bill that lets police arrest migrants who enter the US illegally

By VALERIE GONZALEZ and PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

BROWNSVILLE, Texas (AP) — Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Monday approved sweeping new powers that allow police to arrest migrants who illegally cross the U.S. border and give local judges authority to order them to leave the country, testing the limits of how far a state can go to enforce immigration laws.

Opponents have called the measure the most dramatic attempt by a state to police immigration since a 2010 Arizona law — denounced by critics as the "Show Me Your Papers" bill — that was largely struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court. Immigration enforcement is a federal responsibility, and Texas' law is also likely to face swift legal challenges.

The law, which takes effect in March, allows any Texas law enforcement officer to arrest people who are suspected of entering the country illegally. Once in custody, they could either agree to a Texas judge's order to leave the U.S. or be prosecuted on misdemeanor charges of illegal entry. Migrants who don't leave could face arrest again under more serious felony charges.

Abbott, who signed the law in front of a section of border fence in Brownsville, predicted the number of people crossing illegally into Texas would drop by "well over 50%, maybe 75%." He did not offer evidence for that estimate.

"The consequences of it are so extreme that the people being smuggled by the cartels, they will not want to be coming into the state of Texas," he said.

The law adds another tension point over immigration amid a struggle between the White House and Senate negotiators to reach a deal on border security. Republicans in Congress are demanding changes to the immigration system in exchange for any help for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs.

Texas Republicans have increasingly challenged the U.S. government's authority over immigration, saying President Joe Biden's administration isn't doing enough to control the 1,950-mile (3,149-kilometer) southern border. Texas has bused more than 65,000 migrants to cities across America since August 2022 and recently installed razor wire along the banks of the Rio Grande, which has snagged and injured some asylum-seekers.

The U.S. government on Monday temporarily shut down two railroad border crossings in Texas, a move that rail operators said would hamper trade ahead of Christmas. Troy Miller, U.S. Customs and Border Protection's acting commissioner, said the closures at Eagle Pass and El Paso were a response to more migrants traveling on freight trains, particularly over the last week.

Miller said authorities are seeing "unprecedented" arrivals at the border, topping 10,000 crossings on some days this month.

Shortly after Abbott signed the new law, the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas said it would challenge the measure in court. More than 20 congressional Democrats also signed a letter urging the U.S. Justice Department to sue to stop the law, known as Senate Bill 4.

"SB 4 is dangerous for the people of Texas and interferes with the federal government's exclusive authority over immigration and foreign affairs," the letter read.

Mexico's government also has rebuked the measure. Under bilateral and international agreements, Mexico

is required to accept deportations of its own citizens, but not those of other countries. Under the Texas law, migrants ordered to leave would be sent to ports of entry along the border with Mexico, even if they are not Mexican citizens. In September and October, Venezuelans were the largest nationality arrested for illegally crossing the U.S. border.

During debate in the Texas House in November, GOP state Rep. David Spiller pushed back against concerns that the law would be used as a dragnet to arrest immigrants statewide. He said enforcement would mostly take place in border counties. But he also rebuffed several efforts by Democrats to narrow the law, including a proposed carve-out for police on college campuses.

Because the illegal entry charge is a misdemeanor, which has a statute of limitation of two years, Spiller has said the law will not be used to target immigrants who have long been settled in the U.S.

"This is not, 'Round up everyone who is here illegally and ship them back to Mexico,'" he said during debate over the bill.

Opponents have accused Texas Republicans of using the law as a vehicle to force the Supreme Court's new conservative majority to revisit its landmark 2012 Arizona decision. At the time, Justice Anthony Kennedy said Arizona may have "understandable frustrations" with immigrants who are in the country illegally but that it can't pursue policies that "undermine federal law."

US envoys work for a new hostage release deal and a scale-down of the Israel-Hamas war

By TARA COPP, MELANIE LIDMAN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — The head of the CIA jetted to Europe for talks with Israeli and Qatari officials Monday, sounding out the potential for a deal on a new cease-fire and the release of hostages in Gaza as the United States defense secretary spoke to Israeli military leaders about scaling back major combat operations against Hamas.

Still, there was no sign that a shift in the war was imminent after more than two months of devastating bombardment and fighting. Fierce battles raged in northern Gaza, where residents said rescue workers were searching for the dead and the living under buildings flattened by Israeli strikes.

Pressure is growing as France, the United Kingdom and Germany — some of Israel's closest allies — joined global calls for a cease-fire over the weekend. Israeli protesters have demanded the government relaunch talks with Hamas on releasing more hostages after three were mistakenly killed by Israeli troops while waving a white flag.

U.S. officials have repeatedly expressed concern about the large number of civilian deaths in Gaza. But after talks with Israeli officials Monday, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said, "This is Israel's operation. I'm not here to dictate timelines or terms." The U.S. has vetoed calls for a cease-fire at the United Nations and has rushed munitions to Israel.

The U.N. Security Council delayed to Tuesday a vote on an Arab-sponsored resolution calling for a halt to hostilities to allow unhindered access to humanitarian aid. Diplomats said negotiations were taking place to get the U.S. to abstain or vote "yes" on the resolution.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that Israel will keep fighting until it ends Hamas rule in Gaza, crushes its formidable military capabilities and frees hostages still held in Gaza since the deadly Oct. 7 attack inside Israel that ignited the war. Militants killed some 1,200 people and abducted 240 others in the attack.

The war has killed more than 19,000 Palestinians and demolished much of the north, turning it into a moonscape. Some 1.9 million Palestinians — nearly 85% of Gaza's population — have fled their homes, with most packing into U.N.-run shelters and tent camps in the southern part of the besieged territory.

HOSTAGE TALKS

In an apparent sign that talks on a hostage deal were growing more serious, CIA Director William Burns met in Warsaw with the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency and the prime minister of Qatar, a U.S. official said.

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It was the first known meeting of the three since the end of a weeklong cease-fire in late November, during which some 100 hostages — including a number of foreign nationals — were freed in exchange for the release of around 240 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the talks were not “at a point where another deal is imminent.”

Aiming to increase public pressure on the Israeli government, Hamas released a video showing three older Israeli hostages sitting in white T-shirts and pleading for Israel to bring their immediate release.

The comments were likely made under duress, but the video signaled Hamas wants to move on to discussions of releasing sick and old men from captivity. Israel has said it wants around 19 women and two children freed first. Hamas says the women include soldiers, for whom it is expected to demand a higher price in terms of prisoner releases.

Hamas and other militants are still holding an estimated 129 captives. Hamas has said no more hostages will be released until the war ends.

SCALING DOWN THE WAR

Austin, who arrived in Israel with Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. CQ Brown, said he and Israeli officials exchanged “thoughts on how to transition from high intensity operations” in Gaza and how to increase the flow of humanitarian aid.

American officials have called for targeted operations aimed at killing Hamas leaders, destroying tunnels and rescuing hostages. U.S. President Joe Biden warned Dec. 12 that Israel is losing international support because of its “indiscriminate bombing.”

Speaking alongside Austin, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said only that “the war will take time.”

Israeli military spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said the Israeli chief of staff met with Austin and Brown and presented “plans for the continuation of the battle in the coming stages.”

European countries appear to be losing patience. “Far too many civilians have been killed in Gaza,” European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell posted on X, formerly Twitter.

Under U.S. pressure, Israel provided more precise evacuation instructions earlier in December as troops moved into the southern city of Khan Younis. Still, casualties have continued to mount and Palestinians say nowhere in Gaza is safe as Israel carries out strikes in all parts of the territory.

Israel reopened its main cargo crossing with Gaza to allow more aid in — also after a U.S. request. But the amount is less than half of prewar imports, even as needs have soared and fighting hinders delivery in many areas. Israel blocked entry of all goods into Gaza soon after the war started, and weeks later began allowing a small amount of aid in through Egypt.

MORE DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

At least 110 people were killed in Israeli strikes Sunday on residential buildings in the urban Jabaliya refugee camp in northern Gaza, Munir al-Boursh, a senior Health Ministry official, told Al Jazeera television.

Fierce fighting continued Monday in Jabaliya and the Gaza City districts of Zaytoun and Shijaiyah, where tens of thousands of Palestinians remain trapped, crowded in homes or schools.

In Jabaliya, first responders and residents searched the rubble of many collapsed buildings. “They use their hands and shovels,” said Amal Radwan, who is staying at a U.N. shelter there. “We need bulldozers and above all the bombing to stop.”

More than 19,400 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza, which has said that most are women and minors and that thousands more are buried under rubble. The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths.

Israel’s military says 127 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. It says it has killed thousands of militants, without providing evidence.

Israel blames civilian deaths on Hamas, saying it uses them as human shields. But the military rarely comments on individual strikes.

REGIONAL TENSIONS

Early Tuesday in Bahrain, Austin said that the U.S. and other nations have created a new force to protect commercial ships passing through the Red Sea from attacks by Yemen’s Houthi rebels. The Houthis

say their attacks aim to end Israel's offensive in Gaza, and their campaign has prompted a growing list of companies to halt operations in the major trade route.

"This is an international challenge that demands collective action," Austin said in statement.

Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah have traded fire along the border nearly every day since the war began. And in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, over 300 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the war, including four overnight during an Israeli military raid in the Faraa refugee camp, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry.

This has been the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since 2005. Most have been killed during military raids, which often ignite gunbattles, or during violent demonstrations.

AP Sports Story of the Year: Realignment, stunning demise of Pac-12 usher in super conference era

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

The commissioners from three of the remaining power conferences in college sports appeared together in a crowded convention center ballroom and were asked to ponder what was wrought by three tumultuous years of realignment that culminated in the destruction of a 108-year-old institution.

"Obviously, not happy about the ultimate outcome to the Pac-12, but I'm in this position to give us the best options and future possible and we took advantage of the moment." Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark explained during the session in Las Vegas.

That moment came over a span of six weeks this past summer. The Pac-12 was ripped apart and redistributed by its competitors, regardless of geography. The stunning demolition, set in motion a year earlier, was accelerated when the Pac-12 couldn't secure a media rights deal to match its competitors.

The redrawing of the college sports map and demise of the Pac-12, a conference that claims the most NCAA championships and a legacy that includes the likes of Jackie Robinson, Bill Walton, Aaron Rodgers, Katie Ledecky, Tiger Woods and Cheryl Miller, made conference realignment The Associated Press Sports Story of the Year.

All of the moves by 2023 — and it was hard to keep count — will take effect in 2024, which will go down as one of the most transformative in the history of college athletics.

Oregon and Washington pledged to join the Big Ten, where Southern California and UCLA had already committed. Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado and Utah fled for the Big 12. Stanford and California found a life line in the Atlantic Coast Conference, a league with all its football-playing members currently in the Eastern time zone.

The four new West Coast Big Ten schools will be no closer than 1,500 miles from any of their new conference rivals.

Along with Texas and Oklahoma relocating from the Big 12 to the Southeastern Conference, all will join their new leagues before the start of next college football season.

"These are seismic moves," former Fox Sports executive Bob Thompson said.

The end of the Pac-12 ushered in the super conference era and laid bare the bottom line of college sports.

