

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 1 of 74

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [3- Community Transit Ad](#)
- [3- Dog License Ad](#)
- [4- Names Released in Sunday Lincoln County Fatal Crash](#)
- [4- Names Released in Pennington County Fatal Crash](#)
- [5- Coming up on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [5 - Horton is hiring](#)
- [6- Conde National League](#)
- [6- Angel Tree Ad](#)
- [6- Avantara Christmas Ad](#)
- [7 - BaseKamp Lodge Christmas Ad](#)
- [7- BDM Water Christmas Ad](#)
- [8- Mission educator receives Milken Award](#)
- [10- \\$35,000 Matching Gift Provided to Feeding South Dakota](#)
- [11- SD SearchLight: State disaster report prepares for more natural disasters in coming years](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: Pennington County GOP wants full representation by start of legislative session](#)
- [14- SD SearchLight: Report: Let USD Law grads earn law license through supervised rural practice](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: Senate confirms Oklahoma's first Native American female federal judge, overcoming GOP opposition](#)
- [17- Weather Pages](#)
- [21- Daily Devotional](#)
- [22- 2023 Community Events](#)
- [23- Subscription Form](#)
- [24- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [25- News from the Associated Press](#)

Thursday, Dec. 21

FIRST DAY OF WINTER!

End of Second Quarter, early dismissal at 2 p.m.

Senior Menu: Roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, steamed cabbage, rainbow sherbet.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, tri taters.

Elementary School Christmas Program, 1 p.m., GHS Gym.

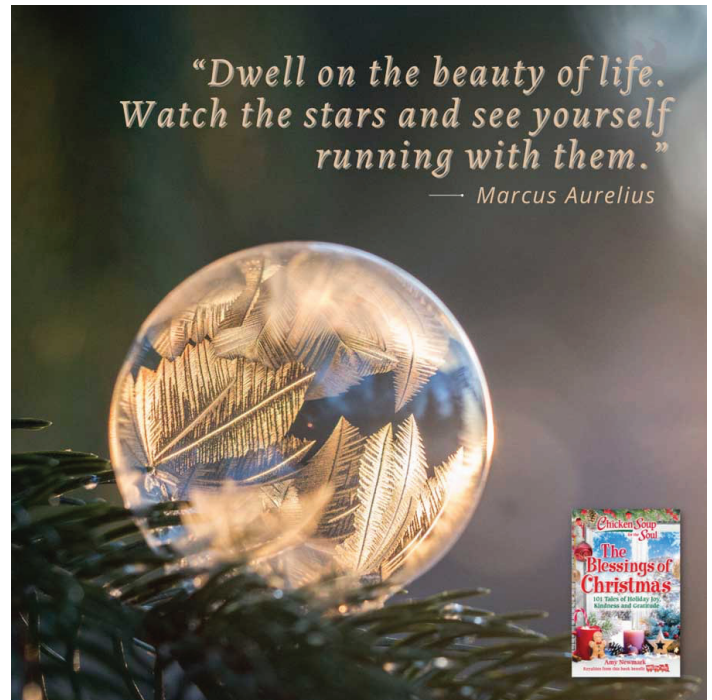
Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Roncalli: C game at 5 p.m. with JV and Varsity to follow.

Boys Wrestling at Sisseton, 5 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

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



*"Dwell on the beauty of life.
Watch the stars and see yourself
running with them."*

— Marcus Aurelius

Girls Wrestling at McCook Central/Montrose (Salem), 4 p.m.

Friday, Dec. 22

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

No School - Christmas Break

Saturday, Dec. 23

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Mass, 4 p.m.; St. Joseph, Turton, Mass, 6 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

cans. © 2023 Groton Daily Independent

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 2 of 74

1440

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

A Malaysian national at the center of one of the largest US Navy corruption scandals in modern history will be returned to face sentencing after Venezuela agreed to his extradition as part of a prisoner exchange.

The European Union's member states and its high-level institutions agreed to major migration reforms yesterday, the conclusion of a three-year debate finalized amid the continent's highest migration levels since 2016. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which awaits formal ratification, comes six months before the next parliamentary elections.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Warner Bros. Discovery and Paramount in talks for potential global merger; the combined valuation of the two media giants is over \$38B. Media mogul Byron Allen offers to buy BET Media from Paramount for \$3.5B.

Georgia, Alabama, and Ohio State highlight top 2024 recruiting classes for college football's national signing day.

Former NBA player Chance Comanche admits to Dec. 6 murder of woman in Las Vegas just hours after finishing an NBA G League game.

Science & Technology

Study finds all major AI models were trained on datasets containing some amount of explicit images of children; advocates push for safeguards to prevent its use in image generation.

Scientists discover new class of drugs effective against antibiotic-resistant staph infection, responsible for 10,000 US deaths annually.

First direct evidence linking marine weather—dynamics in the ocean like waves and turbulence—with global climate observed by researchers.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -1.5%, Dow -1.3%, Nasdaq -1.5%); S&P 500 marks worst day since Sept. 26, with FedEx shares falling 12% after cutting its full-year revenue forecast. US consumer confidence index rises in December to five-month high.

Electric scooter company Bird files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, will sell some of its assets to existing lenders; Bird, founded in 2017, went public in 2021 via special purpose acquisition company merger.

Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick to step down Dec. 29; leadership change expected as part of Microsoft's acquisition of the video game company.

Politics & World Affairs

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh meets with Egyptian officials over cease-fire talks. Death toll in Gaza surpasses 20,000 people, according to Hamas-run Health Ministry, while death toll in Israel stands near 1,400.

Former President Donald Trump asks US Supreme Court to delay considering whether he is immune from federal prosecution in an election interference case while a federal appeals court weighs the issue. Judge allows removal of Confederate memorial in Arlington National Cemetery to resume.

Atmospheric river event prompts Southern California to prepare for flood threat, heaviest rainfall since August's Hurricane Hilary ahead of holiday weekend.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 3 of 74



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

Names Released in Sunday Lincoln County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: 272nd St. and 480th Ave., 11 miles north of Canton, SD

When: 7:37a.m., Sunday, December 17, 2023

Vehicle 1: 1997 Chevrolet CK 107

Driver 1: Evan Dale Mallatt, 27 yr. old male from Brandon, SD, Fatal injuries

Lincoln County, S.D.- 27-year-old Evan Dale Mallatt of Brandon, SD died Sunday morning in a single vehicle crash in Lincoln County.

Preliminary crash information indicates Mallatt was driving a 1997 Chevrolet CK 107 heading westbound on 272nd Street and ran the stop sign at the T-intersection with 480th Avenue. The vehicle went airborne and struck the embankment. Mallatt was pronounced deceased at the scene. He was not wearing a seatbelt. Alcohol use is under investigation.

Names Released in Pennington County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: I-90, Mile Marker 111, 1 mile east of Wall, SD

When: 6:48 a.m., Saturday, December 16, 2023

Vehicle 1: 2018 Toyota Corolla

Driver 1: Kyle Jamison Jones, 34 yr. old male from Lewiston, ID, Fatal injuries

Vehicle 2: 2018 Honda Odyssey

Driver 2: Ashley Renae Hubregtse, 39 yr. old female from Summerset, SD, Life threatening injuries

Passenger 1: Dana Blanche Garry-Reiprich, 43 yr. old female from Summerset, SD, Serious non-life-threatening injuries

Pennington County, S.D.- A Lewiston, ID man died Saturday morning in a two vehicle crash in Pennington County.

Preliminary crash information indicates a 2018 Honda Odyssey driven by Ashley Renae Hubregtse, a 39 yr. old female from Summerset, SD, was traveling eastbound on Interstate 90 in the eastbound lanes near mile marker 111. A 2018 Toyota Corolla driven by Kyle Jamison Jones, a 34 yr. old male from Lewiston, ID, was traveling the wrong way, heading westbound on I-90 in the eastbound lanes. The vehicles collided head-on and Jones died at the scene.

Hubregtse sustained life-threatening injuries and her passenger, Dana Blanche Garry-Reiprich, also from Summerset, sustained serious non-life-threatening injuries. Both were transported by ambulance to a local hospital.

All three people were wearing seatbelts. Alcohol and drug use is under investigation.

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.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 5 of 74

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GLOBAL COMPANY. COMMUNITY CENTERED.



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Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

GT
TR

Groton Area
Tigers



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

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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 6 of 74

Conde National League

Dec. 18 Team Standings: Mets 7, Tigers 5, Braves 4, Cubs 4, Pirates 4, Giants 0

Men's High Games: Russ Bethke 195, Ryan Bethke 192, Chad Furney 186

Men's High Series: Russ Bethke 512, Chad Furney 508, Ryan Bethke 473

Women's High Games: Suzi Easthouse 180, Nancy Radke 175, Sam Bahr 167

Women's High Series: Suzi Easthouse 501, Nancy Radke 466, Sam Bahr 444

Groton Angel Tree Thanks You All

I would really like to thank the people for the donations and help with making this the best Christmas for the children again. Thanks to Lori's Pharmacy and Dollar General for hosting the Angel Tree this year.

It just melts my heart when I pull up to a house or apartment and see the smiles of the children and telling me that they will get a Christmas this year and it will be their best.

It is so special to see all the smiles I see from them.

I have been doing the Angel Tree since 2007.

Tina Kosel



Caring is something
we do year around,
but it's especially
special at this time of
year!

Have a very

*Merry
Christmas!*



AVANTARA

Groton

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 7 of 74



**Merry Christmas
from your home
away from home!**

Base Kamp Lodge

**Your Premier Destination
Lodge in Groton**
www.basekamlodgeSD.com

Est. 2015 Groton, SD



Believe
in the magic of
Christmas

*Merry
Christmas!*

BDM
RURAL WATER SYSTEM

707 7th Street, Britton
605-448-5417

Mission, South Dakota, Music Teacher Surprised With \$25,000 Milken Educator Award for Exceptional Commitment to His Students and Hometown Community



Albert Her Many Horses (SD '23)

Teacher

Todd County Middle School
Mission, SD

Subject(s) taught: Fine Arts, Lakota Language

Grade(s): 6, 7, 8

Education Secretary Dr. Joseph Graves joins in honoring Todd County Middle School's Albert Her Many Horses as national model of educational excellence

Mission, S.D. (December 20, 2023) — Todd County Middle School's Albert "Bobber" Her Many Horses thought he was attending an assembly highlighting the state literacy initiative with a

visit from South Dakota's secretary of education. Instead, the music and Lakota language teacher received the surprise of a lifetime – a national Milken Educator Award, which includes a \$25,000 cash prize for him to use however he chooses. Bestowed by the Milken Family Foundation, the Award presentation is part of a nationwide tour that honors exceptional educators for excellence and innovation in education. Her Many Horses is the only recipient from South Dakota this year.

Milken Educator Awards Senior Vice President Dr. Jane Foley, joined by South Dakota Secretary of Education Dr. Joseph Graves, presented Her Many Horses with the Award in front of cheering students, colleagues, dignitaries and media.

"Albert Her Many Horses shares a perspective and personal experience with the young hearts and minds he is molding within the very community that shaped him," said Dr. Foley, who is a 1994 Milken Educator from Indiana. "Albert's unique insight and deep understanding of the needs of his students, school and community make him an excellent leader and mentor. He has an unwavering enthusiasm for the arts, contributes to all facets of education at Todd County Middle School, and nurtures relationships with students and families that they will remember for years to come. We welcome Albert to our national Milken Educator Network and look forward to the positive contributions he will bring."

Hailed as the "Oscars of Teaching," the Awards will honor up to 75 recipients across the country in 2023-24 as part of the Milken Family Foundation's Journey to the 3,000th Milken Educator. 2023-24 will reach \$75 million in individual financial prizes spanning the length of the initiative and more than \$144 million invested in the Milken Educator Award national network overall, empowering recipients to "Celebrate, Elevate, and Activate" the K-12 profession and inspiring young, capable people to pursue teaching as a career.

"Mr. Her Many Horses has all the hallmarks of what constitutes a first-rate teacher: He is an expert in his fields of music and the Lakota language, he is highly adaptable to new technologies and new situations, and he is an exceptional role model for his students and fellow teachers at Todd County Middle School," said Secretary Graves. "His hard work will inspire his students throughout their lifetimes – his dedication to them ensures that."

"Congratulations to Bobber Her Many Horses on receiving the Milken Educator Award," said U.S. Senator Mike Rounds, who also shared in today's celebration. "Bobber is a leader in the community of Mission and

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 9 of 74

has had a significant impact on the students at Todd County Middle School. He is not only a role model to his students, but for teachers across the state and country as well. This well-deserved award is a testament to Bobber's hard work, both in and out of the classroom."

More About Albert Her Many Horses

High Expectations Lead to Positive Results: Her Many Horses stands out as a leader in his community, both inside and outside of his classroom at Todd County Middle School (TCMS), where he teaches band, chorus, general music and Lakota language classes. This hometown hero understands the challenges his students face to succeed because he faced them himself as a young man growing up in Mission. Despite the many barriers in front of TCMS youth, Her Many Horses maintains high expectations for his fine arts students. He motivates them to strive for their personal best while instilling self-confidence and responsibility within themselves, and he understands that cultivating talent requires imparting dedication and accountability while fostering mutual respect. His students' musical and scholastic achievements are a testament to Her Many Horses' steady, positive presence in their lives, making his classes highly attended and immensely popular.

Creative Approach to Technology in the Classroom: Consistently innovative and forward-thinking, Her Many Horses embraces the use of technology in his curriculum, becoming the first teacher in the school to integrate iPads in his music classes. During the pandemic, Her Many Horses was tasked with teaching music classes virtually due to school closures, and he successfully produced the winter and spring concerts in a virtual format via Zoom. To combat his students' shyness over performing in that manner, he helped them create memojis to be applied as filters over their recorded videos, eliminating the visual impediment to their self-confidence and synching all individual videos to create a masterful musical performance.

A Hometown Hero Inspiring Meaningful Change: Her Many Horses sponsors an in-school wellness group focusing on student mentoring. It has become one of the most engaged and active groups in the school, with its members consistently ranking high in the schoolwide "Wildcat Challenges" based on attendance, grades and behavior. He also dedicates his time to tutoring math and science, volunteering for the wrestling program, assisting the high school pep band at games and teaching summer classes to education majors at Sinte Gleska University, an accredited tribal university on the Rosebud Sioux reservation. Her Many Horses' leadership is far-reaching as he serves alongside Native American tribal members on the Lakota Language and Culture committee, advising the integration of Lakota language and culture within schools. In an effort to foster trust and build confidence among his students, their parents and the school leadership, Her Many Horses also serves on TCMS' parental advisory board, facilitating a partnership between the school and community.

He actively supports South Dakota Destination Imagination, a nonprofit volunteer organization that inspires and equips students to become the next generation of innovators and leaders through competitive challenges assessed by a team of educators and industry experts from various fields. Her Many Horses' personal connection to the organization and history as a participant himself goes beyond simple involvement to a deep commitment rooted in his own experience and desire to make a positive impact on the community in which he was raised.

Education: Her Many Horses earned a Bachelor of Arts in music education from Northern State University in 2011.

More about the Milken Educator Award Journey: "The Future Belongs to the Educated"

- The honorees attend an all-expenses-paid Milken Educator Awards Forum in Los Angeles in June

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 10 of 74

2024, where they will network with their new colleagues as well as veteran Milken Educators and other education leaders about how to broaden their impact on K-12 education.

- Honorees receive powerful mentorship opportunities for expanded leadership roles that strengthen education practice and policy. Milken Friends Forever (MFF) pairs a new recipient with a veteran Milken Educator mentor; the Expanding MFF Resource and Explorer Program fosters individual veteran Milken Educator partnerships around a specific topic area; and Activating Milken Educators (AME) promotes group collaboration in and across states to tackle pressing educational needs.

- Veteran Milken Educators demonstrate a wide range of leadership roles at state, national and international levels.

- The \$25,000 cash Award is unrestricted. Recipients have used the money in diverse ways. Some recipients have spent the funds on their children's or their own continuing education, financing dream field trips, establishing scholarships, and even adopting children.

About the Milken Educator Awards

The first Milken Educator Awards were presented by the Milken Family Foundation in 1987. Created by Lowell Milken, the Awards provide public recognition and individual financial rewards of \$25,000 to elementary and secondary school teachers, principals, and specialists from around the country who are furthering excellence in education. Recipients are heralded in early to mid-career for what they have achieved and for the promise of what they will accomplish. The Milken Family Foundation celebrates more than 40 years of elevating education in America and around the world. Learn more at MFF.org.

\$35,000 Matching Gift Provided to Feeding South Dakota

Sioux Falls, South Dakota (12/19/2023) – Feeding South Dakota has received a generous gift, just in time for the holidays. Bill and Carolyn Hinks, of Furniture Mart USA, have provided \$35,000 to match donations received by the non-profit through December 31.

"These funds are needed now, more than ever before," shared Megan Kjose, Development Director for Feeding South Dakota. "As the use of our hunger relief programs continues to rise, we are purchasing food to help us meet the demand. Food is expensive right now and as an organization we're feeling that pinch in our budget too."

In November Feeding South Dakota served over 13,500 families state-wide through their Mobile Food Distribution Program. This was a 5% increase over the same time the prior year. The organization also provides food through their Backpack and School Pantry Programs and to Wellness Pantries located in medical clinics.

"This matching donation creates twice the impact through Feeding South Dakota and we hope it inspires others to give to the organization," said Carolyn Hinks. "Together we can create a community where no one has to go hungry through the holidays."

To join the Hinks in celebrating the season of giving with a donation to Feeding South Dakota visit www.feedingsouthdakota.org/donate. Donations must be received online, or postmarked by December 31 to qualify for the match.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

State disaster report prepares for more natural disasters in coming years

Heat-related mortality, dam hazard potential added to list of action items

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 20, 2023 5:26 PM

South Dakotans have less than two weeks to review and comment on the state's new 2024 hazard mitigation plan, which is used to navigate and prepare for costly and deadly disasters.