"I don't know what the institutions that are involved will say was the motivation, but it was money in every case," former Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby said.

Next year, the Big Ten will have 18 schools, the Big 12 and SEC 16 each and the ACC 17 football-playing members, including SMU in Dallas. The Pac-12 is likely to survive with Oregon State and Washington State rebuilding the conference, but it will no longer reside among college sports' super wealthy.

The Power Five is now a Power Four, but within that there is a Big Two. The Big Ten and SEC now have media rights deals that will allow them to provide yearly payouts to their members of upwards of \$70 million. The ACC and Big 12 are hoping to stay within \$30 million per year per school of those stratospheric numbers.

This all comes as the prospect of major college football players being directly paid by schools becomes more realistic. Just two weeks ago, NCAA President Charlie Baker proposed a plan to do exactly that.

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"How much of the realignment moves are to position these universities for better success in the NIL world?" Thompson asked.

The frantic culmination of this round of realignment came from late July to early September, but the first domino was tipped in the summer of 2021 when it was revealed that Texas and Oklahoma were bolting the Big 12 for the SEC. That, said ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips, cleared the decks for schools eager to "take advantage of free agency."

When the best the Pac-12 could do was a partnership with Apple that had a smaller annual guarantee than those of the ACC and Big 12, it sent schools shopping for a better deal.

"I don't know that the four members that came to the Big 12 were moving toward something as much as they were trying to ensure that they didn't go down with the ship, relative to the Pac-12," Bowsby said.

Conference realignment has been a part of college sports for about as long as games have been game on campus, primarily driven by schools and leagues jockeying for prestige, better competition and more robust revenue streams.

The most recent round of realignment felt more predatory. Survival for the fittest.

"In short, I think it was unnecessary," Bowsby said. "I don't I don't think the college athletics ecosystem is better with the absence of the Pac-12."

The top of college sports should be heading into a few years of relative peace when it comes to realignment. Each of the remaining power conferences is locked into a media rights deal through at least the 2029-30 school year.

Thompson said he believes the future of major college football could be a super league similar to what has been proposed in European soccer.

"So, let's say it's the top 40 brands or the top whatever brands in football only, they go off and they do the super league and everything else stays at the conference level," Thompson said. "People may decide that maybe that regionality we had a while ago wasn't a bad thing for all the other sports."

A new competitive reality is also coming to college football and it could be harsh for some schools.

"I think there are some in the larger conferences that will clearly be marginalized, and the money won't be worth it because they'll there'll be traditional losers on a regular basis," Bowsby said. "And I think there will institutions that have been traditional winners that will be turn into institutions that are playing in the middle of the pack most of the time, that's going to be a big adjustment."

Deadly storm batters Northeastern US, knocking out power, grounding flights and flooding roads

By PATRICK WHITTLE and LISA RATHKE Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — A storm barreled into the Northeastern U.S. on Monday, flooding roads and downing trees, knocking out power to hundreds of thousands, forcing flight cancellations and school closures, and killing at least four people.

More than 5 inches (13 centimeters) of rain fell in parts of New Jersey and northeastern Pennsylvania by mid-morning, and parts of several other states got more than 4 inches (10 centimeters), according to the National Weather Service. Wind gusts reached nearly 70 mph (113 kph) along the southern New England shoreline.

Power was knocked out for hundreds of thousands of customers in an area stretching north from Virginia through New England, including nearly 423,000 in Maine and about 200,000 in Massachusetts as of Monday night, according to poweroutage.us.

The weather service issued flood and flash-flood warnings for New York City and the surrounding area, parts of Pennsylvania, upstate New York, western Connecticut, western Massachusetts and parts of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.

An 89-year-old Hingham, Massachusetts, man was killed early Monday when high winds caused a tree to fall on a trailer, authorities said. In Windham, Maine, police said part of a tree fell and killed a man who was removing debris from his roof.

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In Catskill, New York, a driver was killed after the vehicle went around a barricade on a flooded road and was swept into the Catskill Creek, the Times Union reported. A man was pronounced dead in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, after he was found in a submerged vehicle Monday morning.

On Sunday in South Carolina, one person died when their vehicle flooded on a road in a gated community in Mount Pleasant.

Five months after flooding inundated Vermont's capital city of Montpelier, water entered the basements of some downtown businesses as the city monitored the level of the Winooski River, officials said. Authorities in the village of Moretown, Vermont, urged residents to evacuate some 30 to 50 homes because of flooding.

However, the city announced Monday night that the river was receding and forecasts predict the rain will taper off overnight.

"Several businesses needed to pump water from basements but damage was minimal due to many basements being empty as a precaution following the July flood," the city's statement said.

Three people were rescued from a home in Jamaica and another in Waterbury when that person's vehicle was swept away by floodwaters, said Vermont Public Safety Commissioner Jennifer Morrison at a press conference with the governor. A shelter was set up in Barre and Morrison urged people to stay off the roads Monday night and not drive through floodwaters as the rivers are expected to rise.

Some schools canceled classes or sent students home early due to the storm. A numbers of roads were also closed around the state due to flooding, including in Londonderry and Ludlow, the southern Vermont communities that were hit hard by flooding in July.

"Although there will be damage to infrastructure, homes and businesses, we do not expect this to be the same scale as July," said Gov. Phil Scott. "That being said, some of the places that were impacted in July are currently experiencing flooding once again. So for them, this is July and it's a real gut punch."

Some schools canceled classes or sent students home early due to the storm. A numbers of roads were also closed around the state due to flooding, including in Londonderry and Ludlow, the southern Vermont community that were hit hard by flooding in July.

Windspeeds exceeded 60 mph (97 kph) in Maine, which was the site of widespread damage to trees and structures, representatives for Maine's largest utility said. Central Maine Power said it anticipated a "multi-day restoration effort" and crews Monday evening remained unable to safely use bucket trucks or to start making repairs.

Heavy rain and high tides caused flooding along the Jersey Shore, leading authorities to block off roads near Barnegat Bay in Bay Head and Mantoloking. The Delaware River spilled over its banks in suburban Philadelphia, leading to road closures. In the suburb of Washington Crossing, crews placed barriers along roadways and worked to clear fallen tree limbs. Seven people died after flash flooding in that area over the summer.

Many flights were cancelled or delayed across the region. Boston's Logan International Airport grounded all flights Monday morning because of the poor conditions, leading to more than 100 canceled flights and about 375 delays, according to the flight-tracking service FlightAware. At New York City area airports, nearly 80 flights were canceled and more than 90 were delayed.

In Rhode Island, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers closed parts of Providence's hurricane barrier system to prevent flooding from storm surge, Mayor Brett Smiley said. The Providence River gates were closed in the morning and another gate was scheduled to close. City Hall in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, was closed due to leaks and water damage from its landmark tower, the city posted online.

In New York City, high winds caused the temporary closure of the Verrazzano Bridge. It reopened later Monday morning, but with a ban on large vehicles.

The storm moved up the East Coast on Saturday and Sunday, breaking rainfall records and requiring water rescues. It brought unseasonably warm temperatures of more than 60 degrees (16 degrees Celsius) to the Northeast on Monday.

In South Carolina on Sunday, the tide in Charleston Harbor reached 9.86 feet (3 meters) just before noon, which was the fourth-highest reading ever.

"This was a tough and frustrating day for our citizens, as historic high tides came up and over the land

in the city, flooding cars, homes, businesses and streets," Charleston Mayor John Tecklenburg said, adding there were no reports of serious injuries.

Monday's rain and wind came a week after a storm caused flooding and power outages in the Northeast after spawning deadly tornadoes in Tennessee.

Jonathan Majors' Marvel ouster after assault conviction throws years of Disney's plans into disarray

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Marvel had more riding on Jonathan Majors than perhaps any other actor. Now it's parting ways with him, and throwing years of plans for its cinematic universe in disarray.

Marvel Studios and the Walt Disney Co. dropped Majors from all future projects following the actor's conviction for assault and harassment on Monday, according to a person close to the studio who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

The swift move by Disney marked a stunning about-face for an actor who had been one of Hollywood's fastest-rising stars. A Manhattan jury on Monday found the 34-year-old Majors guilty of one misdemeanor assault charge and one harassment violation for a March altercation with his then-girlfriend Grace Jabbari.

Majors, who was acquitted of a different assault charge and of aggravated harassment, will be sentenced on Feb. 6. He declined to comment as he left the courthouse. Majors' attorney, Priya Chaudhry, said in a statement that "it is clear that the jury did not believe Grace Jabbari's story of what happened in the SUV because they found that Mr. Majors did not intentionally cause any injuries to her."

"Mr. Majors still has faith in the process and looks forward to fully clearing his name," said Chaudhry.

As the superhero studio prepared phase five of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it cast the highly acclaimed Majors as the antagonist Kang the Conqueror. The character was to span several films and series as the Marvel Cinematic Universe's next-phase answer to Thanos, the villain of "Avengers: Endgame."

Majors had already appeared in "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania" and the first two seasons of "Loki." He was to star in "Avengers: The Kang Dynasty," dated for release in May 2026.

The future of "The Kang Dynasty" is now unclear. Disney declined to comment on whether it will recast the role of Kang or pivot in a new direction.

The studio has been preparing for the possibility of Majors' exit from the franchise. But Marvel was limited in its ability to fashion rewrites due to the screenwriters strike that ran from May to late September. The studio recently hired screenwriter Michael Waldron to rework "The Kang Dynasty."

For Marvel, Majors' departure adds to a series of recent setbacks. Though its box-office success — nearly \$30 billion worldwide from 33 films — is unsurpassed in movie history, the superhero factory has recently seen some atypical struggles. "The Marvels," released in November, has been the MCU's worst performer in theaters, with \$204 million in worldwide ticket sales.

Majors also recently starred as a troubled amateur bodybuilder in "Magazine Dreams," which made an acclaimed debut at the Sundance Film Festival in January and was acquired by the Disney-owned indie distributor Searchlight Pictures. Following its premiere, an Oscar nomination for Majors was widely predicted.

"Magazine Dreams" had been dated to open in theaters in Dec. 8. But ahead of Majors' trial, Searchlight removed the film from its release calendar. Instead, on Dec. 8 text messages from Majors were read in the fifth day of the trial. In one, Majors begged Jabbari not to seek medical attention for a head injury sustained in 2022, warning she had "no perspective of what could happen" if the truth got out.

In late February as "Creed III," starring Majors alongside Michael B. Jordan, was being released, Majors spoke in an interview with The Associated Press in the neighborhood of Chelsea, just a few blocks away from where his fight with Jabbari would weeks later spill out onto New York streets.

Majors then sounded acutely aware that his rapid new fame carried the risk of a downfall.

"Though I've not seen the boogeyman, I know it's out there," Majors said. "And I've been around to know it's comin'. I won't go down my rabbit hole of death, but it's comin'. But you outrun it. You just stay out of the frame. I'll stay out of the frame."

Biden's push for Ukraine aid stalls in Senate as negotiations over border restrictions drag on

By STEPHEN GROVES, LISA MASCARO and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's push to have Congress replenish wartime aid for Ukraine as part of a deal on border and immigration policy changes will almost certainly drag into next year.

The Senate, which had postponed its holiday recess, returned to Washington on Monday after negotiators worked through the weekend on the border legislation, trying to reach an agreement that could unlock the Republican votes for Biden's \$110 billion package of aid for Ukraine, Israel and other security priorities.

But senators said they still had plenty of work ahead, and it remained uncertain how many more days the Senate will remain in session this week. Barely half of the senators returned for a Monday evening vote.

"Obviously we need time," said Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, the top Democratic negotiator.

The delay heaps more uncertainty on the future of the Biden administration's priority of providing support against Russia's invasion. It also puts a potential pause on politically fraught negotiations over immigration and border security policy, though Senate negotiators planned to continue working on the package.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the negotiations were "among the most difficult things we've done in recent memory."

"Everyone knows that something should be done to fix our broken immigration system," he said in a Senate floor speech to start the week. "But we can't do so by compromising our values. Finding the middle ground is exceptionally hard."

The House has already departed for the year as Congress settles into a long winter's break. Lawmakers aren't scheduled to return until the second week of January, and they will then need to tend to other matters besides the Ukraine funding, including facing a partial shutdown in mid-January if Congress can't pass a government funding package.

But as the Senate undertook the first substantial rewrite of immigration and border security law in decades, Republicans insisted they would not agree to rushing legislation.

"Getting this agreement right and producing legislative text is going to require some time," Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said on the Senate floor.

Schumer had scheduled additional work days this week in hopes of pushing the Ukraine aid through the chamber, but made no mention of a vote on the package on Monday. He said both Republicans and Democrats would need to make more concessions and it would take "some more time to get it done."

Members of the core Senate negotiating group — Murphy and Sens. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent, and James Lankford, an Oklahoma Republican — met with White House staff on Monday and planned to continue meeting throughout the week.

"We're all going to be back in January, but it's going to take a while to be able to finish up all the text," Lankford said.

The weeks-long wait comes as the Defense Department says it has nearly run out of available funds for supporting Ukraine's defense. In a letter to Congress, the Pentagon notified lawmakers last week that will soon be transferring more than \$1 billion to replenish stockpiles sent to Ukraine, with no further funds available as it maintains the United States' own military readiness.

"Once these funds are obligated, the Department will have exhausted the funding available to us for security assistance to Ukraine," according to the letter obtained by The Associated Press.

The department said "it is essential that Congress act without delay" on the pending supplemental request.

Ukrainian forces tried to launch a counteroffensive this year, but faced dug-in Russian troops, minefields and other hazards. They struggled to make any significant gains.

As the conflict grinds towards the end of a second year, U.S. public support has waned for sending billions of dollars more in weapons and economic aid. The European Union, too, had to push into the new year a plan to supply Ukraine with \$54.5 billion after a veto from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a right-wing leader who is on good terms with Russian President Vladimir Putin as well as Donald Trump,

the former president and front-runner for the Republican nomination next year.

As his country scrapes low on money to repel Russia, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has traveled the world to ask for support. He elicited praise from Republicans after meeting with them in the Capitol last week, but the conservatives remained unmoved and in no hurry to approve Biden's emergency funding request.

Republicans have said there is still time to redouble support before Ukraine's defense suffers. Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa said that since the European Union put off sending Kyiv more money until the new year, he thinks the U.S. can as well.

"If it's OK for them, it's surely OK for us," he said.

Dozens of Republican House members have signaled they won't support continued Ukraine aid, and even GOP senators who in the past have been stalwart advocates of the Ukraine war effort have insisted that Congress also pass new border restrictions.

Biden has offered to compromise on border and immigration policy, and top White House officials have joined the Senate negotiations, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Negotiators have closed in on a list of immigration enforcement measures, including detaining people who claim asylum at the border and granting nationwide authority to quickly remove migrants who have been in the U.S. for less than two years. They have also agreed on raising the initial threshold for people to enter an asylum claim in credible fear screenings.

The White House has tried to preserve an immigration program known as humanitarian parole. The Biden administration has leaned heavily on the use of humanitarian parole as part of its policy of providing legal pathways for some migrants to enter the country while beefing up consequences for those who don't use those pathways. But Republicans have objected — and even sued to stop it — saying that the administration is essentially bypassing Congress and improperly letting migrants into the country who normally wouldn't qualify.

Still, Biden's willingness to make concessions in the negotiations has alarmed immigration advocates and drawn criticism from influential Hispanic Democrats.

On a conference call with reporters Monday, advocates decried the policies under consideration as a return to the strategies pursued by Trump that left large numbers of migrants waiting in Mexico to apply for asylum in the U.S.

"If you have asylum seekers pushed back into Mexico, it's going to be extremely dangerous," said Kerri Talbot, executive director of The Immigration Hub.

The senators have also described their work as a complex undertaking as they delve into laws that for years have been at the center of intense legal and political fights.

"As we get into the text, it's really hard," said Murphy, but he added, "I think as Ukraine's peril becomes more serious and more immediate, the urgency to get this done will rise."

The late Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court, honored as trailblazer

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, was remembered Monday as a trailblazer who never lost sight of how the high court's decisions affected all Americans.

O'Connor, an Arizona native who was an unwavering voice of moderate conservatism for more than two decades, died Dec. 1 at age 93. Mourners at the court on Monday included Vice President Kamala Harris, the first woman to serve in her role, and her husband Doug Emhoff.

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor spoke at a private ceremony that included the nine justices and retired Justice Anthony Kennedy, as well as O'Connor's family and court colleagues.

"She would often say, 'It was good to be the first, but I don't want to be the last,'" Sotomayor said of O'Connor's distinction as the first woman. She lived to see a record four women serving on the high court.

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"For the four us, and for so many others of every background and aspiration, Sandra was a living example that women could take on any challenge, could more than hold their own in any spaces dominated by men and could do so with grace," Sotomayor said.

O'Connor's body lay in repose after her casket was carried up the court steps with her seven grandchildren serving as honorary pallbearers. It passed under the iconic words engraved on the pediment, "Equal Justice Under Law," before being placed in the court's Great Hall for the public to pay their respects.

Funeral services are set for Tuesday at Washington National Cathedral, where President Joe Biden and Chief Justice John Roberts are scheduled to speak.

O'Connor was nominated in 1981 by President Ronald Reagan and confirmed by the Senate, ending 191 years of male exclusivity on the high court. A rancher's daughter who was largely unknown on the national scene until her appointment, she received more letters than any other member in the court's history in her first year and would come to be referred to by commentators as the nation's most powerful woman.

O'Connor had "an extraordinary understanding of the American people," and never lost sight of how high court rulings affected ordinary Americans, Sotomayor said.

She was also instrumental in bringing the justices together with regular lunches, barbecues and trips to the theater. "She understood that personal relationships are critical to working together," the justice said.

O'Connor wielded considerable influence on the nine-member court, generally favoring states in disputes with the federal government and often siding with police when they faced claims of violating people's rights. Her impact could perhaps best be seen, though, on the court's rulings on abortion. She twice helped form the majority in decisions that upheld and reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade*, the decision that said women have a constitutional right to abortion.

Thirty years after that decision, a more conservative court overturned *Roe*, and the opinion was written by the man who took her place, Justice Samuel Alito.

O'Connor grew up riding horses, rounding up cattle and driving trucks and tractors on the family's sprawling Arizona ranch and developed a tenacious, independent spirit.

She was a top-ranked graduate of Stanford's law school in 1952, but quickly discovered that most large law firms at the time did not hire women. One Los Angeles firm offered her a job as a secretary. When she first arrived, there wasn't even a women's bathroom anywhere near the courtroom. That was soon rectified, but she remained the court's only woman until 1993.

She built a career that included service as a member of the Arizona Legislature and a state judge before her appointment to the Supreme Court at age 51.

O'Connor retired at age 75, citing her husband's struggle with Alzheimer's disease as her primary reason for leaving the court. John O'Connor died three years later, in 2009. After her retirement, she expressed regret that a woman had not been chosen to replace her.

She remained active, sitting as a judge on several federal appeals courts, advocating for judicial independence and serving on the Iraq Study Group. President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

"She changed something," said Karen DiMario, 62, of Lake Forest, Illinois, who came to pay her respects with her husband Joe DiMario, 63. O'Connor's life and experiences brought an important perspective to the court that had long been lacking, and her centrist reasoning had strong legal, rather than political, underpinnings, the couple said.

She died in Phoenix of complications related to advanced dementia and a respiratory illness. Her survivors include her brother, three sons, Scott, Brian and Jay, as well as her grandchildren.

The family has asked that donations be made to iCivics, the group she founded to promote civics education.

The last justice who lay in repose at the court was Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second female justice. After her death in 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, mourners passed by her casket outside the building, on the portico at the top of the steps.

YouTube mom who gave parenting advice, Ruby Franke, pleads guilty in child abuse case

By AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

A Utah mother of six who gave parenting advice on YouTube pleaded guilty Monday to child abuse charges and will go to prison for trying to convince her two youngest children they were evil, possessed and needed to be punished to repent.

Ruby Franke stood shackled in gray and white jail clothing as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath before pleading guilty to each of her first three charges. On the fourth, she fought back some emotion before saying: "With my deepest regret and sorrow for my family and my children, guilty."

Judge John J. Walton scheduled sentencing for Feb. 20 after accepting the plea agreement, which described new details of the abuse the children endured, including the claims that they were possessed. Under the plea agreement, Franke agreed to serve a prison term and the sentences will run consecutively. Sentencing would be up to the judge.

Franke pleaded not guilty to two other counts, court records said, and was returned to custody after the hearing.

Under Utah law, second-degree aggravated child abuse can be charged if that person knowingly or intentionally inflicts serious physical injury to a child or causes or permits another to inflict serious physical injury to their child. Each charge carries a sentence of one to 15 years in prison.

Winward Law said in a statement Friday that the abuse occurred while Franke was influenced by a relationship counselor who led her to "a distorted sense of morality."

"Ruby Franke is a devoted mother and is also a woman committed to constant improvement," Winward Law said in a statement. Franke initially believed that her co-defendant Jodi Hildebrandt "had the insight to offer a path to continual improvement," but said that Hildebrandt "took advantage of this quest and twisted it into something heinous."

In the plea agreement, Franke admits that she tortured her son from May 22 through Aug. 30 by forcing him into hours of physical tasks, summer work outdoors without adequate water and "repeated and serious sunburns" that blistered. He was denied food or given very plain meals, and he was isolated from other people without access to books, notebooks or electronics.

After he tried to run away in July, his hands and feet were regularly bound, sometimes with handcuffs.

At times, ropes were used to tie together handcuffs that secured his hands and feet as he lay on his stomach, lifting his arms and legs off the ground and injuring his wrists and ankles, the plea agreement said.

Franke also admitted to kicking her son while wearing boots, holding his head under water and smothering his mouth and nose with her hands, according to the plea agreement.

"He was also told that everything that was being done to him were acts of love," the agreement states.

Franke acknowledged similarly abusing her 9-year-old daughter by forcing her to work outside, run on dirt roads barefoot, and go without food and water.