The plan is updated every five years to meet state eligibility requirements for increased mitigation funding from the federal government.

The comment period was originally planned to take place during the month of November, according to the report. After the public comment deadline ends on Dec. 31 the report will be submitted to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for review and approval.

Ninety-one presidential disaster declarations have been made in South Dakota in the last 69 years, with the frequency of disasters increasing in recent decades, the report reads. In 2023, South Dakota had four disaster declarations:

July flooding that affected 10 counties and one reservation that cost the federal government \$1.55 million

Late February winter storms that affected 17 counties and cost \$2.2 million

February winter storm that affected one reservation and cost \$277,569

February winter storm that affected one reservation and cost \$978,173

The state had two disaster declarations in 2022, two in 2021, five in 2020 (all pandemic-related), five in 2019, one in 2018 and two in 2017.

South Dakota has had a state hazard mitigation plan in place since 2005. The 2024 revision includes new information and analyses to update the 2019 plan.

Winter storms, wildfires, drought and flooding (including flash, snowmelt, dam or levee failures) pose the greatest risks to South Dakota's economy and the health and safety of its residents, according to the plan.

Tornadoes, summer storms, windstorms, hazardous materials, and agricultural pests and disease were also listed as risks, but won't happen as frequently or cause as much damage.

Fire risk, for example, is expected to increase in South Dakota by 10-30% in the coming years because of increased temperatures, higher likelihood of drought and a greater risk of insect infestations in the Black Hills and West River, according to the report.

The report identifies 63 actions in the 2024 plan to reduce the impact of disasters.

The report includes two new action steps:

Developing systems and processes to monitor and mitigate heat-related morbidity and mortality. South Dakota heat historically has killed as many people as flooding and severe storms combined, but such health outcomes aren't monitored.

Coordinating with public and private dam owners to assess dams with increased development downstream that could change the dam's hazard potential.

When downstream areas are developed, a dam becomes high hazard rated, according to the report. No studies have evaluated that issue in South Dakota, and no programs exist to review dam hazard classification related to downstream development.

"The stable number of high hazard dams in South Dakota should not be taken as an indication that the consequence of dam failure is also stable," the report says. "In fact, the official status of dams may provide

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 12 of 74

a false sense of stability in terms of development-driven hazard creep.”

Nine other action items were already included in the 2019 plan but have not started, including:

Tax credit incentives for efficient water use, which is deemed a high priority. No legislative bills have been discussed

Developing instream flow protections and securing water rights for fish and wildlife conservation, also deemed a high priority,

Prepositioning water resources for fire suppression,

Long-term restoration of grasslands,

Enhancing wildlife habitat,

Creating studies on drought frequencies and future changes,

Promoting the catching of water in cisterns in the southwestern part of the state, and,

Engaging in outreach for mitigating fire damages in rural areas outside of the Black Hills

The report is set to be adopted by the state in March 2024.

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

Pennington County GOP wants full representation by start of legislative session

Noem: Supreme Court should rule on conflicts of interest before filling seats

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 20, 2023 3:07 PM

Some Pennington County Republicans are voicing frustration over Gov. Kristi Noem's decision to wait on a South Dakota Supreme Court opinion about conflicts of interest before filling two vacant seats in the state legislature.

Meanwhile, the Governor's Office says Noem's hands are tied.

With 20 days left before lawmakers convene in Pierre to craft and vote on new laws, the resignations of Sen. Jessica Castleberry and Rep. Jess Olson, both Republicans from Rapid City, have left their legislative districts without complete representation.

Castleberry resigned following a Noem administration-led investigation into her receipt of about \$600,000 in COVID-related financial assistance for her preschool, a move seen as a violation of conflict-of-interest laws. Castleberry inked a settlement with the state to repay the \$500,000 of the money that did not directly benefit families.

Olson cited health reasons for her resignation, but her business's state contracts have also been scrutinized. These incidents have sparked a statewide debate over what constitutes a conflict of interest for state legislators.

Noem issued an executive order in August to make clear that state contracts must include language acknowledging conflict-of-interest laws. However, she has decided not to appoint replacements for Castleberry and Olson until the state Supreme Court provides clarity on conflict-of-interest laws – a topic the justices have taken up at Noem's request.

Noem's decision on appointments means that Districts 34 and 35, which cover parts of Pennington County, may not have complete representation when the Legislature convenes on Jan. 9.

Without full representation

Local Republican party members have expressed concern that the lack of representation could disadvantage their districts.

Amy Wagner, chair of the Pennington County Republican Party Central Committee, said she understands Noem's position, but thinks "it's very concerning" nonetheless.

Six legislative districts include parts of Pennington County, which has a population of well over 100,000.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 13 of 74

Three of those districts do not include any areas outside the county. Castleberry and Olson represented two of them, covering the eastern and western parts of Rapid City and the majority of the citizens in the quickly growing city of Box Elder.

"That's a lot of people without representation," Wagner said.

Ken Straatmeyer is a Pennington County precinct committeeman. He will not be happy if his county goes into the upcoming legislative session without full representation.

"There needs to be something there that facilitates representation for us," he said. "I mean, look how long we've been waiting."

Castleberry stepped down on Aug. 18. A press release from the Governor's office said to email the office with nominations or applications by Sept. 18.

"I get bureaucracy turns slow, but this needs to be addressed," Straatmeyer said.

The Governor's office has previously said it is in the process of interviewing potential candidates for these seats, with the hope that the court's decision will allow for swift appointments. But with no clear timeline for the ruling, frustration is mounting among Pennington County's Republican constituents.

Wagner said the county committee sent Noem multiple suggestions for appointments to fill the void.

Lynn Kading, another Pennington County precinct committeeman, said he finds it "kind of crazy" that the Noem administration is the cause of Castleberry's resignation, the Supreme Court's advisory opinion request and the county's lack of representation.

"I think the Governor should appoint someone right away," Kading said. "Stop listening to the political hacks and listen to the people."

Pennington County precinct committeewoman Karli Healey thinks what's driving the two seats from being filled "stems from the internal fractures" within the Republican party.

The state's Republican party is essentially broken into two factions, she said: the long-established state Republican party – which she said includes Gov. Noem – and anti-establishment Republican outsiders.

"The special interest groups who control the legislature of course want someone from the establishment in there," she said. "But Noem knows she'll take flak in Pennington County if she appoints another member of the Pierre swamp."

Noem's Office responds

Noem spokesperson Ian Fury, said her position is made clear in a court brief recently filed from her office to the Supreme Court. That document intends to clarify what the administration wants the court to answer.

"The Governor should not make a constitutional appointment if doing so violates another constitutional provision," the document says. Therefore, not having a clear definition of what violates the conflict-of-interest provision makes any appointment improper.

One candidate who filed to fill the void "withdrew their application due to both potential concerns of a conflict under [state constitutional law] and the present delay," the document says.

"It cannot be known how many interested, qualified citizens have not even applied because of uncertainty about their own perceived or actual conflict, choosing not to risk unintentionally violating the Constitution," it reads. "Necessary to the Governor's consideration of any candidate must be an inquiry into whether the candidate is qualified and eligible for the appointment, possesses the skills to accomplish the job for their constituents, and whether a direct or indirect conflict of interest exists."

State Court Public Information Officer Alisa Bousa said the state Supreme Court does not have a timeline for the decision and did not speculate on how long it may take.

Pennington County temporarily went without full representation just last year after Senator Julie Frye-Mueller was suspended from the capital over comments made to a Legislative Research Council staffer.

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.

Report: Let USD Law grads earn law license through supervised rural practice

Recommendation aims to address bar exam criticism, legal aid shortage in small towns

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 20, 2023 12:55 PM

University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law students could soon earn their law license through supervised practice before graduation and two years of public service legal work in rural areas afterward. That's if the state adopts the recommendations of a bar exam committee.

South Dakota Supreme Court Chief Justice Steven Jensen called for the creation of the steering committee during his State of the Judiciary message to the Legislature in January. The group was tasked with exploring possible alternative pathways to South Dakota State Bar Membership – a topic that's woven its way into legislative debate for the past two years.

Currently, successful passage of the multi-part bar exam is a prerequisite to practicing law in South Dakota, similar to most states.

Critics say the state's approach to exam scoring has put some groups of students – slower, more methodical readers, for example, or those whose native language is not English – at a disadvantage. They say access to legal aid in rural South Dakota has suffered as a result of reliance on the exam.

For two years in a row, Rep. Mary Fitzgerald, R-Spearfish, has unsuccessfully pushed for bills to admit USD Law grads to the state bar by virtue of their degree, or to offer a pathway to licensure through supervised practice. Neither proposal moved forward.

While the bar exam steering committee's final report was released Wednesday by the Unified Judicial System, the committee included representatives from the courts, the state bar, the state Board of Bar Examiners and the law school in Vermillion.

Its primary recommendation aims to address both alternatives to licensure and rural access to legal services – an issue of concern for Jensen and his predecessor, former Chief Justice David Gilbertson.

A 2013 program was designed to incentivize recent graduates to choose rural areas through \$12,500 payments for up to five years for working in cities with 3,500 people or fewer. It has seen some success in certain areas, such as Winner, which recruited and has retained its county prosecutor through the program.

Meanwhile, the overall number of lawyers in urban areas has continued to grow.

"An estimated 72% of attorneys live in" Sioux Falls, Rapid City, Aberdeen or Pierre, the report says. Since 2013, that figure has grown by 11%.

The committee's alternative pathway recommendation would "offer law students seeking to practice public interest law or serve underserved rural areas of the state a fast track to admission without examination," according to a press release from the judicial system.

The report recommends the program as a 5-year pilot project with a maximum of 10 students per law school class. Participants would complete an externship under the supervision of an experienced lawyer during their second and third years of law school, then commit to a two-year stint in a rural area after graduation. Their bar license would be conditional during those two years and become official afterward.

The committee's yearlong work involved an anonymous survey in March of current bar members on the exam's importance and value. "An impressive total" of 792 people responded, the report says, with 62% saying the exam serves as an adequate measure of "minimum competence" for the practice of law. On the question of exam grading, 75% agreed that the tests are graded fairly.

Those results square with what committee members heard during interviews with bar members on topics ranging from the importance of testing for Indian Law to the relative value of continuing education for current lawyers. South Dakota's bar exam is the only one in the nation to include a question on Indian Law.

Sixty-nine percent of survey respondents did not support "diploma privilege," by which USD Law grads could practice immediately after earning their degree, but 59% supported the idea of supervised practice.

The committee also recommended that the state continue using its current bar exam process for now, but that the state should consider adopting the "NextGen Bar Exam" currently under development by the

National Conference of Bar Examiners when it becomes available in either 2026 or 2027. Competence in the understanding of Indian Law ought to remain a component of licensure, as well, the report says, for those who take the bar or choose an alternative pathway.

The press release on the committee's final report notes that the state Supreme Court will take public comments on the committee proposals at a hearing next year, but the date for such a hearing has yet to be set.

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.

Senate confirms Oklahoma's first Native American female federal judge, overcoming GOP opposition

Thune votes against Sara Hill, Rounds did not vote

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - DECEMBER 20, 2023 2:39 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate on Tuesday confirmed the first Native American woman to serve as a federal judge for the state of Oklahoma, despite some Republicans' protest of her work as the top prosecutor for the Cherokee Nation.

Sara Hill, the Nation's former attorney general, was confirmed as a U.S. District judge for the Northern District of Oklahoma in a 52-14 vote, joining just a handful of Native Americans appointed to lifetime judicial positions in U.S. history.

Hill's confirmation faced opposition from some of Oklahoma's highest-ranking GOP officials, including Gov. Kevin Stitt, but she retained support from the state's two Republican U.S. senators, James Lankford and Markwayne Mullin, during her nomination process.

Immediately following the vote, Lankford said he has "no doubt (Hill's) an American first."

"When she served for the Cherokee Nation, obviously she had a perspective. She was the voice for the Cherokee Nation. She's gonna speak for the Cherokee Nation," Lankford said.

"She's an Oklahoman, she's an American, and she understands full well that your job on the federal bench is to not represent one group of Oklahomans — it's all Oklahomans of the United States. So she's been very clear of her commitment to the United States Constitution and knowing that's her first responsibility on the bench."

GOP senators who joined Lankford in voting for Hill's nomination included Susan Collins of Maine, Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. South Dakota Republican John Thune voted against Hill's confirmation.

Numerous Republicans missed the vote, including Oklahoma's Mullin and South Dakota's Mike Rounds.

Multiple senators were absent Monday and Tuesday after Majority Leader Chuck Schumer cut short the holiday recess in an effort to strike a deal on Ukraine aid and immigration.

Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia was the lone Democrat to vote against Hill.

Cherokee Nation's top prosecutor

Hill served as the Cherokee Nation's attorney general from 2019 to 2023 during the overhaul of the tribe's criminal prosecution system set in motion by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*. The decision removed Oklahoma's jurisdiction over cases involving Native Americans on five tribal lands, which stretch over roughly 40% of the state.

As a result the Cherokee Nation's annual caseload skyrocketed into the thousands from the previous flow of roughly 100 or fewer, Hill said in August.

Republican officials questioned Hill's advocacy on behalf of the Cherokee Nation's sovereignty and asked

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 16 of 74

whether she would be able to judge fairly from the U.S. bench.

Following President Joe Biden's October nomination of Hill, Stitt said in a statement he had "serious concerns."

"... Furthermore, is the best choice an attorney general of a tribal government who has spent a great deal of time and resources actively suing the State of Oklahoma in an effort to overturn 116 years of Statehood and working to strip the state of our authority to enforce laws," wrote Stitt, a member of the Cherokee Nation.

When asked by reporters Tuesday about Stitt's opposition to Hill, Lankford said "we agree on a lot of things. We disagree on this one. I think she's qualified to be able to do it. It was part of the package of two people actually moving together."

John David Russell is the second nominee for U.S. District Judge for Oklahoma's Northern District. Russell and Hill were approved together by the Senate Judiciary Committee Dec. 7. The full Senate has not yet voted on Russell.

"(Stitt) really likes one, he doesn't like the other. OK, he's a Republican governor, I totally get that. If I had a Republican president, we may have two Republican nominees (for the bench). We don't, but they're both very, very qualified to be able to do the task," Lankford said Tuesday.

During Hill's nomination hearing in November, GOP Sen. Mike Lee of Utah questioned Hill's criticism of the Supreme Court's 2022 decision in *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta*, which narrowed the scope of *McGirt* by allowing Oklahoma to prosecute crimes committed by non-Native Americans against Native Americans on tribal land.

"Your apparent desire to remove the state's authority to prosecute non-Indian offenders would, in my view, only weaken law enforcement's ability to remove violent offenders from the streets," Lee said.

Hill responded to Lee in November: "On behalf of my client, I was critical of the decision in *Castro-Huerta*. I certainly believe and understand that I will be required to follow the law if I'm so fortunate as to be confirmed."

Lee did not vote Tuesday.

Three Native Americans have been appointed and approved by the Senate under President Joe Biden's administration. Hill is Biden's fourth Native American judicial appointment, according to the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, which represents roughly 230 U.S. civil rights advocacy organizations and strongly supports Hill's nomination.

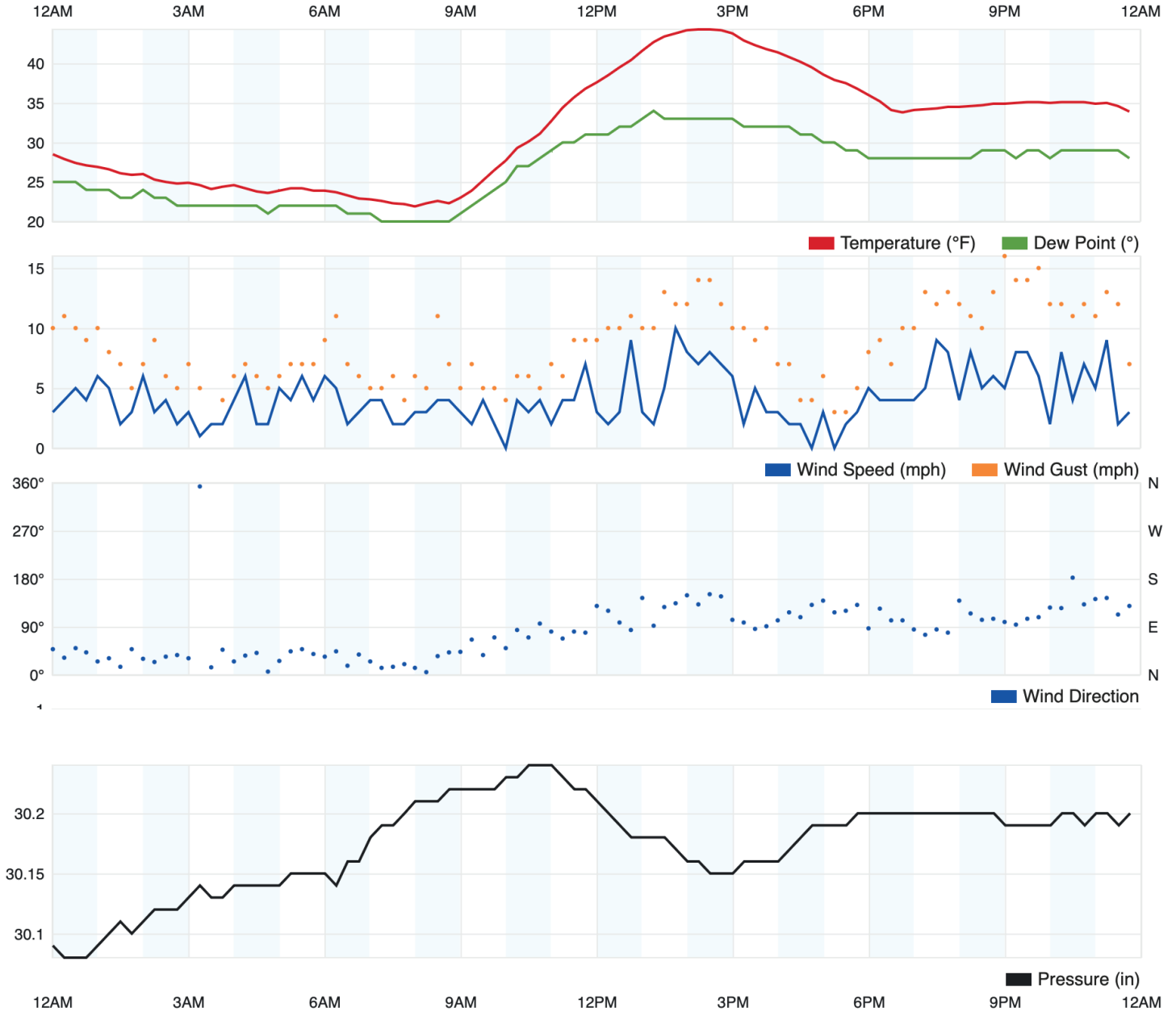
Hill is the eighth Native American in U.S. history appointed to a lifetime judge position, according to both the Leadership Conference and the Native American Rights Fund.

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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 17 of 74

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 18 of 74

Thu Dec 21	Fri Dec 22	Sat Dec 23	Sun Dec 24	Mon Dec 25	Tue Dec 26	Wed Dec 27
44° F 24° F	44° F 29° F	49° F 31° F	37° F 24° F	36° F 25° F	38° F 24° F	40° F 23° F
SE 11 MPH	SW 5 MPH	SSE 11 MPH	N 20 MPH 50%	N 11 MPH 40%	N 8 MPH	WNW 9 MPH

Wintry Precipitation Saturday Night Through Monday Night December 20, 2023 3:42 PM

Possibility of Minor Impacts from 12AM Sunday through 6AM Tuesday

- **What We Know:**
 - Precipitation to spread up through South Dakota and western Minnesota by Sunday morning; starting off as rain before becoming a wintry mix over western South Dakota late in the day Sunday. The wintry mix then expands over into eastern South Dakota Sunday night into Monday before diminishing in the form of snow Monday night into Tuesday.
- **What We Don't Know:**
 - The exact track of the system will result in difference to timing and location of precipitation, as well as temperatures. Even a small variability in temperatures will make the difference between rain, freezing rain and snow.
- **What You Can Do:**
 - Continue to monitor the latest forecast from reliable/reputable sources, **especially if you have travel plans Sunday into Tuesday! Now is the time to prepare a winter supply kit for your vehicle.**

	12/23	12/24				12/25				12/26			
	Sat 6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm
Aberdeen	15%	40%	60%	65%	50%	45%	30%	30%	30%	25%	20%	15%	15%
Britton	10%	40%	70%	70%	55%	45%	35%	35%	30%	25%	20%	15%	15%
Brookings	20%	45%	80%	85%	65%	50%	45%	45%	35%	25%	30%	25%	20%
Chamberlain	25%	55%	80%	75%	60%	50%	45%	40%	30%	25%	20%	20%	10%
Clark	20%	50%	80%	80%	65%	55%	45%	40%	35%	30%	30%	25%	20%
Eagle Butte	15%	35%	50%	55%	45%	35%	25%	25%	20%	15%	15%	10%	5%
Ellendale	10%	35%	55%	60%	45%	35%	30%	30%	25%	20%	20%	20%	10%
Eureka	15%	40%	50%	55%	45%	40%	30%	30%	25%	25%	15%	15%	10%
Gettysburg	15%	45%	60%	60%	55%	45%	35%	30%	30%	25%	15%	15%	15%
Huron	20%	50%	80%	80%	65%	55%	45%	45%	35%	30%	25%	25%	20%
Kennebec	25%	50%	75%	70%	55%	45%	40%	35%	25%	20%	15%	15%	10%
McIntosh	10%	30%	40%	45%	35%	25%	20%	20%	20%	15%	10%	10%	5%
Milbank	15%	40%	70%	80%	65%	55%	45%	40%	35%	30%	25%	25%	20%
Miller	20%	50%	75%	75%	60%	50%	40%	40%	35%	30%	20%	20%	15%
Mobridge	15%	35%	50%	50%	45%	35%	25%	25%	25%	20%	15%	10%	10%
Murdo	25%	55%	70%	70%	60%	45%	35%	30%	25%	20%	15%	15%	10%
Pierre	20%	50%	70%	65%	55%	45%	35%	30%	25%	20%	15%	15%	10%
Redfield	20%	50%	70%	70%	60%	50%	35%	35%	35%	25%	20%	20%	15%
Sisseton	10%	40%	70%	75%	60%	50%	40%	40%	35%	30%	25%	25%	20%
Watertown	15%	45%	80%	80%	65%	55%	45%	40%	35%	30%	25%	25%	20%
Webster	15%	45%	75%	75%	60%	50%	40%	35%	35%	30%	25%	25%	20%
Wheaton	10%	35%	65%	70%	55%	40%	35%	30%	25%	25%	20%	15%	

Created: 3 pm CST Wed 12/20/2023. Shows most impactful weather for the period beginning at the time shown. Weather symbols display where Probability of Precipitation ≥ 0%.

- Rain + - Fz Rain + - Wintry Mix + - Snow +

Created: 3 pm CST Wed 12/20/2023 |



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A storm system is expected to bring some rain mixing with or changing to snow Saturday night into Sunday. Sunday night through Monday, the transition to snow moves from the western half of South Dakota to the eastern half. Minor impacts to travel are anticipated, as the potential for more than an inch of snow (15 to 30%) is not that high at this time.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 19 of 74

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 44 °F at 2:18 PM

Low Temp: 22 °F at 7:57 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 8:53 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 50 in 1979

Record Low: -31 in 1916

Average High: 27

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.40

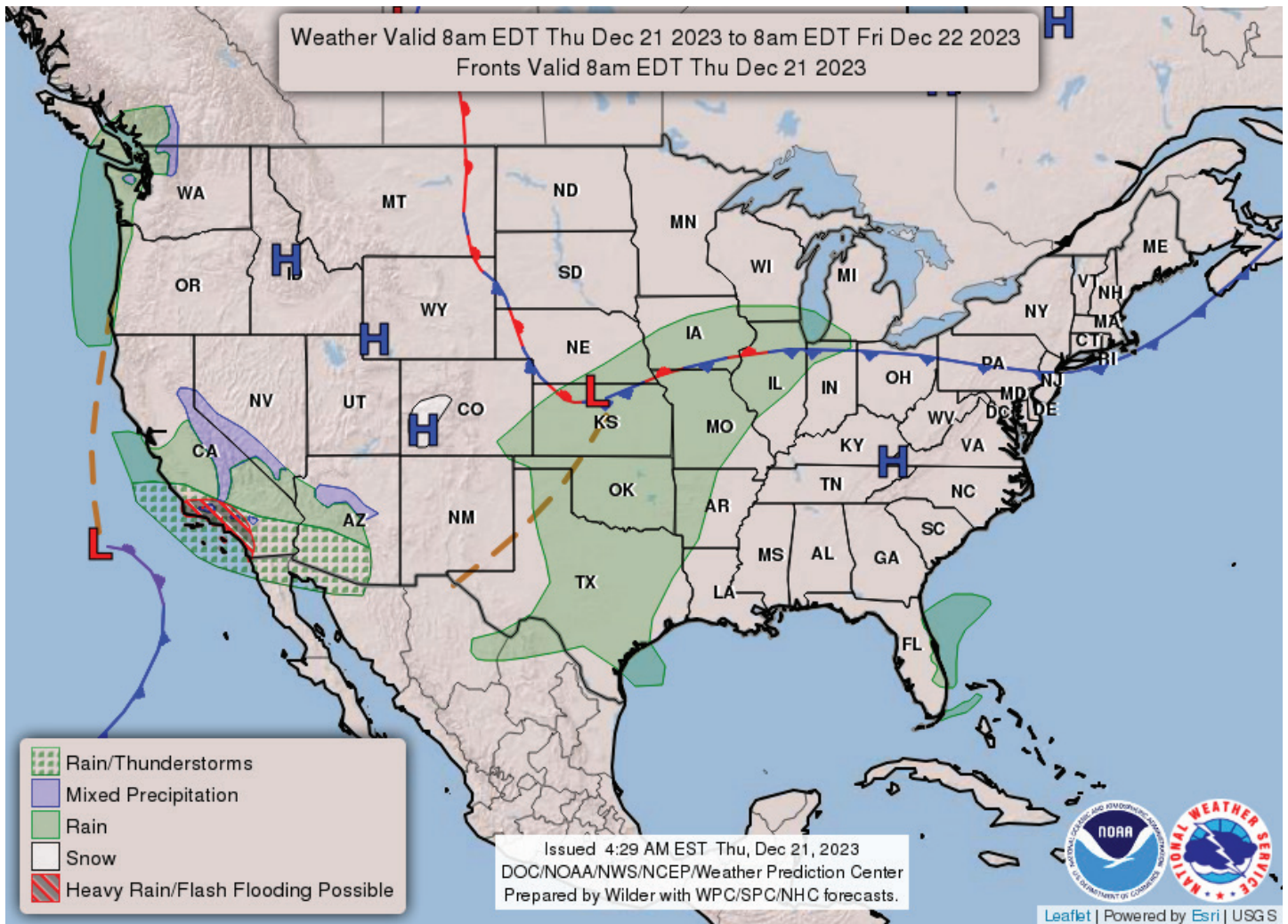
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.61

Precip Year to Date: 23.17

Sunset Tonight: 4:53:33 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07:52 am



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 20 of 74

Today in Weather History

December 21, 1968: A blizzard visited South Dakota and Minnesota on the 21st and 22nd. Snowfall during the storm was generally 1 to 2 inches in the western part of South Dakota, to 5 to 10 inches in Minnesota. More than 12 inches of snow was reported from Artichoke Lake in Big Stone County to the southeast in Minnesota and up to 18 inches in east-central and southeast South Dakota. The snowfall, on top of an already-existing deep snowpack, was whipped by 30-50 mph winds causing reduced visibility to near zero, created snowdrifts up to 10 feet or more. Almost all forms of traffic were blocked on highways for Sunday and blocked most of the secondary roads as well as some other roads for nearly a week.

Early blizzard warnings and the fact that the blizzard occurred late Saturday through Sunday, the highway patrol reported a minimum of accidents and stranded travelers. Most schools were closed, and other activities were curtailed. Many utility lines were down. Record December snowfall amounts were recorded for more than 40 locations in Minnesota. Artichoke Lake in Big Stone County received 16 inches of snow from this storm, by far its largest daily snowfall on record for any month of the year. Clear Lake, in Deuel County, measured 18 inches of snow, which also remains the most substantial daily snowfall on record for any month in that location. Watertown and Bryant received nine inches from this blizzard, while Castlewood reported seven inches.

1892: From December 21st to the 23rd, Portland, Oregon saw 26 inches of snow!

1929 - An exceptional storm produced snow from the Middle Rio Grande Valley of Texas to southern Arkansas. The storm produced 26 inches of snow at Hillsboro TX, 18 inches at El Dorado AR, and 14 inches at Bossier LA. (21st-22nd) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1964 - A great warm surge from the Pacific Ocean across Oregon and northern California brought torrential rains on a deep snow cover resulting in record floods. (David Ludlum)

1967: An F4 tornado traveled 33 miles across Iron and Washington Counties in Missouri during an unusual time of day, 12:45 to 1:20 am. The tornado killed 3 and injured 52 others. Most of the intense damage occurred in the town of Potosi, about 55 miles southwest of St. Louis. The tornado swept through the business district, destroying City Hall, library, a large supermarket, and a shopping center complex. Northeast of town, two people were killed when their home was swept from its foundation. The Red Cross reported 24 homes and trailers, along with 14 businesses destroyed. 81 other houses and trailers were damaged.

1987 - High winds continued along the eastern slopes of the Rockies. During the morning hours winds gusted to 64 mph at Cheyenne WY, and reached 97 mph near Boulder CO. Gale force winds prevailed across the Great Lakes Region. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Seven cities in the eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including Charleston SC with a reading of 78 degrees. A storm in the northwestern U.S. produced 22 inches of snow at Idaho City ID in two days, and up to two feet of snow at Happy Camp CA. Ski resorts in Idaho reported three to six feet of snow on the ground. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Forty cities in the north central U.S., including thirteen in Iowa, reported record low temperatures for the date. Havre and Jordan, MT, tied for honors as the cold spot in the nation with morning lows of 43 degrees below zero, and the temperature remained close to 40 degrees below zero through the daylight hours. Dickinson ND reported a morning low of 33 degrees below zero and a wind chill reading of 86 degrees below zero. The high for the date of 16 degrees below zero at Sioux Falls SD was December record for that location. (The National Weather Summary)

1998 - Cold air spread into the southern San Joaquin Valley of California. For the next four nights, temperatures in the agricultural portions of Fresno, Tulare, and Kern counties dropped below 28 degrees for several hours at a time. In some locations, temperatures dipped into the teens. The California citrus industry suffered more than \$600 million in damages due to the extreme cold.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE JOY THAT COMES FROM CHRISTMAS

A young runaway girl collapsed on the streets of a large city at the beginning of the Christmas season. She was rushed to a hospital, placed in intensive care, and finally made it to a room where she made slow progress in regaining her health.

One evening a group of carolers stopped by her room and sang the beautiful songs that describe the birth of Jesus. After they sang, a young lady approached her bed and asked if she knew the Baby that they had been singing about.

Quietly, barely above a whisper, she said, "I heard about Him when I went to Sunday school. But don't remember too much about Him."

The young lady reminded her of the story and the meaning of the birth of Jesus and the plan of salvation. When she heard the story, she accepted the Lord as her Savior.

Finally, it was time for her to leave and a nurse said, "Well, now that you're better, it's time for you to leave."

Happily, she said, "Yes, but I'm not leaving alone. I'm taking Jesus with me. Do you know Jesus?"

"Oh, yes," replied the nurse, in a grumpy voice.

"Well, then," she asked, "why aren't you filled with joy like I am? If you truly know Jesus, you'll be happy all the time."

David said, "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation!"

Prayer: Lord, sometimes we surrender our joy to the stress and strains of life. Come now and return the joy we once had when we accepted Christ as our Savior. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 51:12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.



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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 22 of 74

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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 23 of 74

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.19.23

17 26 50 58 61 11

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$57,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

4 14 15 17 28 7

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$3,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 15 Mins 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

1 11 19 34 40 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 30 Mins 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

25 26 30 31 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$103,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 30 Mins 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

22 25 28 30 53 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 18 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

27 35 41 56 60 16

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$620,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 18 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

The Top Romantic Destinations in Each State for 2024 According to Honeymoons.com

Jim Campbell | Wealth of Geeks undefined

A record 2.6 million couples tied the knot in 2022, spending an average of \$30,000 for the ceremony and reception. 73% shelled out an additional \$5100 for their honeymoon.

According to Fast Company, the leading 2024 travel trend in 2024 will be “hyperlocal” travel — shifting away from the multi-country and multi-region itineraries, opting instead for week-long stays in one city with plenty of local experiences to enjoy. The Knot echoes this, noting that 47% of couples choose to stay in the United States for their honeymoon adventure.

Imagine unwinding in luxurious hotels, dining in the coziest of restaurants, and indulging in romantic activities, each carefully chosen to highlight the unique charm of every state. From the tranquility of coastal shores to the grandeur of mountain vistas, these destinations promise to amplify the romance and create memories to last a lifetime.

Honeymoon.com wants to send newly married couples on a journey of love and discovery, curating an enchanting guide to the top romantic destinations across the United States.

With a focus on picturesque settings that range from serene coastal shores to majestic mountain landscapes, their selections for the top romantic destinations in each state aim to create unforgettable experiences for couples.

Reflecting the shift towards all-inclusive travel, and taking into account The Knot’s 2024 honeymoon and travel trends, Honeymoons.com looked at the best honeymoon destinations offering comprehensive packages and those that encourage couples to disconnect from their devices and connect with each other. The list also features a variety of hotels and inns with historical significance, offering a blend of luxury and a journey through time.

Hilton’s 2024 travel trend reports that culture and experiences drive many travelers’ choices, so Honeymoons.com evaluated leading restaurants that offer not just a meal but a gateway to cultural immersion and memorable experiences to enrich the honeymoon experience.

The Top Romantic Destinations in Each State

Here are the Best Honeymoon Hotel, Intimate Restaurant, and Most Romantic Activity, based on Honeymoon.com’s exclusive search data and the top trends of 2024.