"She was also repeatedly told she was evil and possessed, the punishments were necessary for her to be obedient and repent, and these things were being done to her in order to help her," the plea agreement said. The girl "was convinced" what her mother said was true, the agreement said.

Franke and Hildebrandt were arrested on Aug. 30 after Franke's 12-year-old son escaped from Hildebrandt's house in the southern Utah city of Ivins and asked a neighbor to call police, according to the 911 call released by the St. George Police Department.

The boy was emaciated and had duct tape around his ankles and wrists but wouldn't say why, the caller reported.

"I think he's been ... he's been detained," the caller said, his voice breaking up. "He's obviously covered in wounds."

The boy and Franke's daughter, who was also found at Hildebrandt's house, were taken to the hospital. Eventually, Franke's four youngest children were taken into state custody.

Franke and Hildebrandt were each charged with six felony counts of aggravated child abuse. They have

remained jailed since their arrests.

During Franke's incarceration, "she has actively engaged in an introspection that has allowed her to reset her moral compass and understand the full weight of her actions. Ms. Franke is committed to taking responsibility for the part she played in the events leading up to her incarceration," the statement said.

The boy told investigators that "Jodi" put the ropes on his ankles and wrists and that they used cayenne pepper and honey to dress the wounds caused by the ropes, according to a search warrant.

Hildebrandt has agreed not to see patients until the allegations are addressed by state licensing officials. Her next court hearing is set for Dec. 27, according to court records. Her attorney, Douglas Terry, did not immediately return a phone call seeking comment on the allegations made against Hildebrandt in the statement by Franke's attorney.

The Franke family was criticized online for its "8 Passengers" video blog showing parenting decisions including banning their oldest son from his bedroom for seven months for pranking his younger brother. In other videos, Ruby Franke talked about refusing to take lunch to a kindergartener who forgot it at home and threatening to cut the head off a young girl's stuffed toy to punish her for cutting things in the house.

In one video, Franke said she and her husband told their two youngest children that they would not be getting presents from Santa Claus one year because they had been selfish and weren't responding to punishment like being kept home from school and cleaning the floorboards.

The YouTube channel, which started in 2015, ended after seven years.

Franke's husband, Kevin Franke, has filed for divorce.

UN Security Council delays vote on resolution urging cessation of hostilities in Gaza to deliver aid

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. Security Council delayed until Tuesday morning a vote on an Arab-sponsored resolution calling for a halt to hostilities in Gaza to allow for urgently needed aid deliveries to a massive number of civilians as members intensified negotiations to try to avoid another veto by the United States.

The council said Monday's 5 p.m. EST vote would not take place, and diplomats said negotiations were taking place to get the United States, Israel's closest ally, to abstain or vote "yes" on the resolution.

A key issue is how to implement and sustain a desperately needed aid operation. Human Rights Watch accused Israel earlier Monday of deliberately starving Gaza's population by blocking the delivery of water, food and fuel, a method of warfare that it described as a war crime. The United Nations' food agency reported on Dec. 14 that 56% of Gaza's households were experiencing "severe levels of hunger," up from 38% two weeks earlier.

The draft on the table Monday morning called for an "urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities" for humanitarian access to deliver aid. But this language is expected to be watered down to a "suspension" of hostilities or something possibly weaker to satisfy the Americans, the diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity because discussions have been private.

The U.S. vetoed a Security Council resolution on Dec. 8 that was backed by almost all council members and dozens of other nations demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza. The 193-member General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a similar resolution on Dec. 12 by a vote of 153-10, with 23 abstentions.

The importance of a Security Council resolution is that it is legally binding, but in practice many parties choose to ignore the council's requests for action. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, but though they are a significant barometer of world opinion.

The draft resolution that was being considered by the 15 council members on Monday recognizes that civilians in Gaza don't have access to sufficient food, water, sanitation, electricity, telecommunications and medical services "essential for their survival." Also, it would express the council's "strong concern for the

disproportionate effect that the conflict is having on the lives and well-being of children, women and other civilians in vulnerable situations.”

More than 19,400 Palestinians have been killed according to the Gaza Health Ministry since Israel declared war on the Palestinian militant Hamas group following its surprise attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7 that killed about 1,200 people — mostly civilians — and took about 240 hostages.

Hamas controls the Gaza Strip and its Health Ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Thousands more Palestinians lie buried under the rubble in Gaza, the U.N. estimates. Israel says 116 of its soldiers have died in its ground offensive.

The proposed council resolution reiterates its demand that all parties comply with international humanitarian law, especially protecting civilians and the infrastructure critical for their survival including hospitals, schools, places of worship and U.N. facilities.

The draft, obtained by The Associated Press, demands the parties to the conflict — Hamas and Israel — fulfill their obligations under international humanitarian law and enable “the immediate, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance at scale directly to the Palestinian civilian population throughout the Gaza Strip.”

It “calls for an urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access” in Gaza and also “firmly condemns all violations of international humanitarian law, including all indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian objects, all violence and hostilities against civilians, and all acts of terrorism.”

The draft also demands the immediate and unconditional release of all Hamas-held hostages .

The draft confirms its “unwavering commitment to the vision of the two-state solution,” and stresses “the importance of unifying the Gaza Strip with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority.”

The draft is being negotiated by the United Arab Emirates, which is the Arab representative on the Security Council, and requests U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres establish an expeditious mechanism to monitor all humanitarian shipments to Gaza by land, sea and air.

Pope approves blessings for same-sex couples that must not resemble marriage

By NICOLE WINFIELD and DAVID CRARY Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis formally approved letting Catholic priests bless same-sex couples, the Vatican announced Monday, a radical shift in policy that aimed at making the church more inclusive while maintaining its strict ban on gay marriage.

But while the Vatican statement was heralded by some as a step toward breaking down discrimination in the Catholic Church, some LGBTQ+ advocates warned it underscored the church’s idea that gay couples remain inferior to heterosexual partnerships.

The document from the Vatican’s doctrine office elaborates on a letter Francis sent to two conservative cardinals that was published in October. In that preliminary response, Francis suggested such blessings could be offered under some circumstances if the blessings weren’t confused with the ritual of marriage.

The new document repeats that condition and elaborates on it, reaffirming that marriage is a lifelong union between a man and a woman. And it stresses that blessings in question must not be tied to any specific Catholic celebration or religious service and should not be conferred at the same time as a civil union ceremony. Moreover, the blessings cannot use set rituals or even involve the clothing and gestures that belong in a wedding.

But it says requests for such blessings for same-sex couples should not be denied. It offers an extensive and broad definition of the term “blessing” in Scripture to insist that people seeking a transcendent relationship with God and looking for his love and mercy shouldn’t be held up to an impossible moral standard to receive it.

“For, those seeking a blessing should not be required to have prior moral perfection,” it said.

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"There is no intention to legitimize anything, but rather to open one's life to God, to ask for his help to live better, and also to invoke the Holy Spirit so that the values of the Gospel may be lived with greater faithfulness," it added.

The document marks the latest gesture of outreach from a pope who has made welcoming LGBTQ+ Catholics a hallmark of his papacy. From his 2013 quip, "Who am I to judge?" about a purportedly gay priest, to his 2023 comment to The Associated Press that "Being homosexual is not a crime," Francis has distinguished himself from all his predecessors with his message of welcome.

"The significance of this news cannot be overstated," said Francis DeBernardo of New Ways Ministry, which supports LGBTQ+ Catholics. "It is one thing to formally approve same-gender blessings, which he had already pastorally permitted, but to say that people should not be subjected to 'an exhaustive moral analysis' to receive God's love and mercy is an even more significant step."

The Vatican holds that marriage is an indissoluble union between man and woman. As a result, it has long opposed same-sex marriage and considers homosexual acts to be "intrinsically disordered." Nothing in the new document changes that teaching.

And in 2021, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said flat-out that the church couldn't bless the unions of two men or two women because "God cannot bless sin."

That 2021 pronouncement created an outcry and appeared to have blindsided Francis, even though he had technically approved its publication. Soon after it was published, he removed the official responsible for it and set about laying the groundwork for a reversal.

In the new document, the Vatican said the church must avoid "doctrinal or disciplinary schemes especially when they lead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others."

It said ultimately, a blessing is about helping people increase their trust in God. "It is a seed of the Holy Spirit that must be nurtured, not hindered," it said.

It stressed that people in "irregular" unions of extramarital sex — gay or straight — are in a state of sin. But it said that shouldn't deprive them of God's love or mercy. "Even when a person's relationship with God is clouded by sin, he can always ask for a blessing, stretching out his hand to God," the document said.

"Thus, when people ask for a blessing, an exhaustive moral analysis should not be placed as a precondition for conferring it," the document said.

The Rev. James Martin, who advocates for a greater welcome for LGBTQ+ Catholics, praised the new document as a "huge step forward" and a "dramatic shift" from the Vatican's 2021 policy.

"Along with many Catholic priests, I will now be delighted to bless my friends in same-sex marriages," he said in an email.

Traditionalists, however, were outraged. The traditionalist blogger Luigi Casalini of Messa in Latino (Latin Mass) blog wrote that the document appeared to be a form of heresy.

"The church is crumbling," he wrote.

University of Notre Dame theologian Ulrich Lehner was also concerned, saying it would merely sow confusion and could lead to division in the church.

"The Vatican's statement is, in my view, the most unfortunate public announcement in decades," he said in a statement. "Moreover, some bishops will use it as a pretext to do what the document explicitly forbids, especially since the Vatican has not stopped them before. It is — and I hate to say it — an invitation to schism."

Ramón Gómez, in charge of human rights for the Movement for Homosexual Integration and Liberation group in Chile, said the statement was a step toward breaking down discrimination in the church and could help LGBTQ+ people in countries where even civil unions aren't legal.

But he said the document was "belated" and "contradictory" in specifying a non-ritualized blessing that cannot be confused with marriage. Such a mixed message, he said, "thus once again gives the signal that same-sex couples are inferior to heterosexual couples."

The Vatican admonition to refrain from codifying any blessing or prayer appeared to be a response to Flemish-speaking bishops in Belgium, who last year proposed the text for a prayer for same-sex couples

that included prayers, Scriptural readings and expressions of commitment.

In Germany, individual priests have been blessing same-sex couples for years, as part of a progressive trend in the German church. In September, several Catholic priests held a ceremony blessing same-sex couples outside Cologne Cathedral to protest the city's conservative archbishop, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki.

The head of the German Bishops Conference welcomed the document.

"This means that a blessing can be given to couples who do not have the opportunity to marry in church, for example due to divorce, and to same-sex couples," Bishop Georg Baetzing said in a statement. "The practice of the church knows a variety of forms of blessing. It is good that this treasure for the diversity of lifestyles is now being raised."

In the United States, the Rev. John Oesterle, a Catholic priest and hospital chaplain in Pittsburgh, said many priests would probably not be open to offering such a blessing, but he welcomed Francis' action.

"I think the pope has learned to accept people as God made them," he said on Monday. "When I was growing up, the assumption was that God made everyone straight. What we have learned is that is not true. In accepting people as God made them, and if Jesus' primary teaching is we should love and serve one another in the community, I think that's what gives Pope Francis the openness to God's presence in those relationships."

The Church of England on Sunday announced a similar move allowing clergy to bless the unions of same-sex couples who have had civil weddings or partnerships, but it still bans church weddings for same-sex couples.

Love it or hate it, self-checkout is here to stay. But it's going through a reckoning

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The promise of self-checkout was alluring: Customers could avoid long lines by scanning and bagging their own items, workers could be freed of doing those monotonous tasks themselves and retailers could save on labor costs.

All that has happened since the rollout of self-checkout but so has this: Customers griping about clunky technology that spits out mysterious error codes, workers having to stand around and monitor both humans and machines, and retailers contending with theft.

"Going to the grocery store used to be simple, and now it's frustrating," said Cindy Whittington, 66, of Fairfax, Virginia. "You're paying more. You're working harder to pay for merchandise at their store. And it's become an ordeal to check out. I should get a 5% discount."

In 2021, self-checkout usage represented 30% of transactions, almost double from 2018, according to a survey of retailers by FMI, an industry group. And 96% of retailers surveyed offer self-checkout.

But the technology is also facing a reckoning amid the critical holiday shopping season. Some retailers are adding restrictions, while others are pulling out completely.

This past fall, Walmart removed self-checkout kiosks in three stores in Albuquerque, New Mexico as part of a location by location approach, but on the whole it is adding more than it is taking away. To reduce wait times, Target is now limiting the number of items to 10 that shoppers can scan in a handful of stores nationwide.

British supermarket chain Booths has been getting rid of its self-checkout at the majority of its stores for the past 18 months in reaction to customer backlash. A year ago, grocery chain Wegmans, citing "losses," discontinued its self-checkout app that lets shoppers scan and bag items while they shop. However, it continues to offer self-checkout registers at its stores.

Self-checkout, first tested in supermarkets in the late 1980s, gained momentum 20 years ago. But grocers ramped it up even more three years ago to address the pandemic-induced severe labor shortages.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says technological advances such as self-checkout and online sales have

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been the main driver in the declining number of cashier jobs, although there are no precise estimates on how many cashiers have been replaced by self-checkout. According to Labor Department data, there are about 1.2 million people currently working as cashiers, compared to 1.4 million in 2019 and the BLS expects the number to fall by another 10% over the next decade.

"We are at an inflection point where if Americans are willing to do this and show an interest, then stores will probably expand it because they want to slash that labor cost," said Christopher Andrews, associate professor and chair of sociology at Drew University and author of "The Overworked Consumer: Self-Checkouts, Supermarkets and the Do-It-Yourself Economy." "But right now they're just seeing downside. They're seeing frustrated customers. They're seeing increased costs and shoplifting."

Theft is indeed an issue. Andrews said a technology that relies on shoppers to do their own scanning and punch in product quantities tempts even law abiding citizens to be dishonest. It's easy to just scan every other item or punch in codes for a cheaper item. Shoppers could also make honest mistakes, leading to losses for stores.

John Catsimatidis, chairman and CEO of Red Apple Group, owner of Gristedes and D'Agostino's food stores in New York City, said he has no interest in self-checkout because of theft and he noted that the technology is not where it needs to be.

"Dishonest people will always find a way to slip a package through," he said.

Still, self-checkout isn't going away, especially with still stubborn labor shortages. And plenty of people love it.

Ellen Wulfhorst, 65, said using self-checkout brings back her childhood when she played with a toy register.

"There's something childish and fun about it," Wulfhorst said. "I get a big kick out of sliding the product across the reader, and it goes beep. There's a certain satisfaction to it."

For Robin Wissmann Doherty of South Salem, New York, who has a progressive neurodegenerative disease and uses a walker, self-checkout makes her shopping experience easier.

The 67-year-old said she likes to shop at Stop & Shop because it has a "scan and go" technology that allows her to scan her items with a device as she shops and then tallies up her bill. She can either pay at a kiosk or at a manned register.

"The laser gun works for disabled people," she said.

Stew Leonard Jr., president and CEO of Stew Leonard's, a supermarket chain that operates stores in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey, said 25% of its customers use self-service. That number could be up to 50% in the next few years. He noted one-third of its registers are unmanned, but he's in a "holding pattern" and is thinking of limiting the number of items to be scanned.

Retailers have been adding cameras or sensors at kiosks to monitor shoppers.

Kroger, for example, has deployed artificial intelligence technology at a majority of stores that triggers alerts when something is amiss. For example, if a shopper fails to scan a particular item successfully, the system flags the error on the screen and prompts the customer to self-correct. If customers are unable to resolve the issue themselves, a light above the self-checkout blinks to attract workers' attention.

There have been inroads for more advanced technology.

Amazon's Just Walk Out technology is in more than 70 Amazon-owned stores and more than 100 third-party retailers across the U.S., including airports. It uses sophisticated cameras and allows shoppers to enter the store with a credit or debit card or by simply hovering their palm over an Amazon One palm payment device, and then walk out without having to stand in line to check out. Japanese fashion retailer Uniqlo has RFID chips embedded in price tags to power a self-checkout system at its Fifth Avenue store in Manhattan, as part of a widescale rollout at its stores. Customers place their items in bins at self-service stations and pay — without having to scan items.

Still, for some workers who were supposed to be liberated from the monotonous task of ringing up customers, the tedium just comes in a different form.

Bernadette Christian, 59, a worker at Giant Food in Clinton, Maryland, mans six self-service stations at once, and she's afraid to help or confront shoppers who she said have become angrier since the pandemic.

"It would be easy for us to be cashiers, and it would be a lot more safer in today's world," she said.

Serbia's opposition takes to the streets claiming election fraud in Sunday's vote

By JOVANA GEC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Serbia's weekend snap election was held in "unjust conditions," with multiple reports of irregularities, international observers said on Monday, as opponents of populist President Aleksandar Vucic took to the streets claiming the vote was rigged.

Political tensions spiked in the Balkan country over the parliamentary and local elections on Sunday. In Belgrade, several thousand people gathered in front of the state election commission headquarters, chanting "thieves," as opposition leaders moved to lodge formal complaints claiming fraud in the city election.

"We have hundreds and hundreds of complaints, said opposition politician Marinika Tepic. She and several other opposition politicians will camp inside the building that's the seat of the state election commission. "We will stay here for a while."

At one point, protesters broke through a fence surrounding the building and one young woman tried to storm the entrance. Protesters threw eggs, tomatoes and rolls of toilet paper at the building.

Vucic's ruling Serbian Progressive Party won the parliamentary vote, an early official count confirmed. However, in the Belgrade local election, an opposition group said it was robbed, would not recognize the results and would demand a rerun of the ballot.

The Serbian president appeared on state RTS television on Monday evening, stating that the "election was fair" and that he wanted "to tell the people not to worry ... peace, law and order will prevail."

In a preliminary statement, a mission made up of representatives of international rights watchdogs said the vote was "marred by harsh rhetoric, bias in the media, pressure on public sector employees and misuse of public resources."

"Election day was smoothly conducted but was marked by numerous procedural deficiencies, including inconsistent application of safeguards during voting and counting, frequent instances of overcrowding, breaches in secrecy of the vote, and numerous instances of group voting," the conclusions said.

Vucic, who has been in power since 2012, has dismissed criticism from his opponents that his government curbed democratic freedoms while allowing corruption and organized crime to run rampant.

Under Vucic, Serbia became a candidate for EU membership, but the opposition accuses the bloc of turning a blind eye to the country's democratic shortcomings in return for stability in the Balkan region, still troubled after the wars of the 1990s.

The election pitted Vucic's SNS against the Serbia Against Violence opposition alliance, or SPN.

Vucic's party won nearly 47% of the ballots in the parliamentary vote, followed by Serbia Against Violence with 23%, according to a near-complete preliminary tally by the state election commission.

Several other smaller parties also competed in the election, which was held only 18 months after the previous presidential and parliamentary vote.

If confirmed in the final vote count, the result means that the SNS party will have an absolute majority in the 250-member parliament and will form the next government on its own.

Officials results for the city hall in Belgrade are yet to be announced, but projections by polling agencies IPSOS and CESID said SNS won 38% of the ballots, while Serbia Against Violence garnered 35%.

Irregularities also were reported by election monitors and independent media in Serbia.

Local independent Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability said the abuses were of such "scope and diversity" that "the results of the Belgrade elections do not reflect the freely expressed will of voters living in Belgrade."

"Irregularities that directly compromised election results were recorded at 5% of polling stations in Parliamentary elections and at 9% of polling stations in the Belgrade elections," said the center.

One report claimed ethnic Serbs from neighboring Bosnia were bused in en masse to vote in Belgrade. Serbia Against Violence charged that 40,000 identity documents were issued for people who do not live in the Serbian capital.

Another report said a monitoring team was assaulted and their car was attacked with baseball bats in a town in northern Serbia. Allegations have also emerged of voters being paid or pressured to vote for the ruling party.

"We brought evidence about flagrant theft in Belgrade," said Tepic, the opposition politician. She said voters were brought in from abroad to "decide how citizens of Belgrade will live."

The international mission report further "raised concerns about voters' ability to make a choice free from undue pressure." Pressure on voters and misuse of public offices "tilted the playing field, and blurred the line between state and the party," the observers added.

Serious irregularities included cases of vote-buying and ballot box stuffing, said the joint conclusions by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament.

Vucic and his party have denied the allegations.

The election did not include a vote for the president but governing authorities backed by the dominant pro-government media ran the campaign as a referendum on Vucic.

Serbia Against Violence, a pro-European Union bloc, includes parties that were behind months of street protests this year triggered by two back-to-back mass shootings in May.

Houthi attacks on commercial ships have upended global trade in vital Red Sea corridor

By COURTNEY BONNELL AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — The attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea by Yemen's Houthi rebels have scared off some of the world's top shipping companies and oil giants, effectively rerouting global trade away from a crucial artery for consumer goods and energy supplies that is expected to trigger delays and rising prices.

BP said Monday that it has "decided to temporarily pause all transits through the Red Sea," including shipments of oil, liquid natural gas and other energy supplies. Describing it as a "precautionary pause," the London-based oil and gas corporation said the decision faces ongoing review but crew safety was the priority.

Both oil and European natural gas prices rose partly over market nerves about attacks by the Iranian-backed Houthis, who confirmed two new attacks Monday. It is the latest targeting of container ships and oil tankers passing through a narrow waterway that separates Yemen from East Africa and leads north to the Red Sea and Suez Canal, through which an estimated 10% of the world's trade passes.

Besides critical energy supplies reaching Europe and beyond on tankers, food products like palm oil and grain and most of the world's manufactured products move by container ships — many of them heading through the Suez Canal.

"This is a problem for Europe. It's a problem for Asia," said John Stawpert, senior manager of environment and trade for the International Chamber of Shipping, which represents 80% of the world's commercial fleet.

He noted that 40% of Asia-Europe trade normally goes through the waterway: "It has the potential to be a huge economic impact."