Alabama – Point Clear

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Grand Hotel Golf Resort & Spa

Intimate Restaurant: Gambino’s

Most Romantic Activity: Making Waves Boat Charters

Alaska – Juneau

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Jorgenson House

Intimate Restaurant: In Bocca Al Lupo

Most Romantic Activity: Tracy Arm Fjord

Arizona – Sedona

Best Honeymoon Hotel: L’Auberge de Sedona

Intimate Restaurant: Casa Sedona

Most Romantic Activity: Antelope Canyon and Horseshoe Bend Tour

Arkansas – Hot Springs

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Lookout Point Inn

Intimate Restaurant: Luna Bella

Most Romantic Activity: Garvan Woodland Gardens

California – Santa Barbara

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 26 of 74

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Rosewood Miramar Beach
Intimate Restaurant: Toma Restaurant and Bar
Most Romantic Activity: Wine Tasting Tour
Colorado – Aspen
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Little Nell
Intimate Restaurant: Element 47
Most Romantic Activity: Hot Air Balloon Rides
Connecticut – Mystic
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Spicer Mansion
Intimate Restaurant: Oyster Club
Most Romantic Activity: Sailing on the Mystic River
Delaware – Rehoboth Beach
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Bellmoor Inn and Spa
Intimate Restaurant: Eden
Most Romantic Activity: Strolling the Boardwalk
Florida – Key West
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Sunset Key Cottages
Intimate Restaurant: Latitudes
Most Romantic Activity: Sunset Sail
Georgia – Savannah
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Kehoe House
Intimate Restaurant: The Grey
Most Romantic Activity: Carriage Ride through Historic District
Hawaii – Maui
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea
Intimate Restaurant: Mama's Fish House
Most Romantic Activity: Sunset Cruise
Idaho – Coeur d'Alene
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Coeur d'Alene Resort
Intimate Restaurant: Beverly's
Most Romantic Activity: Lake Coeur d'Alene Cruise
Illinois – Chicago
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Langham, Chicago
Intimate Restaurant: Alinea
Most Romantic Activity: Chicago Riverwalk
Indiana – Nashville
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Artists Colony Inn
Intimate Restaurant: Story Inn
Most Romantic Activity: Brown County State Park
Iowa – Dubuque
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hotel Julien Dubuque
Intimate Restaurant: Caroline's Restaurant
Most Romantic Activity: Mississippi River Cruise
Kansas – Wichita
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Ambassador Hotel Wichita
Intimate Restaurant: Siena Tuscan Steakhouse
Most Romantic Activity: Botanica Wichita Gardens
Kentucky – Louisville
Best Honeymoon Hotel: 21c Museum Hotel
Intimate Restaurant: Jeff Ruby's Steakhouse

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 27 of 74

Most Romantic Activity: Belle of Louisville Riverboat Cruise
Louisiana – New Orleans
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hotel Monteleone
Intimate Restaurant: Commander's Palace
Most Romantic Activity: French Quarter Carriage Ride
Maine – Bar Harbor
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Harborside Hotel
Intimate Restaurant: The Reading Room Restaurant
Most Romantic Activity: Acadia National Park
Maryland – Annapolis
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Annapolis Inn
Intimate Restaurant: Osteria 177
Most Romantic Activity: Sailing on the Chesapeake Bay
Massachusetts – Nantucket
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Wauwinet
Intimate Restaurant: Topper's
Most Romantic Activity: Brant Point Lighthouse
Michigan – Mackinac Island
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Grand Hotel
Intimate Restaurant: Woods Restaurant
Most Romantic Activity: Carriage Tour of the Island
Minnesota – Minneapolis
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hotel Ivy
Intimate Restaurant: Spoon and Stable
Most Romantic Activity: Minnehaha Falls
Mississippi – Biloxi
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Beau Rivage Resort & Casino
Intimate Restaurant: Mary Mahoney's Old French House
Most Romantic Activity: Biloxi Lighthouse Tour
Missouri – Branson
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Big Cedar Lodge
Intimate Restaurant: Osage Restaurant
Most Romantic Activity: Showboat Branson Belle Dinner Cruise
Montana – Whitefish
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hampton Inn & Suites Whitefish
Intimate Restaurant: Three Forks Grille
Most Romantic Activity: Spotted Bear Spirits
Nebraska – Omaha
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Omaha Marriott Downtown at the Capitol District
Intimate Restaurant: 801 Chophouse at the Paxton
Most Romantic Activity: Henry Doorly Zoo
Nevada – Las Vegas
Best Honeymoon Hotel: Vdara Hotel & Spa
Intimate Restaurant: Primal Steakhouse
Most Romantic Activity: Las Vegas Helicopter Night Flight
New Hampshire – Portsmouth
Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Hotel Portsmouth
Intimate Restaurant: Ristorante Massimo
Most Romantic Activity: Public

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 28 of 74

New Jersey – Cape May

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Congress Hall

Intimate Restaurant: Washington Inn

Most Romantic Activity: Sunset Beach

New Mexico – Santa Fe

Best Honeymoon Hotel: La Fonda on the Plaza

Intimate Restaurant: Geronimo

Most Romantic Activity: Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

New York – New York City

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Plaza

Intimate Restaurant: One if by Land, Two if by Sea

Most Romantic Activity: Central Park Carriage Ride

North Carolina – Asheville

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Biltmore Estate

Intimate Restaurant: Curate

Most Romantic Activity: Blue Ridge Parkway

North Dakota – Fargo

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hotel Donaldson

Intimate Restaurant: Mezzaluna

Most Romantic Activity: Red River Zoo

Ohio – Cincinnati

Best Honeymoon Hotel: 21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati

Intimate Restaurant: Orchids at Palm Court

Most Romantic Activity: Cincinnati Art Museum

Oklahoma – Oklahoma City

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Colcord Hotel Oklahoma City, Curio Collection by Hilton

Intimate Restaurant: Paseo Grill

Most Romantic Activity: Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum

Oregon – Bend

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Wall Street Suites

Intimate Restaurant: Pine Tavern Restaurant

Most Romantic Activity: Tumalo Falls

Pennsylvania – Philadelphia

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Rittenhouse Hotel

Intimate Restaurant: Ristorante Pesto

Most Romantic Activity: A Day in Amish Country

Rhode Island – Newport

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Chanler at Cliff Walk

Intimate Restaurant: Restaurant Bouchard

Most Romantic Activity: Rough Point Museum

South Carolina – Charleston

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Vendue

Intimate Restaurant: Peninsula Grill

Most Romantic Activity: Carriage Tour of Historic District

South Dakota – Rapid City

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Summer Creek Inn

Intimate Restaurant: Tally's Silver Spoon

Most Romantic Activity: Mount Rushmore

Tennessee – Nashville

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 29 of 74

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Hermitage Hotel

Intimate Restaurant: The Catbird Seat

Most Romantic Activity: Grand Ole Opry

Texas – San Antonio

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hotel Emma

Intimate Restaurant: Bliss

Most Romantic Activity: River Walk

Utah – Park City

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Stein Eriksen Lodge

Intimate Restaurant: Riverhorse on Main

Most Romantic Activity: Park City Mountain Resort

Vermont – Stowe

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Trapp Family Lodge

Intimate Restaurant: Michael's on the Hill

Most Romantic Activity: Stowe Mountain Resort

Virginia – Charlottesville

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Oakhurst Inn

Intimate Restaurant: Hamiltons' at First & Main

Most Romantic Activity: Virginia Private Custom Wine Tour from Charlottesville

Washington – Seattle

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Lotte Hotel Seattle

Intimate Restaurant: The Pink Door

Most Romantic Activity: Space Needle

West Virginia – Charleston

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Blennerhassett Hotel

Intimate Restaurant: Laury's Restaurant

Most Romantic Activity: Kanawha State Forest

Wisconsin – Milwaukee

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hilton Garden Inn Milwaukee Downtown

Intimate Restaurant: Sanford Restaurant

Most Romantic Activity: Milwaukee Art Museum

Wyoming – Jackson Hole

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Amangani

Intimate Restaurant: Snake River Grill

Most Romantic Activity: Grand Teton National Park

South Carolina – Hilton Head Island

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Inn & Club at Harbour Town – Sea Pines Resort

Intimate Restaurant: Michael Anthony's Cucina Italiana

Most Romantic Activity: Parasailing Adventure at the Hilton Head Island

South Dakota – Sioux Falls

Best Honeymoon Hotel: ClubHouse Hotel & Suites Sioux Falls

Intimate Restaurant: Carnaval Brazilian Grill

Most Romantic Activity: Falls Park

Tennessee – Nashville

Best Honeymoon Hotel: The Joseph

Intimate Restaurant: Bourbon Steak by Michael Mina, a Nashville Steakhouse

Most Romantic Activity: Nashville to Jack Daniel's Distillery Bus Tour with Tastings

Texas – Austin

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hotel ZaZa Austin

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 30 of 74

Intimate Restaurant: Acre 41

Most Romantic Activity: Texas State Capitol

Utah – Park City

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Hotel Park City, Autograph Collection

Intimate Restaurant: Ruth's Chris Steak House

Most Romantic Activity: Deer Valley Resort

Wyoming – Jackson Hole

Best Honeymoon Hotel: Rusty Parrot Lodge

Intimate Restaurant: Snake River Grill

Most Romantic Activity: Jackson Hole Playhouse

This article was produced by Media Decision and syndicated by Wealth of Geeks.

Kot's 22 help Wyoming beat South Dakota State 78-65

EL PASO, Texas (AP) — Akuel Kot's 22 points helped Wyoming defeat South Dakota State 78-65 on Wednesday night.

Kot shot 8 for 14 (4 for 7 from 3-point range) and 2 of 3 from the free throw line for the Cowboys (7-4). Mason Walters shot 4 of 12 from the field and 3 for 4 from the line to add 12 points.

Charlie Easley led the way for the Jackrabbits (6-6) with 17 points, four steals and two blocks. South Dakota State also got 16 points and two blocks from William Kyle III. In addition, Luke Appel finished with 13 points.

NEXT UP

Wyoming takes on BYU on the road on Saturday, and South Dakota State hosts North Dakota on Sunday.

Wednesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Marion 80, Patrick Henry, Va. 64

US, Venezuela swap prisoners: Maduro ally for 10 Americans, plus fugitive contractor 'Fat Leonard'

By JOSHUA GOODMAN, ERIC TUCKER and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The United States freed a close ally of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in exchange for the release of 10 Americans imprisoned in the South American country and the return of a fugitive defense contractor known as "Fat Leonard" who is at the center of a massive Pentagon bribery scandal, the Biden administration announced Wednesday.

The American detainees were back on U.S. soil late Wednesday, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said. Six of them arrived at Kelly Airfield Annex in San Antonio.

Savoi Wright, a Californian who had been arrested in Venezuela in October, said, "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last" after disembarking the plane.

The deal represents the Biden administration's boldest move yet to improve relations with the major oil-producing nation and extract concessions from the self-proclaimed socialist leader. The largest release of American prisoners in Venezuela's history comes weeks after the White House agreed to suspend some sanctions, following a commitment by Maduro to work toward free and fair conditions for the 2024 presidential election.

Maduro celebrated the return of Alex Saab as a "triumph for truth" over what he called a U.S.-led campaign of lies, threats and torture against someone he considers a Venezuelan diplomat illegally arrested on a U.S. warrant.

"President Biden, we won't be anyone's colony," a defiant Maduro said with Saab at his side for a hero's

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 31 of 74

welcome at the presidential palace.

The release of Saab, long regarded by Washington as a bagman for Maduro, is a significant concession to the Venezuelan leader. Former President Donald Trump's administration held out Saab as a trophy, spending millions of dollars pursuing the Colombian-born businessman, at one point even deploying a Navy warship to the coast of West Africa following his arrest in Cape Verde to ward off a possible escape.

U.S. officials said Biden's decision to grant him clemency was difficult but essential in order to bring home jailed Americans, a core administrative objective that in recent years has resulted in the release of criminals once seen as untradeable.

"These individuals have lost far too much precious time with their loved ones, and their families have suffered every day in their absence. I am grateful that their ordeal is finally over," President Joe Biden said in a statement.

The agreement also resulted in the return to U.S. custody of Leonard Glenn Francis, the Malaysian owner of a ship-servicing company who is the central character in one of the largest bribery scandals in Pentagon history.

But the exchange angered many in the Venezuelan opposition who have criticized the White House for standing by as Maduro has repeatedly outmaneuvered Washington after the Trump administration's campaign to topple him failed.

Eyvin Hernandez, a Los Angeles County public defender arrested almost two years ago along the Colombia-Venezuela border, was one of the U.S. detainees. After arriving in Texas Wednesday night, he thanked Biden "because I know he made a difficult decision that will have a lot of pressure on him on Capitol Hill. But he got us home and we're with our families. And so we're incredibly grateful, all of us."

Hernandez added, "Honestly, all you think about when you're in prison is how you didn't appreciate being free while you were free."

Wright told reporters: "I didn't know if I would ever make it out. And it's really scary to be in a place where you're used to having freedoms and you're locked into a cell. ... It's a very challenging situation."

In October, the White House eased sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry following promises by Maduro that he would level the playing field for the 2024 election, when he's looking to add six years to his decade-long, crisis-ridden rule. A Nov. 30 deadline has passed and so far Maduro has failed to reverse a ban blocking his chief opponent, María Corina Machado, from running for office.

Biden told reporters earlier in the day that, so far, Maduro appeared to be "keeping his commitment on a free election." Republicans, echoing the sentiment of many in the U.S.-backed opposition, said Saab's release would only embolden Maduro to continue down an authoritarian path.

"Disgraceful decision," Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, posted on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter.

The White House went to lengths to assure it won't hesitate to snap back sanctions if Venezuela's government fails to fulfill electoral commitments hammered out during negotiations with the opposition. A \$15 million reward seeking Maduro's arrest to face drug trafficking charges in New York also remains in effect, it said.

The agreement also requires Maduro's government to release 20 political prisoners, in addition to a close ally of Machado, along with the suspension of arrest warrants of three other Venezuelans.

The U.S. has conducted several swaps with Venezuela over the past few years, including one in October 2022 for seven Americans, including five oil executives at Houston-based Citgo, in exchange for the release of two nephews of Maduro's wife jailed in the U.S. on narcotics charges. Like that earlier exchange, Wednesday's swap took place on an airstrip in the Caribbean island nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Saab, who turns 52 on Thursday, hugged his wife and two young children as he descended the staircase of a private jet at the Simon Bolivar International Airport.

It was a stark reversal from the scene on another tarmac, in Cape Verde, where he was arrested in 2020 during a fuel stop en route to Iran to negotiate oil deals on behalf of Maduro's government. The U.S. charges were conspiracy to commit money laundering tied to a bribery scheme that allegedly siphoned

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 32 of 74

off \$350 million through state contracts to build affordable housing. Saab was also sanctioned for allegedly running a scheme that stole hundreds of millions in dollars from food-import contracts at a time of widespread hunger mainly due to shortages in the South American country.

After his arrest, Maduro's government said Saab was a special envoy on a humanitarian mission and was entitled to diplomatic immunity from criminal prosecution under international law.

"Life is a miracle," Saab said, standing alongside Maduro at the neoclassical presidential palace in Caracas. "I'm proud to serve the Venezuelan people and this government, a loyal government, which, like me, never gives up. We will always triumph."

Absent from Maduro's chest-thumping was any mention of Saab's secret meetings with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. In a closed-door court hearing last year, Saab's lawyers said that he was for years helping that agency untangle corruption in Maduro's inner circle and had agreed to forfeit millions of dollars in illegal proceeds from corrupt state contracts.

But the value of the information he shared with the Americans is unknown; some have suggested it may have all been a Maduro-authorized ruse to collect intelligence on the U.S. law enforcement activities in Venezuela. Whatever the case, Saab skipped out on a May 2019 surrender date and shortly afterward was charged by federal prosecutors in Miami.

The deal is the latest concession by the Biden administration in the name of bringing home Americans jailed overseas, including a high-profile prisoner exchange last December when the U.S. government — over the objections of some Republicans in Congress and criticism from some law enforcement officials — traded Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout for WNBA star Brittney Griner.

The swaps have raised concerns that the U.S. is incentivizing hostage-taking abroad and producing a false equivalence between Americans who are wrongfully detained abroad and foreigners who have been properly prosecuted and convicted in U.S. courts.

"What happened to the separation of powers?" said Juan Cruz, who oversaw the White House's relations with Latin America while working at the National Security Council from 2017-19. "Normally you would have to wait a defendant to be found guilty in order to be able to pardon him for a swap. This is an especially bad precedent with a Trump 2.0 potentially around the corner. It invites winking and nodding from the executive."

But Biden administration officials say securing the freedom of wrongfully detained Americans and hostages abroad requires difficult dealmaking.

Making this deal more palatable to the White House was Venezuela's willingness to return Francis.

Nicknamed "Fat Leonard" for his bulging 6-foot-3 frame, Francis was arrested in a San Diego hotel nearly a decade ago as part of a federal sting operation. Investigators say he bilked the U.S. military out of more than \$35 million by buying off dozens of top-ranking Navy officers with booze, sex, lavish parties and other gifts.

Three weeks before he faced sentencing in September 2022, Francis made an escape as stunning and brazen as the case itself as he snipped off his ankle monitor and disappeared. He was arrested by Venezuelan police attempting to board a flight from Caracas and has been in custody since.

'Total systemic breakdown': Missteps over years allowed Detroit serial killer to roam free

By ED WHITE, DEL QUENTIN WILBER and MADDY PEEK Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — The serial killer lured women one by one into vacant homes to be murdered, posing their nude or partially clothed corpses amid cheap booze pints, crumbling sheetrock and hypodermic needles.

The slayings set Detroit on edge, prompting authorities to dispatch crews on overtime to scour the city's decrepit stock of abandoned properties for more bodies. When the killer was charged in 2019, the police chief at the time told reporters that his department had been "very diligent, relentless" in solving the crimes.

But now, a year after DeAngelo Martin was sent to prison for committing four murders and two rapes, it's clear that police were hardly diligent or relentless.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 33 of 74

Over 15 years, Detroit police failed to follow up on leads or take investigative steps that may have averted the eventual killing spree, despite having received repeated warnings that Martin was a violent predator, an Associated Press investigation has found.

"It's astonishing," said Jim Trainum, a retired Washington, D.C., homicide detective who specializes in reviewing police investigations for possible wrongful convictions. "All the police had to do was one little thing, one little thing here or there, and they would have put a stop to this whole process and these women would still be alive. Just one thing."

In uncovering the failures, the AP relied on more than a dozen interviews, hundreds of pages of court documents and records from prosecutors and police, including a lengthy internal affairs report, obtained through public information requests.

The files reveal that the bungling started in 2004, when evidence from the rape of a 41-year-old woman was stored in a kit — and then forgotten for years in a warehouse, along with thousands of others. When police finally reopened the investigation, the victim had long been dead.

The lapses continued all the way into 2018, when police arrested the wrong man in a strangling. Even after a state crime lab linked Martin's DNA to the death, police only sought his arrest weeks after he had raped a woman in his grandmother's basement in 2019 and had killed thrice more.

Detroit's internal affairs branch issued a 247-page report that found the agency's sex crimes unit did not properly handle DNA hits. Officers were confused about what number of assaults would define a serial rapist, and they were also reluctant to re-approach victims to persuade them to cooperate.