Almost all goods that stores needed for Christmas will have already been delivered, but online orders could be delayed, analysts say, because four of the world's five largest container shipping companies have paused or rerouted movements through the Red Sea in the last several days.

MSC, Maersk, CMA CGM Group and Hapag-Lloyd are leaders in alliances that move the bulk all consumer goods between Asia and Europe, so "virtually all services will have to make this rerouting," said Simon Heaney, senior manager of container research for Drewry, a maritime research consultancy.

Ships will have to go around the Cape of Good Hope at the bottom of Africa instead, adding what some analysts have said could be a week to 10 days or even longer to voyages.

Depending on what companies decide to do, they will have to add more ships to make up the extra time or burn more fuel for the longer journey and if they decide to go faster to meet their itineraries — both of which would release more climate-changing carbon dioxide, Heaney said.

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"The impact will be longer transit times, more fuel spent, more ships required, potential disruption and delays — at least in the first arrivals in Europe," he said, noting that ships could arrive to ports from their longer journeys "in clumps."

That brings up the cost of shipping, but "I don't think it's going to go to the heights that it reached during the pandemic," Heaney said.

Supply chain disruptions increased as people stuck at home during the COVID-19 pandemic ramped up orders for all sorts of products, driving up consumer prices around the world.

Stawpert of the shipping chamber said he would expect to see some price increases for consumers in the short term but that it depends how long the security threat lasts.

The Houthis have targeted Israeli-linked vessels during Israel's war with Hamas but escalated their attacks in recent days, hitting or just missing ships without clear ties.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, the Houthi military spokesman, said Monday that they launched what he described as "naval aircraft" at the Cayman Islands-flagged Swan Atlantic, a chemical and oil products carrier, and Panama-flagged MSC CLARA cargo ship. He didn't offer further details.

Denmark-based operator Uni-Tankers said the Swan Atlantic, which was carrying vegetable oils to France's Reunion Island off Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, was hit by an unknown object that ignited a small fire. Crew members put it out and all were reported to be safe, the company said. It received military aid and continued on its journey.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said at a news conference during a visit to Israel that he was convening a meeting of his counterparts in the Middle East and beyond on Tuesday to address the Houthi risk to shipping.

"These attacks are reckless, dangerous, and they violate international law," Austin said. "We're taking action to build an international coalition to address this threat."

U.S., French, U.K. and other coalition warships already patrol the area, keeping the waterway open. Stawpert said deployments by navies have increased and that should boost confidence in the shipping industry and ease the threat to some degree.

"We would also hope for a surge in forces, given how important this is to the world economy and people around the world," he said.

Disruptions expected from the Red Sea could have far-reaching effects because they would happen at the same time ships are being restricted through the Panama Canal, a major trade route between Asia and the United States.

Some companies had planned to reroute to the Red Sea — which is a crucial thoroughfare for Asia-Europe shipments — to avoid delays at the Panama Canal caused by a lack of rainfall, analysts say.

Now, some may be scared away from that alternative by the threat of Houthi attacks. That means those taking extra precautions to avoid risks and delays from both global trade arteries will have to take the longer journey around Africa.

"It's unprecedented that the two have coincided," the analyst Heaney said, adding that neither the Suez nor Panama canals are closed, "it's just that they're becoming less viable for the short term."

The cancellations also will mean problems for cash-strapped Egypt, he said, with millions in fees that shipping companies pay to clear the Suez Canal representing a big source of income for a country whose economy is struggling with high inflation and a weakening currency.

EXPLAINER: How can Catholic priests bless same-sex unions?

ROME (AP) — The Vatican document explicitly saying Catholic priests can bless same-sex unions lays out the conditions for what such blessings can, and cannot, involve.

The overall goal is to make it abundantly clear to the couple and those around them that the blessing in no way resembles a marriage. This is because the Catholic Church teaches that marriage is a lifelong union between a man and a woman.

Nothing has changed about the church's position on marriage, its firm opposition to gay marriage, or its belief that any extramarital sex — gay or straight — is sinful.

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WHAT DOES THE DOCUMENT SAY?

The document from the Vatican's doctrine office explicitly says priests can offer blessings to same-sex couples provided the blessings themselves don't in any way resemble a marriage. To avoid any confusion, the blessing should not be offered in conjunction with a civil union ceremony, gay or straight.

DOES THIS MEAN PRIESTS CAN MARRY LGBTQ+ COUPLES?

No. Nothing has changed about the Catholic Church's firm opposition to gay marriage, or its teaching that homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered." Rather, this new document aims to allow any couple in an "irregular union" to seek and receive God's love and mercy through a blessing. That can include LGBTQ+ couples, heterosexual couples who haven't been married in the church.

HOW CAN THESE BLESSINGS BE PERFORMED?

These blessings can be offered during a visit to a Catholic shrine, during a meeting with a priest, a prayer recited in a group or during a pilgrimage. But they cannot be performed with "any clothing, gestures, or words that are proper to a wedding."

ARE THESE PRAYERS WRITTEN DOWN?

To prevent any confusion with official prayers of the church, the blessing should not be codified or established by set procedures or rituals by dioceses or bishops' conferences. Rather, priests should be trained to "spontaneously" offer blessings outside the church's set of approved blessings.

IS THERE MORE TO COME?

To drive home the spontaneous, informal nature of these blessings, the Vatican said it has no plans to regulate details or practicalities about same-sex blessings, or respond to further questions about them, leaving it to individual priests to work out.

Analysis: Josh Allen and the Bills show how quickly things can turn around in the NFL

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

On Football analyzes the biggest topics in the NFL from week to week. For more On Football analysis, head here.

Turnarounds happen quickly in the NFL.

Josh Allen and the Buffalo Bills have quieted talk about coach Sean McDermott's job security with a pair of impressive wins.

The Dallas Cowboys suddenly look like pretenders because they can't win on the road.

Joe Flacco has gone from his couch to becoming a Cleveland folk hero in less than a month.

Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs just needed a trip to New England to get back on the winning track.

Tommy DeVito was the toast of New York and New Jersey until the Saints whipped the Giants and mocked his celebrations.

The Eagles are shaking things up like a desperate team searching for answers instead of a division leader battling for the No. 1 seed.

The up-and-down Jaguars still sit in first place despite three straight losses.

At least Brock Purdy, Christian McCaffrey and the San Francisco 49ers are consistent.

The game of Week 15 turned into a dud when Buffalo dominated Dallas and exposed the Cowboys in a 31-10 victory Sunday.

In the process, Dak Prescott's MVP bid took a hit.

Allen helped the Bills (8-6) save their season in a win at Kansas City last week and watched James Cook carry the offense by leading a stellar rushing attack against the Cowboys.

Allen completed only seven passes against Dallas because Micah Parsons and the rest of the defense couldn't stop Cook, who ran for 179 yards.

"We weren't physical enough," Cowboys cornerback Stephon Gilmore said. "They were more physical than we were."

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Now, nobody is talking about firing McDermott. Buffalo still has a shot to win the AFC East. The Bills need to gain one game on the Dolphins (10-4) to make their showdown in Miami in Week 18 for first place. The Cowboys (10-4) visit the Dolphins next week while the Bills visit the Chargers (5-9).

"The NFL is a one-week-at-a-time league," McDermott said. "We're on a short week. We've got a couple guys banged-up. We have to go out West so that'll be a challenge in itself."

Flacco knows all about the fickle nature of life in the NFL.

The former Super Bowl MVP was unemployed before the Browns signed him to the practice squad on Nov. 20. He stepped into the starting lineup three weeks ago and has led Cleveland to consecutive wins with 300-yard passing performances in both games.

Flacco overcame three picks and rallied the Browns to a 20-17 victory over Chicago. Cleveland (9-5) leads the AFC wild-card race despite starting four quarterbacks this season.

"Obviously, Joe made some unbelievable throws there when we needed them," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said. "Just can't say enough good things about how he played in that fourth quarter."

The Chiefs avoided the first three-game losing streak in the Mahomes era with a 27-17 win over the hapless Patriots.

Mahomes threw for 305 yards and two TDs and also had two interceptions, including one on a ball that bounced out of Kadarius Toney's hands. Mahomes, who threw a tantrum on the sideline last week after Toney's offside penalty negated a go-ahead score in a loss to Buffalo, was fuming after the play.

But Toney's mistake didn't cost the Chiefs this time around.

"Losing three straight in this league really puts you in a tough spot and I thought the guys did a good job," Mahomes said. "That's a really good defense. Offensively, we scored points early. On defense, shut the door, kind of like they've been doing these last few weeks, but we have to continue to get better and better."

The Giants had won three in a row behind DeVito before running into New Orleans. DeVito was sacked seven times in a 24-6 loss and the Saints mimicked his finger celebration after big plays.

The loss put New York (5-9) on the brink of playoff elimination.

The Eagles clinched a playoff berth without taking the field but they made a big change. Coming off lopsided losses to San Francisco and Dallas, coach Nick Sirianni stripped defensive coordinator Sean Desai of playcalling duties and gave senior defensive assistant Matt Patricia that role.

With Jalen Hurts questionable because of an illness, the Eagles (10-3) have to beat Seattle (6-7) on Monday night to keep pace with the 49ers in the race for the No. 1 seed.

Purdy tossed four TD passes and McCaffrey had 187 scrimmage yards and three scores in a 45-29 rout over Arizona.

The 49ers (11-3) have won five in a row after losing three straight. They've been the NFL's most complete team and have the inside track on the NFC's No. 1 seed.

But with a showdown against the AFC-leading Baltimore Ravens (11-3) coming up Christmas night, that can change in a hurry.

France urges Lebanese leaders to work on bringing calm along the border with Israel

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — France's foreign minister urged Lebanese leaders on Monday to work on reducing tensions along the border with Israel, warning that the Israel-Hamas war could still spread to other parts of the region.

Catherine Colonna's visit to Lebanon came a day after she visited Israel, where she called for an "immediate truce" aimed at releasing more hostages, getting larger amounts of aid into Gaza and moving toward "the beginning of a political solution."

While she was in Beirut, Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group exchanged fire with Israeli troops along the tense frontier, which seen violent exchanges since Oct. 8 — a day after the Palestinian militant Hamas

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group attacked southern Israel, killing 1,200 people, most of them civilians.

In Beirut, Colonna held talks with Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri about the situation Lebanon's southern border. Officials from France, once Lebanon's colonial ruler, have visited Lebanon over the past two months, urging for calm. For the past few years, Lebanon has been in the grips of the worst economic crisis in its modern history, which has significantly destabilized the country.

Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, an Iran-backed Shiite militant group, are bitter enemies that last fought a war in the summer of 2006. Israel estimates that Hezbollah has around 150,000 rockets and missiles on Lebanese soil, aimed at Israel.

During the meeting with Colonna, Mikati called on Israel to implement the U.N. Security Council resolution 1701 that ended the 2006 war saying Israel should abide by it, according to a statement released by his office. He was apparently referring to almost daily violations of Lebanese air space by Israel's air force.

The resolution also states the border area in southern Lebanon must be "free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons" other than Lebanese government forces and U.N. peacekeepers. Under the resolution, Hezbollah should not have military presence in the border region.

A day after the Hamas-Israel war started, Hezbollah fighters have been attacking Israeli posts along the Lebanon-Israel border. Israeli tanks, artillery and air force have been also striking areas on the Lebanese side of the border.

"The dangers of the conflict spreading are still high" Colonna said, adding that she came to Lebanon to urge all parties to avoid expanding the conflict. "I am very worried. ... escalation must stop."

On Friday, U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said during a visit to Israel that a "negotiated outcome" is the best way to reassure residents of northern Israel, where tens of thousands of its civilians have been evacuated from Israeli towns and villages along the border with Lebanon. Some have said they have no plans to return home as long as Hezbollah fighters are across the border in Lebanon.

Earlier Monday, Lebanon's state news agency said an Israeli drone fired a missile at a building close to where the funeral of a Hezbollah fighter was being held in a southern border village, without inflicting any casualties. On Sunday, Israeli strikes killed three Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon; more than 100 Hezbollah fighters have been killed since Oct. 8.

In Monday's strike, the missile hit the roof of a building about 40 meters (yards) from a square where the funeral of Hezbollah fighter Hassan Maan Surour was underway in the border village of Aita al-Shaab, the state-run National News Agency said.

Hezbollah claimed it targeted one of Israel's Iron Dome missile defense systems batteries in northern Israel while the Israeli military said its fighter jets struck a series of Hezbollah targets on Monday, including infrastructure, a launch post and a military site.

What about Bob? Some NJ Democrats want Menendez to move on so they can fight for his Senate seat

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — For years in New Jersey, any Democrat weighing a run for statewide office had to grapple with an important question: What about Bob?

It wasn't a reference to the 1991 Bill Murray flick but to Bob Menendez, the incumbent U.S. senator whose political influence placed him atop the state Democratic Party food chain. He kept allies in line, helped anoint rising stars and had an important voice in determining the fate of both candidates and policy proposals. Even after a federal corruption indictment ended in a hung jury in 2017, Menendez continued to wield considerable power.

The "What about Bob?" question is no less relevant now, though it has taken on new meaning. It still bears no connection to the movie, though it has cinematic qualities of its own. Menendez is facing federal charges that he secretly aided Egypt's authoritarian government and tried to thwart a friend's criminal prosecution in exchange for gold bars and cash. He and his wife, who was also charged, and other co-

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defendants in the alleged scheme have all pleaded not guilty.

So if New Jersey Democrats ask the question these days, they're more likely to be wondering when he'll get out of the way and let them get on with the business of trying to keep a crucial U.S. Senate seat in Democratic hands.

Menendez, for his part, hasn't said whether he'll seek another term but vows that he's "not going anywhere." Jason Tuber, Menendez's chief of staff, said in an email that the "people of New Jersey will determine who their Senator will be." He didn't specify Menendez's plans.

"Senator Menendez has been powerful, effective, and indispensable in delivering for New Jersey and the Senator is prepared to put his record up against anyone who enters the race," he said.

Still, many in the party he once held considerable sway over already are looking beyond him.

"Anybody looking at that indictment has no choice but to move on," said former state Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg. "It was horrendous."

Party leaders, from Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy to local officials, have called on Menendez to resign, his home county party has dropped its endorsement, and with the Democrats' U.S. Senate majority hanging in the balance, a field of robust primary challengers has begun to emerge.

U.S. Rep. Andy Kim entered the race a day after the indictment, and the state's first lady, Tammy Murphy, has jumped into the campaign and begun to win significant support from county party officials. Establishment support is typically a key factor to winning primaries in New Jersey because county parties can award the "line" or favored positioning on the ballot. Other prominent Democrats could join the race, too.

"They're already assuming he's toast," said Daniel Cassino, executive director of the Fairleigh Dickinson University poll. "He doesn't have the pull he had before."

That's due to a couple of factors, according to Cassino and other experts. Menendez's previous indictment unfolded with a Republican governor in office, who would have been likely to tap a GOP senator if the seat opened up. That case also erupted years before Menendez faced reelection, so Democrats had some incentive to see how things would wind up before deciding how they should proceed politically.

Now, rather than back him again amid a second federal corruption case, the party seems poised to move on.

A reliably blue-leaning state with nearly 1 million more Democratic registered voters than Republicans, New Jersey hasn't elected a GOP senator since 1972. The possibility of a rematch between former President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden has Democrats optimistic about their chances of keeping the seat, even if Menendez mounts a reelection effort.

The Republican field at the moment includes Mendham Mayor Christine Serrano Glassner. A handful of others are also considering running. The GOP has struggled to win statewide elections, and typically performs better in gubernatorial races, which happen in odd-numbered years, than in Senate races. GOP state party chairman Bob Hugin spent millions of his own cash to try to unseat Menendez in 2018 and came up short.

Menendez has taken a defiant stance in the face of charges brought earlier this year by the U.S. attorney in Manhattan. Mounting a reelection effort while battling the case against him could be too much of a challenge, according to Brigid Harrison, political science professor at Montclair State University.

"It's going to be hard for Bob Menendez to raise money with the scandal overhead. That is a serious impediment," she said.

Ben Dworkin, who heads the Rowan Institute for Public Policy & Citizenship, acknowledged that some Democrats are looking to nudge Menendez off the political stage and that public polls have shown support declining for him. Still, he added, Menendez has survived politically before.

"You can't ever count Menendez out," he said.

Behind the 'Maestro' drama is a raft of theater stars supporting the story of Leonard Bernstein

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Leonard Bernstein was a towering figure on Broadway. So it seems only fitting that the new film drama of him leans on the Great White Way to get the story right.

Bradley Cooper's movie "Maestro" is studded with theater stars — 29 of the 38 principal cast members have a background in the theater, including Gideon Glick, Michael Urie, Greg Hildreth, Nick Blaemire, Ryan Steele, Zachary Booth and Gaby Diaz.

Look closely and you'll find actor-turned-director Scott Ellis playing Bernstein's manager, Harry Kraut, and rising stage star Jordan Dobson — whose credits include "Bad Cinderella," "Hadestown" and, significantly, "West Side Story" — playing a young conductor.

Casting director Shayna Markowitz said she didn't necessarily set out to land theater pros but it came naturally when she was trying to populate Bernstein's world authentically.

"There's kind of this amazing synergy between casting theater actors to portray people of the theater world and of Lenny's world," Markowitz said. "I just feel like we got really lucky with just these wonderful New York actors that are here and that wanted to be a part of this."

Markowitz worked with Cooper on telling the story of a conductor, composer, pianist who helped create such musical theater classic as "West Side Story," "Candide," "On the Town" and "Wonderful Town." Cooper stars alongside Carey Mulligan as Bernstein's wife.

Some selections seem inspired, like the casting of dancer Ricky Ubeda by choreographer Justin Peck. In 2015, "So You Think You Can Dance" winner Ubeda made his Broadway debut when joining the ensemble of a revival of "On the Town" and in "Maestro" he can be seen in a dream sequence of, yes, "On the Town."

But perhaps the best Easter egg is a scene in the movie when the cast is rehearsing "Candide" with Cooper conducting. Actor June Gable approaches Mulligan's character to ask a question. Eagle-eyed viewers will recognize that's the same Gable who was nominated for a Tony Award in the mid-1970s for "Candide."

"She knew Lenny Bernstein and so was having a full-on, out-of-body experience being in that scene with Bradley," said Markowitz. "She was like, 'It was crazy. I was crying. It was as if he was there.' So that was a cool moment."

Casting directors like Markowitz use a service that alerts talent agents and managers about upcoming roles and she will make up her own lists of actors she thinks would be perfect, which she did for "Maestro."

"Every director works a little differently. Every project is obviously different and the needs are different. I adapt to how the filmmaker likes to work," said Markowitz. "I think you want to find the very best actors who are most suited for the roles. That never changes."

Glick, who has appeared on Broadway in "Spring Awakening," "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" and was Tony-nominated for "To Kill a Mockingbird," auditioned on tape for the role of Tommy Cothran, music director at a radio station in San Francisco and a lover of Bernstein.

"Bradley created a very loose and immersive environment that was very, very playful and it sort of reminded me of that stage in the rehearsal process when you're doing a play or a musical where you're not being result oriented and you're just exploring and taking chances," said Glick. "I think you can feel that in the film."

Some parts in "Maestro" are very small roles — just a few seconds of film needing a day's work — but have deep significance for the theater community, like the legendary songwriting team of Betty Comden and Adolph Green — played in "Maestro" by Mallory Portnoy and Nick Blaemire.

"Actors sign on to do projects or audition for projects because they want to be a part of it. And so they understood the significance of both of those parts," Markowitz said. "Some actors just want to be a part of it no matter what and no matter how."

Ellis, a multiple Tony Award-nominated director, was coaxed back to acting by Cooper, a friend and colleague who had worked together onstage, most notably on "The Elephant Man" on Broadway.

Cooper thought his warm and loving relationship with Ellis could infuse the onscreen relationship he

wanted to show between Bernstein and his manager.

"It was so relaxed and an incredible experience and something way out of my comfort zone," said Ellis, who estimated he last acted 30 years ago.

"I'm sitting there in a dressing room surrounded by these incredible actors who, as a director, I would go, 'God, I'd love to work with you on a piece.' But, all of a sudden, I realize, 'No, I'm just one of them.'"

In many ways, "Maestro" is the latest artistic watering hole for Broadway veterans, joining "Law & Order," "Glee," "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel," "The Good Fight," "The Gilded Age," "Fosse/Verdon," "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist," "Only Murders in the Building" and "Smash."

Markowitz, who works across film and TV and who has cast "Dash & Lily," "Ocean's Eight," winning the inaugural BAFTA Award for best casting in 2020 for "Joker," said "Maestro" is special.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime milestone film for sure," she said. "I feel so lucky to have had this experience, and I'm so happy with how people are receiving it as this really special thing, because it's it's very special to me."

Senate border security talks grind on as Trump invokes Nazi-era 'blood' rhetoric against immigrants

By LISA MASCARO and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Time slipping, White House and Senate negotiators struggled Sunday to reach a U.S. border security deal that would unlock President Joe Biden's request for billions of dollars worth of military aid for Ukraine and other national security needs before senators leave town for the holiday recess.

The Biden administration, which is becoming more deeply involved in the talks, is facing pressure from all sides over any deal. Negotiators insist they are making progress, but a hoped-for framework did not emerge. Republican leaders signaled that without bill text, an upcoming procedural would likely fail.

The talks come as Donald Trump, the Republican presidential front-runner in 2024, delivered alarming anti-immigrant remarks about "blood" purity over the weekend, echoing Nazi slogans of World War II at a political rally.

"They're poisoning the blood of our country," Trump said about the record numbers of immigrants coming to the U.S. without immediate legal status.

Speaking in the early-voting state of New Hampshire, Trump, drew on words similar to Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf" as the former U.S. president berated Biden's team over the flow of migrants. "All over the world they're pouring into our country," Trump said.