No mistakes rose "to the level of criminality," the report said, but several officers had "neglected their duties." Two were briefly suspended. An internal affairs supervisor summed up the debacles as a "total systemic breakdown."

"That's one way of categorizing it," Detroit police Commander Michael McGinnis told the AP.

"Sitting here today, would I have liked to have seen a more aggressive apprehension effort made in 2018? Yes, I absolutely would have," said McGinnis, who formerly served as the head of the homicide unit and now leads the department's professional standards bureau. "But that's sitting here in hindsight knowing exactly what I know today."

McGinnis said the department has since changed the way it deals with crime victims and manages DNA leads. Supervisors and command staff now are more involved, he said, especially in cases with a serial offender.

"We learn from our mistakes," McGinnis said, "and we resolve to do better."

Relatives of Martin's victims were furious when they learned through AP that police had chances to stop him before their loved ones were killed. They also wondered if the department would have been more aggressive if the victims hadn't been among the city's most vulnerable — and invisible — residents: women struggling with addiction, mental illness or homelessness.

"My sister would be alive today if the police had done their jobs," said Anthony Ellis, the brother of Trevesene Ellis, who was found slain in May 2019. "She always looked out for everyone and didn't deserve to die this way."

Lisa Hohnstreiter, the daughter of Martin's second victim, Nancy Harrison, said she was overwhelmed by the information obtained by AP. "My mom's death could definitely have been prevented," she said.

Tough Upbringing

Martin, who is serving between 45 and 70 years in prison, declined a request for an interview.

Born in 1985, he was raised by his mother, Chantrienes Barker, in Detroit until she was arrested in 1998 for the kidnapping and murder of a 28-year-old Detroit man.

Barker had permitted the kidnappers to hold a rival drug dealer in her basement while they extorted money from his suppliers and family, court records show. Barker bought food for the kidnappers as they burned the 27-year-old captive with cigarettes and heated nickels, and stabbed him with a bayonet, records show.

When the ransom plan fell apart, the kidnappers killed the drug dealer and left his body on a city street.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 34 of 74

It is not known if Martin, then 13, was home during the kidnapping. Barker was convicted of felony murder in 1999 and sentenced to life in prison.

Martin next lived with his grandparents, or on the streets. Kyle "Brother Joe" Hicks, a minister, said he first met Martin two decades ago when the teenager was sheltering with other homeless men under a downtown amphitheater.

Martin was addicted to alcohol and drugs, Hicks said, and panhandled to earn cash. He dreamed of being a singer, Hicks said, and frequently tried to croon duets with another homeless man.

"I imagine they were pretty good singers when they were sober," Hicks said, "but they were never sober."

Around 15 years ago, Hicks said, Martin lost three toes on his right foot to frostbite.

"I was surprised when he was arrested," Hicks said. "He seemed nice. But do the math: He had a messed-up childhood with his mom going to prison for murder, and he had addictions to drugs and alcohol. That doesn't make you a serial killer, but it's not a recipe for success."

DNA Links

Martin had several run-ins with police over the years. He had at least two convictions by 2009, including one for receiving a stolen car, and, as a result, his DNA profile was on file in a national database.

He first was connected to a potential sexual assault in 2012. That's when a state crime laboratory alerted Detroit police that a national database had matched Martin's DNA to evidence collected in the 2004 rape of Sylvia Sampson.

Sampson, 41, told police she was walking down a deserted street when a gold-colored car pulled up, and the gun-wielding driver demanded she get inside, reports show. He drove Sampson to a nearby field strewn with tires where he warned her to "do what I say or I'll snap your neck." After the rape, Sampson told police, her assailant kicked her in the face and took \$10 from her coat.

Police collected evidence in a rape kit, which was stored in a warehouse. Five years later, prosecutors discovered that untested kit and more than 11,000 others in the building, sparking a push by Wayne County prosecutor Kym Worthy to clear the backlog.

Her office said the testing initiative concluded last year, having identified 841 serial offenders while netting 239 convictions. Worthy's efforts were highlighted in a 2017 documentary, "I Am Evidence," that explored similar backlogs of untested rape kits across the country. The film was produced and narrated by Mariska Hargitay, the star of NBC's "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit."

It does not appear that police at first did anything about the "hit" linking Martin to Sampson's assault. Four years after receiving it, records show, detectives looked into the assault and determined that Sampson was dead.

Without a living victim, they closed the case.

The state crime lab in October 2016 linked Martin's DNA to a specimen collected in a second rape kit.

A 50-year-old woman had reported the previous December that a male companion had thrown "her down and started hitting her in the face and possibly sexually assaulted her" in a vacant home, according to a police report of the incident.

Police noted in their report that the woman had suffered injuries consistent with an assault: "two black swollen eyes" and swollen lips, as well as bruises on her legs and scratches on her neck.

The brutality alarmed prosecutors. In an email to police shortly after learning about the DNA hit, assistant prosecutor Tanya Abdelnour told sex crimes investigators that "clearly a second hit to (a rape kit) is an indication of a possible serial offender."

"It appears that that assault included some physical violence to the victim resulting in injuries," she wrote. "It is concerning that the physical violence is increasing."

Police did not get very far. The victim declined to be a witness, records show, though an officer called the woman a second time in a failed attempt to convince her to cooperate.

In 2017, the crime lab linked Martin's DNA to evidence collected in a third rape kit. That specimen had been submitted by a hospital, but police could find no record of the female victim having reported the crime.

The First Killing

The first homicide attributed to Martin took place in February 2018, though police initially arrested the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 35 of 74

wrong man.

It was a Monday afternoon when two Detroit police officers were flagged down by Rudolph Henderson, a 43-year-old vagabond. At Henderson's feet was a dead, naked woman.

Detectives arrested Henderson on murder charges after discovering security video that showed him dragging Annetta Nelson, 57, from a vacant house where she had been strangled and beaten to death.

Henderson told police that he had stumbled across Nelson's corpse in the living room as he was looking for crack cocaine. He said he decided to move the body because he didn't think anyone would find it otherwise.

Henderson was released a week after his arrest when police uncovered other video evidence that prosecutors described as proving the homeless man "was not the perpetrator."

Two months later, records show, the state crime lab linked Martin's DNA to evidence collected from Nelson's vagina. A scientist even told police they could find his name in other case files. Henderson, meanwhile, was cleared by the same DNA testing.

The case files do not indicate what police did with the information, though the internal affairs report suggests Det. Jesus Colon created a reward flier seeking information about him. The detective declined an interview request. His remarks to internal affairs investigators, like most others made by officers, were redacted in the report.

After obtaining the DNA hit, police dispatched an "apprehension team" to search for Martin, according to McGinnis, the police commander.

"I don't know what specific actions they took to try to locate him but they were unsuccessful. Unfortunately, it takes time sometimes to catch people," McGinnis said.

McGinnis told AP that other DNA was recovered from the crime scene, though homicide files only noted only Martin's genetic material was found in the victim's body. "For all we knew he might have been a consensual sexual partner, and the other male DNA could have been the murderer's," McGinnis said.

Two law enforcement experts — and the Detroit police chief at the time — say police missed an opportunity by not aggressively pursuing the lead.

At the very least, detectives should have obtained a search warrant to obtain a DNA sample from Martin to confirm the database match, according to Julianne Himelstein, who spent more than a decade prosecuting sex offenders in Washington, D.C.

The warrant would have alerted other departments to detain Martin if they came across him, she said, and given Detroit police the chance to interrogate him.

"That is just crazy they didn't get that warrant," said Himelstein, a former federal prosecutor. "Confirming that link is step one in Investigations 101."

In an interview with AP, Detroit's police chief back in 2018, James Craig, said the DNA hit was "compelling" evidence and would have been enough to "to try to detain" Martin. He could not say why police didn't take that step.

Not Hard To Find

In the months after the DNA alert, Martin had repeated contact with Detroit-area police officers. He was given a ticket for disorderly conduct by Wayne State University police in September. He was arrested that same month in Ferndale for lying about his identity.

Martin was arrested again in December 2018 on charges of repeatedly hitting a girlfriend in Southfield, another suburb. He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor assault charge and spent about two weeks in the Oakland County jail.

Authorities in those jurisdictions did not inform Detroit police about their encounters with Martin because Detroit police never asked them to be on the lookout for him, records show.

"Had a more robust apprehension effort been made," McGinnis said, "I would hope we would have learned that he had contact with these other agencies and been able to chase that down. That did not occur."

Not long after Martin was released from jail, he killed for the second time. On March 19, 2019, the body of Nancy Harrison, 52, was discovered in an abandoned house on Coventry Street.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 36 of 74

The medical examiner ruled she had died from being struck in the head (Martin would admit he beat Harrison to death with a two-by-four).

Two months after discovering Harrison's body, police were dispatched to the home of Martin's grandmother, where a 26-year-old woman told them that Martin had stabbed her in the neck and raped her in the basement.

A relative of Martin's corroborated the woman's account. An aunt, Linda Martin, told police that she had heard screaming from the basement and found the victim bleeding from a stab wound.

Police would not seek charges in the rape until two days after Martin's final known homicide victim was discovered.

City On Edge

A few days after the assault in his grandmother's basement, Martin was arrested 30 miles away in Chesterfield Township after flagging down police for help in a parking lot.

Officers discovered that he was wanted in Southfield for ignoring the conditions of probation in the earlier assault of a girlfriend.

"In your favor, please look out for me," Martin wrote to the judge overseeing his return to court. "You have my word. ... I wanna do what's right."

He spent 10 more days in jail. Southfield Judge Cynthia Arvant encouraged Martin to seek social services and take his medication.

"Mr. Martin, I wish you the best of luck," said Arvant, who had no way of knowing that Martin could be a murder suspect. "Hopefully you'll be done with this. Put it behind you and move forward."

The day after Martin was released, Trevesene Ellis' decomposed body was found in a Detroit house. She was murder victim No. 3. Authorities could not determine a cause of death, though Martin would later admit to having killed her.

The corpse of a fourth victim, Tamara Jones, 55, was found on June 5 in a vacant house on Mack Avenue. She had been beaten to death.

Martin's DNA was later linked to both crimes, as well as to Harrison's slaying in March.

The discovery of the bodies shook Detroit, especially after police warned that the culprit was likely a serial killer.

At a June 7 press conference about the slayings, Mayor Mike Duggan and his police brass pledged that they were racing to inspect buildings for more bodies and scrambling to board up 2,000 properties.

Later that day, police named Martin a person of interest in the killings. Detectives obtained a warrant charging him with the rape in his grandmother's basement and arrested him without incident that night at a bus stop.

Prosecutors subsequently charged him in the four homicides and the two 2019 rapes after DNA testing linked him to all the crimes. Police declined to say whether they suspected Martin in other killings, but reports and court files suggest he was suspected in at least one disappearance and another death.

Martin eventually pleaded guilty to killing Nelson, Harrison, Ellis and Jones. He also admitted he raped two women.

At his sentencing last year, Martin said he wanted to apologize but in the next breath denied wrongdoing. His lawyer acknowledged "these crimes were horrible, demeaning," and a prosecutor described Martin as a serial killer and rapist who brought immeasurable pain into the world.

When it was their turn to address the judge, the victims' relatives spoke of deep anger and loss.

A father lamented his daughter would never meet her grandchildren.

A daughter said she suffered from repeated nightmares and struggled with explaining to her own children how their grandmother died.

And a twin sister marveled at how it had taken a serial killer to snuff out the life of a loving and caring woman who had beaten the odds and survived nearly two decades on Detroit's streets. She urged the judge to throw the book at Martin because he "is not fit to live in society."

A year since the sentencing, family members of the victims say their emotions have grown only more complicated.

Their fury, once directed at a man, is now also focused on Detroit police. The relatives all have the same question: How did police miss so many chances to stop a killer?

Ukraine ends year disappointed by stalemate with Russia, and anxious about aid from allies

By BARRY HATTON Associated Press

The year started with high hopes for Ukrainian troops planning a counteroffensive against Russia. It ended with disappointment on the battlefield, an increasingly somber mood among troops and anxiety about the future of Western aid for Ukraine's war effort.

In between, there was a short-lived rebellion in Russia, a dam collapse in Ukraine, and the spilling of much blood on both sides of the conflict.

Twenty-two months since it invaded, Russia has about one-fifth of Ukraine in its grip, and the roughly 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line has barely budged this year.

A crunch has come away from the battlefield. In Western countries that have championed Ukraine's struggle against its much bigger adversary, political deliberations over billions in financial aid are increasingly strained.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is playing a waiting game two years into a war that proved to be a costly miscalculation by the Kremlin. He is wagering that the West's support will gradually crumble, fractured by political divisions, eroded by war fatigue and distracted by other demands, such as China's menacing of Taiwan and war in the Middle East.

The international political outlook could turn sharply in Putin's favor after next November's elections in the United States — by far Ukraine's biggest military supplier and where some Republican candidates are pushing to wind down support for its war.

Nearly half of the U.S. public believes the country is spending too much on Ukraine, according to polling published in November by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

"The political landscape on both sides of the Atlantic is changing," says Charles Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington DC. "Transatlantic solidarity has been steady. But I don't think it will remain steady forever."

The shifting sentiment could benefit Putin, analysts say, as he seeks at least to keep Ukraine in limbo and eventually compel it to accept a bad deal to end the war. Putin announced in early December that he will run for reelection in March, all but guaranteeing he keeps his repressive grip on Russia for at least another six years.

"It's been a good year, I would even actually call it a great year" for Putin, says Mathieu Boulegue, a consulting fellow for the Russia-Eurasia program at Chatham House think tank in London.

Western sanctions are biting but not crippling the Russian economy. Russian forces are still dictating much of what happens on the battlefield, where its defensive lines feature minefields up to 20 kilometers (12 miles) deep that have largely held back Ukraine's monthslong counteroffensive.

The counteroffensive was launched before Ukraine's forces were fully ready, a hurried political attempt to demonstrate that Western aid could alter the course of the war, said Marina Miron of the Defense Studies Department of King's College London.

"The expectations (for the counteroffensive) were unrealistic," she said. "It turned out to be a failure."

Putin got a victory he desperately wanted in May in the fight for the bombed-out city of Bakhmut, the longest and bloodiest battle of the war. It was a trophy to show Russians after his army's winter offensive failed to take other Ukrainian cities and towns along the front line.

A mutiny in June by the Wagner mercenary group was the biggest challenge to Putin's authority in his more than two decades in power. But it backfired. Putin defused the revolt and kept the allegiance of his armed forces, reasserting his hold on the Kremlin.

Wagner chief and mutiny leader Yevgeny Prigozhin was killed in a mysterious plane crash. And any public

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 38 of 74

dissent about the war was quickly and heavy-handedly stamped out by Russian authorities.

Still, Putin has had setbacks. He fell afoul of the International Criminal Court, which in March issued an arrest warrant for him on war crimes, accusing him of personal responsibility for the abductions of children from Ukraine. That made it impossible for him to travel to many countries.

Ukraine has so far clawed back about half the land that the Kremlin's forces occupied in their full-scale invasion in February 2022, according to the U.S., but it's going to be hard to win back more.

The big Ukrainian push fell far short of its ambitions, even though Western countries had given Kyiv a variety of weapons and training.

That has raised uncomfortable questions in the West about the best way forward. "We're in a very awkward moment now," said Kupchan of the Council on Foreign Relations.

The Russians have been ruthless in their determination to stop the Ukrainians punching through their lines. They were suspected of sabotaging the major Kakhovka dam on the Dnieper River in southern Ukraine, having possessed the means, motive and opportunity to do so. The dam's collapse flooded a huge area where Ukrainian forces might have been able to break through.

For its part, Ukraine has proved able to strike far behind enemy lines, even hitting Moscow with long-range drones. It has bloodied Russia's nose by hitting with missiles and drones a key bridge in Moscow-annexed Crimea, oil depots and airfields, and the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol.

By showing it can strike in the Black Sea, Ukraine has been able to push Russian warships away from the coast, although not entirely. At one point, Russia turned its sights on Ukraine's Black Sea ports — a vital conduit to global trade — and its farming infrastructure, destroying enough food to feed more than 1 million people for a year, the U.K. government said.

Yet while Russia has endured huge losses of troops and equipment, the country possesses the scale to soak up those setbacks.

Putin, who foreign officials say has secured large supplies of ammunition from North Korea, has put together a state budget that devotes a record amount to defense as it increases spending by around 25% in 2024-2026. He has also ordered the country's military to increase the number of troops by nearly 170,000 to more than 1.3 million.

For Ukraine, the challenge is resourcing another offensive operation. Its troops are motivated but exhausted, analysts say.

Zelenskyy has tirelessly lobbied Western leaders to keep help coming, aware they are his country's lifeline. He has traveled to Washington three times in the past two years.

U.S. President Joe Biden traveled to Kyiv last February in a display of Western solidarity. He now wants Congress to grant an additional \$50 billion for the war in Ukraine.

Support for Kyiv shows signs of fraying, however. Biden's proposal is stuck in a divided Senate.

Zelenskyy scored a diplomatic victory late in the year when the European Union granted Ukraine accelerated talks on joining the bloc. But even that triumph was tempered by the knowledge that the process could take years, as could clinching NATO membership.

And the EU's denial of 50 billion euros (\$55 billion) in aid to help keep the battered Ukrainian economy going was frustrating for Kyiv.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni perhaps expressed the predicament most succinctly in November when she inadvertently told a pair of Russian prank callers that "there is a lot of fatigue" on the issue of Ukraine.

"We are near the moment in which everybody understands that we need a way out," she said.

Taylor Swift's new romance, debt-erasing gifts and the eclipse are among most joyous moments of 2023

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — A romance that united sports and music fans, a celestial wonder that drew millions of eyes skyward and a spiritual homecoming for some Native American tribes were just some of

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 39 of 74

the moments that inspired us and brought joy in 2023.

In a year that saw multiple wars, deadly mass shootings, earthquakes, wildfires, sexual harassment stories and other tragedies, these events were among those that broke through the tumult of 2023 and made people feel hopeful.

As Taylor Swift would say, "Hold on to the memories." Here are a few of them:

A FRIENDSHIP BRACELET WITH A PHONE NUMBER

That's how Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce planned to woo superstar Taylor Swift when he went to her Eras Tour concert stop in the Missouri capital. It didn't work — at first.

But the romantic gesture, and public admission of defeat on his "New Heights" podcast, caught the Grammy Award-winner's attention. After the power pair took their relationship public — she went to a Chiefs game and sat in a box with Kelce's mom, to the delight of fans — they began taking the world by storm.

Sportscasters calculated Swift's effect on Kelce's game stats and TV viewership, national magazines offered up comprehensive dating timelines, and Swift fans scoured Kelce's old social media posts to make sure he was fit for their queen.

On tour in Buenos Aires, the then-33-year-old singer changed a lyric from "Karma is the guy on the screen" to "Karma is the guy on the Chiefs." And fans went crazy when she jumped into Kelce's arms for an iconic post-concert kiss.

"I think we're all excited about it. Until they start making good romcoms again, this is what we have," said Michal Owens, a 37-year-old longtime fan from the Indianapolis suburb of Zionsville.

While pint-sized pairs of trick-or-treaters donned glitzy dresses and Chiefs jerseys this Halloween, Owens transformed her outdoor display into a tribute. The mother of three dressed one 12-foot-tall (3.66-meters-tall) skeleton in a Chiefs jersey, another in a sparkly dress and then stacked three smaller skeletons atop one another to create what she called a "tower of Swifties."

"We've got so many things in the world to be sad about," she said. "Why not find something to root for and give us some joy?"

AN AWE-INSPIRING ECLIPSE

From Oregon's coast to the beaches of Corpus Christi, Texas, millions of people in October donned special glasses and gazed upward to take in the dazzling "ring of fire" eclipse of the sun.

"It's kind of spiritual, but in a way that is almost tangible," University of Texas at San Antonio astrophysics professor Angela Speck said as she recalled the type of eclipse that ancient Mayan astronomers called a "broken sun."

Crowds in the path of the eclipse erupted in cheers when the moon blocked out all but a brilliant circle of the sun's outer edge. Participants at an international balloon fiesta in Albuquerque, New Mexico, whooped from the launch pad. Broadcasters for NASA said they felt a chill as the moon cast a shadow over the earth — and one broadcaster was so overcome with emotion that she began crying.

The phenomenon was a prelude to the total solar eclipse that will sweep across Mexico, the eastern half of the U.S. and Canada, in April 2024. But the next "ring of fire" eclipse won't be visible in the U.S. until 2039 and then only in parts of Alaska.

IN DEATH, A SELFLESS ACT

Surprise letters are showing up in mailboxes, informing recipients that their medical debt is wiped away.

They have Casey McIntyre to thank. The 38-year-old New York City book publisher nearly died of cancer in May. But in what her husband, Andrew Rose Gregory, called a "bonus summer," the young mother made plans to help people after she was gone. Her goal: To erase medical debt.

In a message posted after her death in November, she asked for donations, writing, "I loved each and every one of you with my whole heart and I promise you, I knew how deeply I was loved."

By December, more than \$900,000 had been raised, enough to erase nearly \$90 million in debt. That's because the nonprofit RIP Medical Debt says every dollar donated buys about \$100 in debt.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 40 of 74

"Her positive spirit is just resonating with a lot of people," said Allison Sesso, the nonprofit's president and CEO.

The effort was inspired by the people McIntyre met during treatment. They weren't just worried about their health but how to pay for their care. She had good insurance — and "couldn't even fathom having to deal with that on top of the cancer," Sesso said.

The fundraiser, which quickly shattered its initial goal of \$20,000, gave her family a sliver of "something positive" to focus on amid their grief. It was particularly hard for the family because when McIntyre died, her daughter was just a toddler, not yet 2.

"This sounds crazy but she didn't seem angry at all," said Sesso. "She was like, 'This happened. I've accepted that this has happened, and I'm going to do this positive thing.'"

A SPIRITUAL HOMECOMING

When the Grand Canyon became a national park over a century ago, many Native Americans who called it home were displaced.

In 2023, meaningful steps were taken to address the federal government's actions. In May, a ceremony marked the renaming of a popular campground in the inner canyon from Indian Garden to Havasupai Gardens, or "Ha'a Gyoh," in the Havasupai language.

It marked a pivotal moment in the tribe's relationship with the U.S. government nearly a century after the last tribal member was forcibly removed from the park. The Havasupai Tribe was landless for a time until the federal government set aside a plot in the depths of the Grand Canyon for members.

Then in August, President Joe Biden signed a national monument designation — over the opposition of Republican lawmakers and the uranium mining industry — to help preserve about 1,562 square miles (4,046 square kilometers) to the north and south of Grand Canyon National Park.

It was another big step for the Havasupai, and for the 10 other tribes that consider the Grand Canyon their ancestral homeland.

The new national monument is called Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni. "Baaj Nwaavjo" meaning "where tribes roam," for the Havasupai people, while "I'tah Kukveni" translates to "our footprints," for the Hopi Tribe.

The move restricts new mining claims and brings tribal voices to the table to manage the environment, said Jack Pongyesva, of the Grand Canyon Trust, an advocacy group that represents tribal and environmental issues in the region.

He said it also could open the door for more cultural tourism, where visitors could learn not just about the landscape but about the tribes — from the tribes themselves.

Pongyesva, a member of the Hopi Tribe, said the dedication is "The beginning of hopefully this healing and looking back and seeing what was wrong and moving forward together."

A RESILIENT RETURN

Firs are mainstays of Christmas tree lots. But on the Isle Royale National Park near Michigan's border with Canada, balsam firs were being devoured.

Gray wolves on the remote island cluster in Lake Superior were already dying out from inbreeding, causing the moose population to become a "runaway freight train" and strip trees that were wolves' primary food during long, snowbound winters, said Michigan Tech biologist Rolf Peterson.

An ambitious plan was hatched to airlift wolves from the mainland to the park — and it's starting to make a big difference. A report this year shows the resurging wolf population is thriving and the moose total is shrinking, giving the trees a chance to recover.

There were critics of the plan, but Peterson said there weren't other viable options. Because of climate change, particularly global warming, there are fewer ice bridges, reducing wolves' ability to trek from the mainland and diversify the gene pool.

"That was a huge undertaking," Peterson said, and it turned out "spectacularly well."

Biden needs a new approach to Black voters based on Georgia and Michigan, group of strategists says

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Some top Democrats are worried that a dip in Black voter turnout, along with other challenges, could doom President Joe Biden and his party in 2024.

A group of Democrats is offering a new analysis of the most recent campaigns in Georgia and Michigan, pitching those battlegrounds as models for drawing in more Black voters next year and beyond. They argue that Democratic power players need to think — and spend money — in new ways, going beyond efforts that can be last-minute or superficial as they try to reassemble Biden's 2020 coalition.

"The days of the symbolic fish fry and one-time church visit are over," wrote the authors of the analysis by strategists widely credited for helping flip Georgia and Michigan to Biden. "Black voters have always required an approach to voter engagement as diverse as the Black voting coalition."

Biden has long depended on Black voters — first as a Delaware senator and most notably in the 2020 South Carolina primary, which delivered him a decisive win that led much of the Democratic field to consolidate behind him.

But just 50% of Black adults said they approve of Biden in a December poll by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs. That is compared with 86% in July 2021, with the gap fueling concerns about his reelection prospects.

The new report, shared exclusively with The Associated Press and being presented privately to Democratic power players, contends as part of several recommendations that the left must regularly engage all Black voters, including the most reluctant, while amplifying arguments about abortion rights in Black communities.

Said Lauren Groh-Wargo, a leader of the push and longtime adviser to Georgia Democrat Stacey Abrams: "People need to see something different; they need to see you coming to them and asking for their vote in their cultural spaces."

The authors include veterans of Abrams' operation and Michigan's efforts to approve an abortion-rights referendum and re-elect Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Abrams lost her second bid against Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, but Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock beat Herschel Walker to retain his Senate seat, bolstered in part by years of work by Abrams and other organizers.

The report explores why the two states' 2022 electorates differed from other racially diverse battlegrounds. The contributors want to share their conclusions with the party's biggest donors and top strategists, including those running Biden's 2024 campaign. One of Biden's top campaign aides managed Warnock's campaign.

Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin are the seven states that will be critical in deciding the Electoral College next year. Across those states in 2022, Black turnout dropped, on average, about 22% from the 2018 midterms, according to multiple Democratic firms' data analysis. Lagging Black support for Biden in any three of those states next fall could cut off his path to the required 270 electoral votes.

Michigan's Black turnout in 2022 was about 90% of its 2018 totals, according to the analysis. But among Black voters under 35, the 2022 turnout was 96% of 2018 levels — notably outpacing other battlegrounds, Georgia included. That bolstered Whitmer's nearly 11-point victory and the abortion rights referendum, which passed by 13 points. The analysis found Michigan's Black voters supported the initiative by a higher proportion than any other race or ethnicity; that finding was repeated recently in Ohio's abortion referendum, authors said.

"We were open to the research that showed us just how much this would resonate in Black communities," said Michigan Democratic Chairwoman Lavora Barnes, the first Black woman to hold her post and a co-author of the report.

"We made it part of a broader message about rights and freedom," she added, saying Black Americans, because of their historical experience with oppression, are especially attuned to "having our rights taken away."

Whitmer, who embraced the nonpartisan abortion-rights campaign, said the lessons must carry forward as some Republicans propose national abortion restrictions.

"My generation assumed that these rights would always be intact for us and our children," the governor, 52, said recently. "Lo and behold, here we are having to fight over and over again to protect these rights."

Black turnout in Georgia, meanwhile, was about 92% of 2018 levels; Black voters over 50 exceeded their 2018 marks.

If Georgia's Black turnout had tracked the 2022 battleground average, the analysis calculates that about 175,000 fewer voters would have cast November ballots. With Warnock winning more than 9 out of 10 Black votes, that shortfall almost certainly would have meant his defeat to Walker, the only GOP statewide nominee who lost in Georgia last year.

And if Black turnout in other 2022 battlegrounds reflected Georgia's, Democrats almost certainly would have defeated Republican Sen. Ron Johnson in Wisconsin and may have won a North Carolina Senate seat, expanding their narrow majority, the authors argue.

Some recommendations from Georgia are challenging and expensive. Abrams' operation began a decade ago trying to expand voter participation in Georgia, focusing on Black and other nonwhite residents who rarely or never voted. Now Georgia's political footprint involves hundreds of paid canvassers, sophisticated digital outreach, voter registration drives and door-knocking campaigns even in non-campaign years.

The report argues that the investment over time creates so-called "super voters" who make the Democratic investment worth it. The document details tactics Georgia and Michigan Democrats have used and that the authors say can be scaled in other states.

The authors note that in 2018, when Abrams first ran for governor, Georgia had more than 1.1 million Black voters deemed "low propensity" and unlikely to vote. After the 2022 election, that has dropped to between 700,000 and 800,000.

Conversely, the "super voter" measure — defined as people who have cast three consecutive general election ballots — has climbed from about 525,000 Black Georgians after 2016 to more than 850,000 after 2022.

Donors and most campaigns, though, still gravitate to traditional turnout models aimed at regular or semi-regular voters. They see the Abrams approach as costing too much money per vote.

"We need other groups out there making contacts with inactive voters because most campaigns just aren't cut out to do that," said Preston Elliot, Whitmer's 2022 campaign manager, who was not involved in the analysis. He complimented figures like Groh-Wargo, Abrams and Barnes but cautioned that the latest effort comes down to resources.

"There are enough tasks out there for everyone to play their parts," Elliot said. "But ultimately we're talking about about finite money here."

A deal on US border policy is closer than it seems. Here's how it is shaping up and what's at stake

By STEPHEN GROVES, LISA MASCARO and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Amid grueling negotiations, the contours of a bipartisan border security and immigration deal are beginning to take shape, emerging even as Congress leaves town having failed to publicly unveil any details of the package that's central to unlocking stalled aid for Ukraine.

Talks between the White House and key senators have not veered widely from three main areas of discussion: toughening asylum protocols for migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border; bolstering border enforcement with more personnel and high-tech systems; and deterring migrants from making the journey in the first place.

As the Senate broke for the holidays, due back Jan. 8, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell in a rare joint statement indicated negotiations are progressing. They also met Wednesday to discuss how to advance the border policy alongside President Joe Biden's \$110 billion package of wartime aid for Ukraine, Israel and other national security priorities.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 43 of 74

"We all know there's a problem at the border," Schumer said before sending senators home. "Our goal is, as soon as we get back, to get something done."

McConnell said the negotiations "continue to make headway."

And as aid for his country hangs in balance, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said at his own press conference in Kyiv he was confident "the U.S. will not let us down."

Here's a look at what's being discussed as key Senate negotiators and the White House plan to dig in during the weeks ahead:

TOUGHER ASYLUM CLAIMS

Senate negotiators have focused on asylum, by which the U.S. offers protection for people facing persecution in their home countries. The senators say they are trying to ensure that migrants who have a credible claim to asylum can safely apply, but that officials can also quickly turn away those who don't qualify.

Critics often say that too many people who pass their initial asylum interview end up ultimately failing in their efforts to win asylum. But because the immigration courts are so backlogged by the time the final determination happens, many have been in the country for years, making it more difficult and expensive to deport them.

The senators and the Biden administration have considered toughening the so-called credible fear standard that's used in the initial interviews to determine if migrants seeking asylum would likely have a winnable case before an immigration judge.

Advocates for immigrants argue that the credible fear standard is deliberately low in recognition of the fact that migrants being interviewed have usually fled desperate conditions, don't have legal representation and are still shaken by their journeys.

BORDER SECURITY

It was the Republicans who demanded negotiations over the border, refusing to provide aid for Ukraine as it battles Russia's invasion, unless Biden also agreed to changes to cut immigration.

While Biden had initially proposed \$14 billion to bolster border security in the national security package, Republicans said money was not enough. They want to enshrine policy changes at the border into law, some echoing Donald Trump, the party's frontrunner for the presidential nomination, who takes a hard line against immigration.

Still, billions of dollars of funding will almost certainly be part of any deal.

Border Patrol officers are overwhelmed processing migrants who turn themselves in seeking asylum. Biden had proposed \$3.1 billion for additional border agents as well more asylum officers, immigration judge teams and processing personnel. Supporters say the money for the asylum system is crucial to addressing the backlog in immigration courts and essentially getting the process moving faster.

Biden has also suggested \$1.2 billion for Customs and Border Protection officers and inspection systems to stop the flow of deadly fentanyl.

While the president also proposed funds to help communities in the U.S. that are taking in the record numbers of new arrivals, Republicans have resisted sending money to the cities, largely Democratic, that are helping house and provide care for the migrants.

REDUCING BORDER BUILD-UP

Over and over, senators have emerged from hours of closed-door talks with an exasperated conclusion: Immigration policy is complicated.

"Millions of decisions," said Sen. James Lankford, a Republican of Oklahoma. "Underneath every big idea is 100 smaller decisions that all have to be made, and every one is complicated."

Sen. Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, said: "It's interconnected. So if you press in one side and it pops out the other, it takes time to get this right."

One of the toughest issues to resolve has been how to dissuade migrants from even embarking on their journeys to the U.S. in the first place, particularly from countries experiencing unrest, economic calamity or widespread gang violence.

Senators have discussed ways to encourage people to apply for asylum before they arrive at the border — either in their home country, or if that's not plausible, a country they travel through on their way

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 44 of 74

to the U.S.

The Biden administration had launched a new system earlier this year that encourages people seeking asylum to schedule an appointment, via a smartphone app, to seek entry at the border.

In talks, the White House has also insisted on keeping in place its ability to allow 30,000 people a month from Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba and Haiti entry into the U.S. if they have a financial sponsor and fly into the country.

The idea is to create a more orderly, efficient asylum system that reduces chaos at the border.

But record numbers of migrants are still arriving. Illegal crossings topped 10,000 some days in December.

ENFORCEMENT

Negotiators have run into trouble in the talks when it comes to enforcement measures. One potential compromise would set a threshold for the number of border crossings, and once the number is reached, stricter enforcement measures would take effect.

Under that system, if the crossings get too high authorities would shut down the border for asylum claims, enable fast-track removals of migrants who have already entered unlawfully, and detain some migrants while they are screened for valid asylum claims.

Funding in the package could also go to bolstering immigration enforcement, including detention facilities, according to one person familiar with the private negotiations who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Advocates for immigrants worry that some of the restrictions under discussion could just push the build-up of migrants south of the U.S.-Mexico border.

"We're turning Mexico into a staging area for migrants moving north," said Dylan Corbett, who heads the Hope Border Institute, in a call with reporters. "Mexico doesn't have the infrastructure to be able to deal with this."

They also warn that the expedited removal measures would strike fear in the millions of immigrants lacking permanent legal status while effectively turning Trump-style administrative policies into law, making them potentially more difficult to challenge in court.

Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent central to the negotiations, said that the potentially lasting impact of their work hangs over the talks.

"A mistake here will matter for many years," she said.

China emerged from 'zero-COVID' in 2023 to confront new challenges in a changed world

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China's prospects for 2024 look uncertain, as a year that opened free of COVID-19 lockdowns winds down without the dreamed of robust recovery for the world's No. 2 economy.

The wars in Gaza and Ukraine are straining China's ties with the West. A U.S.-China leaders' summit helped get relations back on track, but also clearly defined the stark divide between the two global powers. To counter a U.S.-led world order, China is pushing alternative visions for global security and development whose prospects depend partly on restoring its own economic vitality.