Throughout the weekend, senators and top Biden officials, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, have been working intently behind closed doors at the Capitol to strike a border deal, which Republicans in Congress are demanding in exchange for any help for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs. Mayorkas arrived for more talks late Sunday afternoon.

"Everyday we get closer, not farther away," said Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., as talks wrapped up in the evening.

Their holiday recess postponed, Murphy and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, the Arizona independent, acknowledged the difficulty of drafting, and securing support, for deeply complicated legislation on an issue that has vexed Congress for years. Ahead of more talks Monday, it is becoming apparent any action is unlikely before year's end.

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said senators don't want to be "jammed" by a last-minute compromise reached by negotiators.

"We're not anywhere close to a deal," Graham, whose staff has joined the talks, said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press."

Graham predicted the deliberations will go into next year. He was among 15 Republican senators who wrote to GOP leadership urging them to wait until the House returns Jan. 8 to discuss the issue.

Top GOP negotiator Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma and Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell

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also signaled in their own letter Sunday that talks still had a ways to go. Lankford said later that the January timeline was "realistic."

The Biden administration faces an increasingly difficult political situation as global migration is on a historic rise, and many migrants are fleeing persecution or leaving war-torn countries for the United States, with smugglers capitalizing on the situation.

The president is being berated daily by Republicans, led by Trump, as border crossings have risen to levels that make even some in Biden's own Democratic Party concerned.

But the Biden administration, in considering revival of Trump-like policies, is drawing outrage from Democrats and immigrant advocates who say the ideas would gut the U.S. asylum system and spark fears of deportations from immigrants already living in the U.S.

The White House's failure to fully engage Latino lawmakers in the talks until recently, or ensure a seat at the negotiating table, has led to a near revolt from leaders of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

"It's unacceptable," said Rep. Nanette Barragan, D-Calif., chair of the Hispanic Caucus, on social media. "We represent border districts & immigrant communities that will be severely impacted by extreme changes to border policy."

Progressives in Congress are also warning the Biden administration off any severe policies that would bar immigrants a legal path to enter the country. "No backroom deal on the border without the involvement of the House, the House Hispanic Caucus, Latino senators is going to pass," said Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., on Fox News.

White House chief of staff Jeff Zients, along with Mayorkas, heard from leading Latino lawmakers during a conference call with the Hispanic Caucus on Saturday afternoon.

The senators and the White House appear to be focused on ways to limit the numbers of migrants who are eligible for asylum at the border, primarily by toughening the requirements to qualify for their cases to go forward.

The talks have also focused removing some migrants who have already been living in the U.S. without full legal status, and on ways to temporarily close the U.S.-Mexico border to some crossings if they hit a certain metric, or threshold. Arrests of migrants have topped 10,000 on some days.

There has also been discussion about limiting existing programs that have allowed groups of arrivals from certain countries to temporarily enter the U.S. while they await proceedings about their claims. Decades ago, those programs welcomed Vietnamese arrivals and others, and have since been opened to Ukrainians, Afghans and a group that includes Cubans, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans and Haitians.

Meanwhile, Biden's massive \$110 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel and other security needs is hanging in the balance.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made a dramatic, if disappointing, visit to Washington last week to plead with Congress and the White House for access to U.S. weaponry as his country fights against Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion.

Many, but not all, Republicans have soured on helping Ukraine fight Russia, taking their cues from Trump. The former president praised Putin, quoting the Russian leader during Saturday's rally while slamming the multiple investigations against him as politically motivated — including the federal indictment against Trump for conspiring to overturn the 2020 election that resulted in the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol by a mob of Trump supporters.

Ukraine's ambassador to the United States said Sunday she believes in "Christmas miracles" and won't give up hope.

Of Biden's package, some \$61 billion would go toward Ukraine, about half of the money for the U.S. Defense Department to buy and replenish tanks, artillery and other weaponry sent to the war effort.

"All the eyes are on Congress now," the envoy, Oksana Markarova, said on CBS' "Face the Nation."

"We can just only pray and hope that there will be resolve there, and that the deal that they will be able to reach will allow the fast decisions also on the support to Ukraine," she said.

The House already left for the holiday recess, but Republican Speaker Mike Johnson is being kept aware

of the negotiations in the Senate.

Flooding drives millions to move as climate migration patterns emerge

By MICHAEL PHILLIS and CAMILLE FASSETT Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Flooding is driving millions of people to move out of their homes, limiting growth in some prospering communities and accelerating the decline of others, according to a new study that details how climate change and flooding are transforming where Americans live.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the threat of flooding convinced more than 7 million people to avoid risky areas or abandon places that were risky, according to a paper Monday in the journal *Nature Communications* and research by the risk analysis organization First Street Foundation.

Climate change is making bad hurricanes more intense and increasing the amount of rain that storms dump on the Midwest. And in the coming decades, researchers say millions more people will decide it is too much to live with and leave.

First Street found that climate change is creating winners and losers at the neighborhood and block level.

Zoom out to consider the whole country and Americans appear to be ignoring the threat of climate change when they decide where to live. Florida, vulnerable to rising seas and strong storms, is growing fast, for example. But that misses an important way people behave locally. Most moves are short distance; people stay near family, friends and jobs.

Jeremy Porter, head of research at First Street, said “there’s more to the story” than population gains in Sun Belt states.

“People want to live in Miami. If you live in Miami already, you’re not going to say, ‘Oh, this property is a 9 (out of 10 for flood risk), let me move to Denver,’” Porter said. “They are going to say, ‘This property is a 9, but I want to live in Miami, so I’m going to look for a 6 or a 7 or a 5 in Miami.’ You are going to think about relative risk.”

That’s what First Street projects over the next three decades: blocks in Miami with a high chance of getting hit by a bad storm are more likely to see their population drop even though a lot of the city is expected to absorb more people.

Behind these findings is very detailed data about flood risk, population trends and the reasons people move, allowing researchers to isolate the impact of flooding even though local economic conditions and other factors motivate families to pick up and live somewhere else. They analyzed population changes in very small areas, down to the census block.

Some blocks have grown fast and would have grown even faster if flooding wasn’t a problem, according to First Street. Expanding but flood-prone places could have grown nearly 25% more — attracting about 4.1 million more people — if that risk were lower. Researchers also identified areas where flood risk is driving or worsening population decline, which they called “climate abandonment areas.” About 3.2 million people left these neighborhoods because of flood risk over a two-decade span.

When First Street projected out to 2053, many of the new climate abandonment areas were in Michigan, Indiana and other parts of the Midwest. Flood risk is just one factor driving this change and it doesn’t mean communities are emptying out, said Philip Mulder, a professor focused on risk and insurance at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

“People can live in smarter places within those communities. That’s just as true for Detroit as it is for Miami,” he said.

When people know a home is prone to flooding, they are less likely to buy it. Some states, however, don’t require that flood history be disclosed, according to Joel Scata, a senior attorney on the Natural Resources Defense Council’s climate adaptation team.

“Access to good information is really important in the real estate market,” Scata said.

Even for people who get assistance to move, the choice can be excruciating. Socastee, a community

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near Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, flooded not only when hurricanes hit, but sometimes just when it rained hard and water would reach doorways and saturate yards. First Street's data says Horry County won't grow quite as fast over the next three decades because of flood risk.

One resident who endured repeated flooding said it "makes you sick" with worry whenever it storms and rips away your sense of security.

Terri Straka decided to move from the area but had a hard time convincing her parents to do the same. Eventually, she brought them to a house for sale and said it could be their dream home. They reluctantly agreed to move.

"Them being able to visualize what a future might look like is absolutely critical to people being able to move. They have to imagine a place and it needs to be a real place that they can afford," said Harriet Festing, executive director of Anthropocene Alliance that supports communities like Socastee hit by disaster and climate change.

Older people move less often and it takes money to move, so if people don't get enough assistance and don't have the means, they are more likely to stay in risky areas. When people do start to move, it can create momentum for others to depart, leaving behind fewer residents to support a shrinking local economy, according to Matt Hauer, a demographic expert and study author at Florida State University.

But there are also winners. Louisville, Kentucky, Detroit and Chicago as well as several other big cities have a lot of space with little flood risk, which will be attractive in the future, First Street found.

The University of Wisconsin's Mulder said of cities like Chicago: "They shouldn't discount their relative benefits that will come from being a safer place in a warming world."

Today in History: December 19, Bill Clinton is impeached

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 19, the 353rd day of 2023. There are 12 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 19, 1998, President Bill Clinton was impeached by the Republican-controlled House for perjury and obstruction of justice. (Clinton was subsequently acquitted by the Senate.)

On this date:

In 1777, during the American Revolutionary War, Gen. George Washington led his army of about 11,000 men to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to camp for the winter.

In 1907, 239 workers died in a coal mine explosion in Jacobs Creek, Pennsylvania.

In 1946, war broke out in Indochina as troops under Ho Chi Minh launched widespread attacks against the French.

In 1950, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower was named commander of the military forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

In 1960, fire broke out on the hangar deck of the nearly completed aircraft carrier USS Constellation at the New York Naval Shipyard; 50 civilian workers were killed.

In 1972, Apollo 17 splashed down in the Pacific, winding up the Apollo program of manned lunar landings.

In 2001, the fires that had burned beneath the ruins of the World Trade Center in New York City for the previous three months were declared extinguished except for a few scattered hot spots.

In 2003, design plans were unveiled for the signature skyscraper — a 1,776-foot glass tower — at the site of the World Trade Center in New York City.

In 2008, citing imminent danger to the national economy, President George W. Bush ordered an emergency bailout of the U.S. auto industry.

In 2011, North Korea announced the death two days earlier of leader Kim Jong Il; North Koreans marched by the thousands to mourn their "Dear Leader" while state media proclaimed his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, a "Great Successor."

In 2016, a truck rammed into a crowded Christmas market in central Berlin, killing 12 people in an attack

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claimed by Islamic State. (The suspected attacker was killed in a police shootout four days later.)

In 2022, the House Jan. 6 committee urged the Justice Department to bring criminal charges against former President Donald Trump for the violent 2021 Capitol insurrection, calling for accountability for the former president and "a time of reflection and reckoning."

Today's Birthdays: Actor Elaine Joyce is 80. Actor Tim Reid is 79. Musician John McEuen is 78. Singer Janie Fricke is 76. Jazz musician Lenny White is 74. Actor Mike Lookinland is 63. Actor Scott Cohen is 62. Actor Jennifer Beals is 60. Actor Robert MacNaughton is 57. Magician Criss Angel is 56. Rock musician Klaus Eichstadt (Ugly Kid Joe) is 56. Actor Ken Marino is 55. Actor Elvis Nolasco is 55. Actor Kristy Swanson is 54. Model Tyson Beckford is 53. Actor Amy Locane is 52. Pro Football Hall of Famer Warren Sapp is 51. Actor Rosa Blasi is 51. Actor Alyssa Milano is 51. Actor Tara Summers is 44. Actor Jake Gyllenhaal (JIH'-lihn-hahl) is 43. Actor Marla Sokoloff is 43. Rapper Lady Sovereign is 38. Journalist Ronan Farrow is 36. Actor Nik Dodani is 30.