Pandemic-related restrictions ended, China still faces long-term, fundamental challenges: a falling birth-rate and aging population — India surpassed it as the world's largest country in April — and its rivalry with the United States over technology, Taiwan and control of the high seas. Another: to balance the ruling Communist Party's tightening grip on myriad aspects of life with the flexibility needed to keep the economy dynamic and growing.

"This year started on a such optimistic note," said Wang Xiangwei, a China expert and former editor-in-chief of the South China Morning Post newspaper. "And now (as) we are ending 2023, I think people are getting more worried about what ... will be in store" for next year.

A WINTER OF HOPE

As China's mask and testing requirements faded, for the first time in three years crowds thronged temples

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 45 of 74

and parks last January for the Lunar New Year.

"Life is returning to normal," said Zhang Yiwen, visiting a historic Beijing district bustling with tourists. "I look forward to seeing how the economy grows in the new year and what the country can accomplish in the international market."

Hopes for warming ties with Washington were dashed with the shooting down of an apparently off-course Chinese balloon that drifted over the United States in February. Secretary of State Antony Blinken canceled a trip to Beijing. A month later during the annual session of the largely ceremonial legislature, Chinese leader Xi Jinping accused the U.S. of seeking to isolate and "contain" China.

But China's re-opening brought a parade of foreign leaders to Beijing as it strengthened links with the Mideast and other developing regions and showed support for Russia, and set about mending relations with Europe, the U.S. and Australia.

China raised its international profile when Saudi Arabia and Iran reached an agreement in Beijing to reestablish diplomatic relations. Shi Shusi, a regular analyst on Chinese TV, highlighted China's capacity to play a diplomatic role in the developing world.

"China has traditional friendships with these countries," Shi said. "If we provide some assistance and strengthen cooperation ... it seems to be a realistic solution for China to participate in the game of great powers and in global governance."

During the National People's Congress, Premier Li Keqiang announced an economic growth target of around 5% for the year. But Li, who died in October, was on his way out, replaced by close associates of Xi as he further consolidated his hold on power.

SPRING'S ELECTRIC VEHICLE SURPRISE

China's economic rebound was short-lived, though the Shanghai auto show showcased one gleaming bright spot: electric vehicles. Exports of EVs have soared, to the extent that by September, the European Union launched a trade investigation into Chinese subsidies to EV makers.

"The EV market is getting better year by year, even though the overall economy is not promising," said Li Jing, a salesperson at a small electric car dealer in Wuwei, a city of 1.2 million people in eastern China's Anhui province.

Li said his pay remained steady through the pandemic. Still, he was putting off plans to buy an apartment, expecting housing prices to fall amid a real estate crisis that has many Chinese cutting back on spending, hobbling efforts to tap consumer demand to drive economic growth.

A SUMMER OF ECONOMIC DOLDRUMS

Blinken made his balloon-delayed trip to Beijing, followed by visits by U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, climate envoy John Kerry and then Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo.

Meanwhile, the economy was slowing as growing numbers of property developers defaulted on debts, caught short in a crackdown on excessive borrowing that began in 2020 and has hamstrung the entire industry. The jobless rate among young Chinese surged to about one-in-five, leading the government to stop publishing that data.

"Life hasn't returned to how it was before the pandemic," said Liu Qingyu, a young worker in Shanghai's financial sector who was hoping for more opportunities but instead is fretting over layoffs at her company.

When the Zhongzhi Enterprise Group missed payments to investors, worries deepened that the real estate meltdown could spread into a financial crisis. The government began loosening restrictions on lending for home purchases and stepped up spending on construction, though housing prices kept falling.

"I think in July, the Chinese leadership realized that the economy ... was in more serious trouble than (they had) expected," Wang said. "So they started to pump more money into the economy. But all those measures were considered incremental."

Small business owners like Dong Jun cut costs to avoid going into the red. Orders were less than half the pre-pandemic level, he said.

Stewed meat maker Xinyang Food Co. laid off more than a dozen employees, reducing its workforce to 20. "We are afraid of losing money," said Gao Weiping, a co-owner and manager.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 46 of 74

AUTUMN'S CHALLENGES

Relations with the United States warmed further in the fall, though fundamental differences over technology and territorial disputes remain.

Visits by Philadelphia Orchestra members, the American Ballet Theatre, American World War II veterans and California Gov. Gavin Newsom set a friendly tone ahead of a November meeting in San Francisco between Xi and U.S. President Joe Biden.

"China has not treated its customers very well over the past five years because of geopolitical tensions," Wang said, referring to the American, European and other export markets. "Now, China wants to focus on growing the economy. So China will have to make nice with its biggest customers."

Still, ahead of the Biden-Xi meeting, the U.S. broadened its export controls on advanced computer chips. And a collision of Chinese and Philippine ships in the South China Sea harkened to tensions that could draw the U.S. into conflict.

As the year's end drew near, the passing of former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger underscored how times have changed. Kissinger helped engineer the normalization of China-U.S. ties in the early 1970s and had met with Xi in Beijing in August at age 100. But his was another era, when the two sides found common ground despite their disagreements.

The future will test the wisdom of both Chinese and Western leaders, Shi said.

"The future for all of us lies not in making a big fortune but in security, in the effort to ... avoid global conflicts," he said.

Li Yu just wants a job. He wound up at a day labor market in Beijing in September after his family's restaurant in northeast China went bankrupt. He started out earning about 300 yuan (\$40) for a 12-hour day as a package delivery person. By December, that had fallen almost by half.

"Honestly, all are just trying to get a job, to put food on the table," he said, describing how people jostle for jobs and even end up in fights.

Analysts now think the government will achieve its 5% growth target but they expect a slowdown next year.

This matters not only for China's workers but for the whole world. The U.S. economy is the foundation of America's status as the dominant global power. Even after its auto and steelmakers faltered, Silicon Valley led the way into the 21st century.

In his second decade in power, Xi aims to restore China's global stature. That will depend largely on the Communist Party's capacity to overcome its many challenges in 2024 and beyond.

Federal judge blocks California law that would have banned carrying firearms in most public places

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A federal judge on Wednesday blocked a California law that would have banned carrying firearms in most public places, ruling that it violates the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and deprives people of their ability to defend themselves and their loved ones.

The law signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom in September was set to take effect Jan. 1. It would have prohibited people from carrying concealed guns in 26 places including public parks and playgrounds, churches, banks and zoos. The ban would apply whether the person has a permit to carry a concealed weapon or not. One exception would be for privately owned businesses that put up signs saying people are allowed to bring guns on their premises.

U.S. District Judge Cormac Carney granted a preliminary injunction blocking the law, which he wrote was "sweeping, repugnant to the Second Amendment, and openly defiant of the Supreme Court."

The court case against the law will proceed while the law is blocked. The judge wrote that gun rights groups are likely to succeed in proving it unconstitutional, meaning it would be permanently overturned.

The decision is a victory for the California Rifle and Pistol Association, which sued to block the law. The measure overhauled the state's rules for concealed carry permits in light of the U.S. Supreme Court's deci-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 47 of 74

sion in New York State Rifle and Pistol Association v. Bruen, which set several states scrambling to react with their own laws. That decision said the constitutionality of gun laws must be assessed by whether they are “consistent with the nation’s historical tradition of firearm regulation.”

“California progressive politicians refuse to accept the Supreme Court’s mandate from the Bruen case and are trying every creative ploy they can imagine to get around it,” the California association’s president, Chuck Michel, said in a statement. “The Court saw through the State’s gambit.”

Michel said under the law, gun permit holders “wouldn’t be able to drive across town without passing through a prohibited area and breaking the law.” He said the judge’s decision makes Californians safer because criminals are deterred when law-abiding citizens can defend themselves.

State Attorney General Rob Bonta said his office will appeal the decision, which he said if allowed to stand “would endanger communities by allowing guns in places where families and children gather.”

Newsom said he will keep pushing for stricter gun measures.

“Defying common sense, this ruling outrageously calls California’s data-backed gun safety efforts ‘repugnant.’ What is repugnant is this ruling, which greenlights the proliferation of guns in our hospitals, libraries, and children’s playgrounds — spaces, which should be safe for all,” the governor said in a statement Wednesday evening.

Newsom has positioned himself as a national leader on gun control while he is being increasingly eyed as a potential presidential candidate. He has called for and signed a variety of bills, including measures targeting untraceable “ghost guns,” the marketing of firearms to children and allowing people to bring lawsuits over gun violence. That legislation was patterned on a Texas anti-abortion law.

Carney is a former Orange County Superior Court judge who was appointed to the federal bench by President George W. Bush in 2003.

Descendants fight to maintain historic Black communities. Keeping their legacy alive is complicated

By SHARON JOHNSON Associated Press

DAUFUSKIE ISLAND, S.C. (AP) — Sallie Ann Robinson proudly stands in the front yard of her grandmother’s South Carolina home. The sixth-generation native of Daufuskie Island, a once-thriving Gullah community, remembers relatives hosting meals and imparting life lessons on the next generation.

“I was born in this very house, as many generations of family have been as well,” said Robinson, a chef and tour guide. “I was raised here. These woods was our playgrounds.”

Long dirt roads were once occupied by a bustling community that had its own bartering system and a lucrative oyster industry.

“There were at one point over a thousand people living on this island,” Robinson said. Now, she and several cousins are the only ones of Gullah descent who remain.

Historic Black communities like Daufuskie Island are dying, and descendants like Robinson are attempting to salvage what’s left of a quickly fading history.

“The towns are the authentic source or sources of much of our culture, our history, our physical expression of place,” said Everett Fly, a landscape architect who uncovered more than 1,800 Black historic settlements through his research.

Scholars define a historic Black community or town as a settlement founded by formerly enslaved people, usually between the late 19th- and early 20th-century. The enclaves often had their own churches, schools, stores and economic systems.

Fly and other researchers estimate there are fewer than 30 incorporated historic Black towns left in the United States, a fraction of more than 1,200 at the peak between the 1880s and 1915.

“The ones that do remain are extremely rare. They’re extremely important,” Fly said.

The eradication of these neighborhoods can be traced back to their creation when white supremacists terrorized Black people, destroying whole blocks of homes and businesses or driving them out of town, as seen with the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921 and the Rosewood, Florida, massacre in 1923.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 48 of 74

But in more recent times, the dwindling of Black strongholds is due in part to the culmination of amended ordinances, uneven tax rates, home devaluations, and political challenges that leave communities vulnerable to developers and rampant gentrification.

"Something as simple as, they change or they rezone areas," said Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, the director of the public history program at Howard University. "People with political power can make determinations that will ring the death bell for these towns."

"We've seen gated areas, golf courses and planned unit developments directly linked to increasing the taxes and displacement of native Gullah-Geechees throughout the coast," said Marquetta Goodwine, known as Queen Quet, the leader of the Gullah-Geechee nation.

On St. Helena Island in South Carolina, massive banners dot driveways and sidewalks reading "Protect the culture, protect the history, protect the land."

The governing Beaufort County council blocked a golf course on Gullah-Geechee land after the developer, Elvio Tropeano, requested to remove the 503-acre (204-hectare) plot from a zoning district on the island. The zoning district bans gated communities and resorts in locations considered culturally significant. Tropeano has since filed two legal actions against the county to appeal the decision, and is now considering building homes on the property.

A local group, Community Coalition Action Network, supports the plan to build a golf course on the unoccupied land. Co-founder Tade' Oyeilumi said she was originally against it; then she went to a listening session.

"When I heard Mr. Tropeano speak about the development and what he wanted to do with the development, the purpose of the development and how that was going to contribute to the community that we live in, I was blown away," Oyeilumi said.

She fears the housing plan that the developer is now considering will instead have jarring results.

"It's going to change the infrastructure to our community. It's going to bring in that gentrification factor that people are saying they don't want, faster. The golf course, on the other hand, minimizes that," Oyeilumi said.

Residents of Hogg Hammock, a tiny Gullah-Geechee community on Sapelo Island in Georgia, filed a lawsuit in October to halt a zoning law they say will raise taxes, forcing them to sell their homes. McIntosh County commissioners voted in September to double the size of houses allowed in the community, also known as Hog Hammock — a move locals believe will draw in wealthy outsiders who want to build vacation getaways. Only a few dozen Black residents still live in the enclave of modest homes along dirt roads.

"My ancestors were forced to work on that land, and then they fought for the right to have that land," said 23-year-old Keara Skates, a descendant who spent her last birthday speaking against the zoning law alongside state legislators in Atlanta, the state capital. "Sapelo Island has historically never seen the level of growth that's being proposed. Where does that leave the descendants?"

McIntosh County Commission Chairman David Stevens said the community's landscape is changing because some native owners have sold their property.

"I don't need anybody to lecture me on the culture of Sapelo Island," Stevens said, adding: "If you don't want these outsiders, if you don't want these new homes being built ... don't sell your land."

Research by Brookings Institution fellow Andre Perry finds that homes in majority Black neighborhoods are appraised at significantly lower values than homes in neighborhoods where Black people are the minority. Perry says that developers can buy these homes at lower costs and sell them for a much higher price.

"A lot of people will call that a major tool of gentrification," said Perry. "The people who live in those areas may be priced out ultimately, and then the companies or individuals who purchase those properties get profit as a result."

Attorney Rukaiyah Adams runs a nonprofit called "Rebuild Albina" based in Portland, Oregon. The organization aims to educate, invest and restore homeownership to Black people in an area that used to be a thriving Black neighborhood.

"We cannot continue to extract and exploit to the breaking point," said Adams. "We're trying to create

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 49 of 74

a new model for what that might look like, how we might live together.”

In Florida, one of the first incorporated self-governing Black municipalities in the U.S. was Eatonville, established in 1887. Located just 24 miles (39 kilometers) north of Disney World, the key challenge for present-day residents is the Orange County Public School Board, which owns 100 acres (40 hectares) of property in the middle of town.

The land was once home to Robert Hungerford Normal and Industrial School, established in 1897 as a school for Black children. In 1951, it was sold to Orange County Public Schools.

In March, a private developer interested in building commercial, office and residential units on the land terminated a sales contract with the district after protest from residents.

The school system said in a statement in March that it wouldn't consider any further bids for the land. The Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community has sued the school district to safeguard the land for educational purposes.

“There are four things that have kept Eatonville: its faith, its family, its education and its civic pride,” said NY Nathiri, a third-generation Eatonville resident and founder of the association.

Nathiri smiles as she reminisces about her idyllic childhood and her family's history in the town — from her grandfather moving there at the beginning of the Great Depression, to her aunts' close relationship with author Zora Neale Hurston.

Descendants of the community work to boost its economy and preserve the local heritage and culture, put on display at the town's annual ZORA! Festival.

“As long as you know your story, you know how to tell your story, and you are welcoming to people, they are going to spend money with you,” said Nathiri.

Back on Daufuskie Island, Robinson is working to restore 10 empty homes that used to be filled with her extended family. Her biggest challenge is finding people to help her write grants to help fund the restoration of her community.

“I'm not asking people to go out of pocket. I'll just say help me understand the other methods of getting funds that are out there for you,” said Robinson.

Down the street from her grandmother's house, Robinson walks through Mary Field Cemetery where many of her relatives are buried and remembers what's possible.

“There goes my baby sister, my cousin Marvin. This is my great-grandfather,” Robinson said while pointing at headstones nestled between tall grass. “If something looked impossible, it wasn't. They didn't live like that. If it could be done, they made a way.”

Argentina's president announces economy deregulation as thousands protest against austerity

By DÉBORA REY and ALMUDENA CALATRAVA Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — President Javier Milei announced sweeping initiatives Wednesday to transform Argentina's struggling economy, including easing government regulation and allowing privatization of state-run industries as a way to boost exports and investment.

The right-wing libertarian announced the moves for South America's second biggest economy just hours after thousands of Argentines took to the streets of the capital to protest against austerity and deregulation actions taken last week by Milei.

The demonstrations went off relatively peacefully, after a government warning against blocking streets.

Around the start of the protest, which drew thousands of marchers, police briefly scuffled with some demonstrators and two men were arrested. But the event concluded without widespread street blockages that have been frequent in past years.

Undeterred by the protest, Milei afterward announced the measures in a televised address to the nation.

“The goal is start on the road to rebuilding our country, return freedom and autonomy to individuals and start to transform the enormous amount of regulations that have blocked, stalled and stopped economic growth in our country,” Milei said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 50 of 74

The approximately 300 changes would earmark many government companies for privatization, and loosen protections for renters, employees and shoppers.

After the announcement, people in some neighborhoods of Buenos Aires banged pots to show their disapproval. "Cacerolazos" — noisy anti-government protests in which people bang casserole pots — have been symbolic in Argentina in recent years when people want to express their anger.

Milei's administration had said it will allow protests, but threatened to cut off public aid payments to anyone who blocks thoroughfares. Marchers were also forbidden to carry sticks, cover their faces or bring children to the protest.

Marchers set out toward Buenos Aires' iconic Plaza de Mayo, the scene of protests dating back to the country's 1970s dictatorship. Police struggled to keep demonstrators from taking over the entire boulevard, and in the end many kept to the sidewalks and filled about half the plaza.

Eduardo Belliboni, one of the march's organizers, said demonstrators faced "an enormous repressive apparatus." Belliboni's left-wing Polo Obrero group has a long history of leading street blockages.

Toward the end of the demonstration, organizers called on the country's trade unions to declare a general strike.

Today's was Milei's first test of how his administration would respond to demonstrations against economic shock measures, which he says are needed to address Argentina's severe crisis.

The steps include a 50% devaluation of the Argentine peso, cuts to energy and transportation subsidies, and the closure of some government ministries. They come amid soaring inflation and rising poverty.

Protesters "can demonstrate as many times as they want. They can go to the squares .. but the streets are not going to be closed," Milei's security minister, Patricia Bullrich, told local media.

Bullrich announced a new "protocol" to maintain public order that allows federal forces to clear people blocking streets without a judicial order and authorizes the police to identify — through video or digital means — people protesting and obstructing public thoroughfares. It can bill them for the cost of mobilizing security forces.

Some groups say the protocol goes too far and criminalizes the right to protest.

Argentine labor, social and human rights groups on Tuesday signed a petition asking the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to intercede against the new public order procedures. The document says the security protocol is "incompatible with the rights to free assembly and association, freedom of expression and social protest" recognized by Argentina's constitution.

On Monday, the government announced that people who block streets could be removed from the public assistance benefit lists if they are on one.

In Argentina, some people receive social support directly from the government, but others get support through social organizations with direct links to federal offices. Milei's administration says many of these groups use this as a way to force people to go out to protests in exchange for support.

A recent poll by the University of Buenos Aires' Observatory of Applied Social Psychology said 65% of those surveyed agree with banning street blockages.

Milei, a 53-year-old economist who rose to fame on television with profanity-laden tirades against what he called the political caste, became president with the support of Argentines disillusioned with the economic crisis.

Study shows AI image-generators being trained on explicit photos of children

By MATT O'BRIEN and HALELUYA HADERO Associated Press

Hidden inside the foundation of popular artificial intelligence image-generators are thousands of images of child sexual abuse, according to a new report that urges companies to take action to address a harmful flaw in the technology they built.

Those same images have made it easier for AI systems to produce realistic and explicit imagery of fake children as well as transform social media photos of fully clothed real teens into nudes, much to the alarm

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 51 of 74

of schools and law enforcement around the world.

Until recently, anti-abuse researchers thought the only way that some unchecked AI tools produced abusive imagery of children was by essentially combining what they've learned from two separate buckets of online images — adult pornography and benign photos of kids.

But the Stanford Internet Observatory found more than 3,200 images of suspected child sexual abuse in the giant AI database LAION, an index of online images and captions that's been used to train leading AI image-makers such as Stable Diffusion. The watchdog group based at Stanford University worked with the Canadian Centre for Child Protection and other anti-abuse charities to identify the illegal material and report the original photo links to law enforcement. It said roughly 1,000 of the images it found were externally validated.

The response was immediate. On the eve of the Wednesday release of the Stanford Internet Observatory's report, LAION told The Associated Press it was temporarily removing its datasets.

LAION, which stands for the nonprofit Large-scale Artificial Intelligence Open Network, said in a statement that it "has a zero tolerance policy for illegal content and in an abundance of caution, we have taken down the LAION datasets to ensure they are safe before republishing them."

While the images account for just a fraction of LAION's index of some 5.8 billion images, the Stanford group says it is likely influencing the ability of AI tools to generate harmful outputs and reinforcing the prior abuse of real victims who appear multiple times.

It's not an easy problem to fix, and traces back to many generative AI projects being "effectively rushed to market" and made widely accessible because the field is so competitive, said Stanford Internet Observatory's chief technologist David Thiel, who authored the report.

"Taking an entire internet-wide scrape and making that dataset to train models is something that should have been confined to a research operation, if anything, and is not something that should have been open-sourced without a lot more rigorous attention," Thiel said in an interview.

A prominent LAION user that helped shape the dataset's development is London-based startup Stability AI, maker of the Stable Diffusion text-to-image models. New versions of Stable Diffusion have made it much harder to create harmful content, but an older version introduced last year — which Stability AI says it didn't release — is still baked into other applications and tools and remains "the most popular model for generating explicit imagery," according to the Stanford report.

"We can't take that back. That model is in the hands of many people on their local machines," said Lloyd Richardson, director of information technology at the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, which runs Canada's hotline for reporting online sexual exploitation.

Stability AI on Wednesday said it only hosts filtered versions of Stable Diffusion and that "since taking over the exclusive development of Stable Diffusion, Stability AI has taken proactive steps to mitigate the risk of misuse."

"Those filters remove unsafe content from reaching the models," the company said in a prepared statement. "By removing that content before it ever reaches the model, we can help to prevent the model from generating unsafe content."

LAION was the brainchild of a German researcher and teacher, Christoph Schuhmann, who told the AP earlier this year that part of the reason to make such a huge visual database publicly accessible was to ensure that the future of AI development isn't controlled by a handful of powerful companies.

"It will be much safer and much more fair if we can democratize it so that the whole research community and the whole general public can benefit from it," he said.

Much of LAION's data comes from another source, Common Crawl, a repository of data constantly trawled from the open internet, but Common Crawl's executive director, Rich Skrenta, said it was "incumbent on" LAION to scan and filter what it took before making use of it.

LAION said this week it developed "rigorous filters" to detect and remove illegal content before releasing its datasets and is still working to improve those filters. The Stanford report acknowledged LAION's developers made some attempts to filter out "underage" explicit content but might have done a better job

had they consulted earlier with child safety experts.

Many text-to-image generators are derived in some way from the LAION database, though it's not always clear which ones. OpenAI, maker of DALL-E and ChatGPT, said it doesn't use LAION and has fine-tuned its models to refuse requests for sexual content involving minors.

Google built its text-to-image Imagen model based on a LAION dataset but decided against making it public in 2022 after an audit of the database "uncovered a wide range of inappropriate content including pornographic imagery, racist slurs, and harmful social stereotypes."

Trying to clean up the data retroactively is difficult, so the Stanford Internet Observatory is calling for more drastic measures. One is for anyone who's built training sets off of LAION-5B — named for the more than 5 billion image-text pairs it contains — to "delete them or work with intermediaries to clean the material." Another is to effectively make an older version of Stable Diffusion disappear from all but the darkest corners of the internet.

"Legitimate platforms can stop offering versions of it for download," particularly if they are frequently used to generate abusive images and have no safeguards to block them, Thiel said.

As an example, Thiel called out CivitAI, a platform that's favored by people making AI-generated pornography but which he said lacks safety measures to weigh it against making images of children. The report also calls on AI company Hugging Face, which distributes the training data for models, to implement better methods to report and remove links to abusive material.

Hugging Face said it is regularly working with regulators and child safety groups to identify and remove abusive material. Meanwhile, CivitAI said it has "strict policies" on the generation of images depicting children and has rolled out updates to provide more safeguards. The company also said it is working to ensure its policies are "adapting and growing" as the technology evolves.

The Stanford report also questions whether any photos of children — even the most benign — should be fed into AI systems without their family's consent due to protections in the federal Children's Online Privacy Protection Act.

Rebecca Portnoff, the director of data science at the anti-child sexual abuse organization Thorn, said her organization has conducted research that shows the prevalence of AI-generated images among abusers is small, but growing consistently.

Developers can mitigate these harms by making sure the datasets they use to develop AI models are clean of abuse materials. Portnoff said there are also opportunities to mitigate harmful uses down the line after models are already in circulation.

Tech companies and child safety groups currently assign videos and images a "hash" — unique digital signatures — to track and take down child abuse materials. According to Portnoff, the same concept can be applied to AI models that are being misused.

"It's not currently happening," she said. "But it's something that in my opinion can and should be done."

Israel uncovers major Hamas command center in Gaza City as cease-fire talks gain momentum

By JOSEF FEDERMAN, WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli military on Wednesday said it had uncovered a major Hamas command center in the heart of Gaza City, inflicting what it described as a serious blow to the Islamic militant group as pressure grows on Israel to scale back its devastating military offensive in the coastal enclave.

The army said it had exposed the center of a vast underground network used by Hamas to move weapons, militants and supplies throughout the Gaza Strip. Israel has said destroying the tunnels is a major objective of the offensive.

The announcement came as Hamas' top leader arrived in Egypt for talks aimed at brokering a temporary cease-fire and a new deal for Hamas to swap Israeli hostages for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Israeli leaders have vowed to press ahead with the two-month-old offensive, launched in response to a bloody cross-border attack by Hamas in October that killed some 1,200 people and saw 240 others taken

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 53 of 74

hostage.

The offensive has devastated much of northern Gaza, killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians, and driven some 1.9 million people — nearly 85% of the population — from their homes. The widespread destruction and heavy civilian death toll has drawn increasing international calls for a cease-fire.

Hamas militants have put up stiff resistance lately against Israeli ground troops, and its forces appear to remain largely intact in southern Gaza. It also continues to fire rockets into Israel every day.

The United States, Israel's closest ally, has continued to support Israel's right to defend itself while also urging greater effort to protect Gaza's civilians.

But in some of the toughest American language yet, Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday called on Israel to scale back its operation.

"It's clear that the conflict will move and needs to move to a lower intensity phase," Blinken said. He said the U.S. wants to see "more targeted operations" with smaller levels of forces focused on specific targets, such as Hamas' leaders and the group's tunnel network.

"As that happens, I think you'll see as well, the harm done to civilians also decrease significantly," he said.

His comments were more pointed than statements by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who in a visit to Israel this week said the U.S. would not dictate any timeframes to its ally.

TUNNEL NETWORK

The Israeli military escorted Israeli reporters into Palestine Square in the heart of Gaza City to show off what it described as the center of Hamas' tunnel network.

Military commanders boasted that they had uncovered offices, tunnels and elevators used by Hamas' top leaders. The military released videos of underground offices and claimed to have found a wheelchair belonging to Hamas' shadowy military commander, Mohammed Deif, who has not been seen in public in years.

The army's chief spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said the army had located a vast underground complex. "They all used this infrastructure routinely, during emergencies and also at the beginning of the war on Oct. 7," he said. He said the tunnels stretched across Gaza and into major hospitals. The claims could not be independently verified.

Hagari also indicated that Israel was winding down its operations in northern Gaza, including Gaza City, where it has been battling Hamas militants for weeks. He said the army had moved into a final remaining Hamas stronghold, the Gaza City neighborhood of Tufah.

But the army also acknowledged a significant misstep. An investigation into its soldiers' mistaken shooting of three Israelis held hostage in Gaza found that, five days before the shooting, a military search dog with a body camera had captured audio of them shouting for help in Hebrew.

Hagari said the recording was not reviewed until after the hostages were killed while trying to make themselves known to Israeli forces.

The incident has sparked an uproar in Israel and put pressure on the government to reach a new deal with Hamas. The military chief has said the shooting was against its rules of engagement.

The Israeli military campaign now is largely focused on southern Gaza, where it says Hamas' leaders are hiding.

"We will continue the war until the end. It will continue until Hamas is destroyed, until victory," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a video statement. "Whoever thinks we will stop is detached from reality."

CEASE-FIRE TALKS GAIN MOMENTUM

As Netanyahu vowed to continue the war, there were new signs of progress in cease-fire talks.

Hamas' top leader, Ismail Haniyeh, traveled to Cairo for talks on the war, part of a flurry of diplomacy. In recent days, top Israeli, American and Qatari officials have also held cease-fire talks.

"These are very serious discussions and negotiations, and we hope that they lead somewhere," the White House's national security spokesman, John Kirby, said aboard Air Force One while traveling with President Joe Biden to Wisconsin.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 54 of 74

Biden, however, indicated a deal was still a ways off. "There's no expectation at this point, but we are pushing," he said. Asked about the rising death toll in Gaza, Biden said: "It's tragic."

Hamas says no more hostages will be released until the war ends. It is insisting on the release of large numbers of Palestinian prisoners, including high-level militants convicted in deadly attacks, for remaining captives.

Osama Hamdan, a senior Hamas official in Beirut, said the efforts right now are focused on how to "stop this aggression, especially that our enemy now knows that it cannot achieve any of its goals."

Israel has rejected Hamas' demands for a mass prisoner release so far. But it has a history of lopsided exchanges for captive Israelis, and the government is under heavy public pressure to bring the hostages home safely.

Egypt, along with Qatar and the U.S., helped mediate a weeklong cease-fire in November in which Hamas freed over 100 hostages in exchange for Israel's release of 240 Palestinian prisoners. Hamas and other militants are still holding an estimated 129 captives, though roughly 20 are believed to have died in captivity.

U.N. Security Council members are negotiating an Arab-sponsored resolution to halt the fighting in some way to allow for an increase in desperately needed humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza.

A vote on the resolution, first scheduled for Monday, was pushed back again on Wednesday in the hopes of getting the U.S. to support it or allow it to pass after it vetoed an earlier cease-fire call.

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Mobile phone and internet service was down across Gaza again on Wednesday. The outage could complicate efforts to communicate with Hamas leaders inside the territory who went into hiding after Oct. 7.

The war has led to a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Tens of thousands of people are crammed into shelters and tent camps amid shortages of food, medicine and other basic supplies. Israel's foreign minister traveled to Cyprus to discuss the possibility of establishing a maritime corridor that would allow the delivery of large amounts of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

At least 46 people were killed and more than 100 wounded early Wednesday after Israel bombarded the urban Jabaliya refugee camp near Gaza City, according to Munir al-Bursh, a senior Health Ministry official.

At least five people were killed and dozens injured in another strike that hit three residential homes and a mosque in Gaza's southern city of Rafah Wednesday, health officials said.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Tuesday the death toll since the start of the war had risen to more than 19,600. It does not distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths.

Israel's military says 134 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. Israel says it has killed some 7,000 militants, without providing evidence. It blames civilian deaths in Gaza on Hamas, saying it uses them as human shields when it fights in residential areas.

The Constitution's insurrection clause threatens Trump's campaign. Here is how that is playing out

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Former President Donald Trump's bid to win back the White House is now threatened by two sentences added to the U.S. Constitution 155 years ago.

The Colorado Supreme Court on Tuesday barred Trump from the state's ballot under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which prohibits anyone who swore an oath to support the Constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" against it from holding office. It's the first time in history the provision has been used to prohibit someone from running for the presidency, and the U.S. Supreme Court is likely to have the final say over whether the ruling will stand.

If it does — which many legal experts say is a longshot — it's the end of Trump's campaign because a Supreme Court decision would apply not just in Colorado, but to all states. It also could open a new world of political combat, as politicians in the future fish for judicial rulings to disqualify their rivals under the same provision.

Some conservatives have even considered using it against Vice President Kamala Harris, who raised bail

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 55 of 74

money for those jailed during the violence following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. They said that also should be considered an “insurrection” against the Constitution.

Some answers related to the 14th Amendment cases seeking to remove Trump from the ballot:

WHAT’S THE IMPACT OF THE RULING?

So far, very little in the real world. Aware that the case was very likely going to the U.S. Supreme Court, the 4-3 Colorado Supreme Court majority stayed their own order until Jan. 4 — the day before the state’s primary ballots are due at the printer — or until the Supreme Court rules.

Technically, the ruling applies only to Colorado, and secretaries of state elsewhere are issuing statements saying Trump remains on the ballot in their state’s primary or caucus.

But it could embolden other states to knock Trump off the ballot. Activists have asked state election officials to do so unilaterally, but none have. Dozens of lawsuits have been filed, but all failed until Colorado.

The U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled on the meaning of Section 3. The justices can take the case as quickly as they like once Trump’s campaign files its appeal, which is not expected this week. The high court then could rule in a variety of ways — from upholding the ruling to striking it down to dodging the central questions on legal technicalities. But many experts warn that it would be risky to leave such a vital constitutional question unanswered.

“It is imperative for the political stability of the U.S. to get a definitive judicial resolution of these questions as soon as possible,” Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, wrote shortly after the ruling. “Voters need to know if the candidate they are supporting for president is eligible.”

WHAT WILL THE US SUPREME COURT DO?

It’s always dangerous to try to predict a Supreme Court ruling. The high court is comprised of six justices appointed by Republicans, including three nominated by Trump himself. Partly because this is completely new legal ground, it’s hard to predict how individual justices will rule based on their ideology.

Some of the strongest advocates of using Section 3 against Trump have been prominent conservative legal theorists and lawyers who argue that courts have to follow the actual words of the Constitution. Here, they argue, there’s no wiggle room — Trump is clearly disqualified.

The Colorado high court’s seven justices were all appointed by Democrats. But they split 4-3 on the ruling. The majority quoted a ruling from Neil Gorsuch, one of Trump’s conservative Supreme Court appointees, from when he was a federal judge in Colorado. He ruled then that the state properly kept a naturalized citizen born in Guyana off the presidential ballot because he didn’t meet the constitutional qualifications.

Courts are very hesitant to limit voters’ choices, however. There’s even a term for that — the “political question,” whether a legal dispute is better settled by the people the voters have selected to make the laws than by unelected judges. That’s one reason all the other Section 3 lawsuits had failed so far.

Sometimes courts have dodged the essential question. That’s what happened in Minnesota, where the state Supreme Court allowed Trump to stay on the ballot because, it found, the state party can place whomever it likes on its primary ballot. A Michigan appeals court came to the same conclusion. A New Hampshire judge dismissed a lawsuit by a little-known longshot Republican presidential candidate, saying the question of whether Trump belonged on the ballot was “non-justiciable.”

WHAT IS SECTION 3 OF THE 14th AMENDMENT?

Section 3 of the 14th Amendment was written to keep former confederates from returning to government office. It reads:

“No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice-President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability.”

The provision was used often in the years immediately after the Civil War, but fell into disuse after Congress granted an amnesty to many confederate veterans in 1872. The only record of it being used in the 20th century, according to legal scholars, was as justification in refusing to seat a socialist congressman

in 1919 because he opposed U.S. involvement in World War I.

WHAT ARE TRUMP'S LEGAL ARGUMENTS?

The argument to disqualify Trump is that he clearly held an office under the United States, swore an oath and broke it in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. So he can't return to office unless two-thirds of Congress lets him back in.

The arguments against disqualifying Trump are many. Trump's lawyers have argued that, technically, the president isn't an officer "under the United States" — that it's a legal term of art that refers to government appointees and therefore the provision doesn't apply to him.

Even if it did, they've argued the Jan. 6 attack wasn't an insurrection — it was more of a riot. And even if it was an insurrection, Trump didn't "engage" in it — all he did was exercise his rights to free speech under the First Amendment. And state courts, the argument goes, aren't in a position to determine whether Jan. 6 was an insurrection — it would take months at least to hold a trial and get all the facts, and most witnesses are out of their jurisdiction.

Finally, even if the courts concluded Jan. 6 was an insurrection and Trump was barred, that's not their decision to make — it's a political question for Congress.

WHAT THE COLORADO JUSTICES SAID

The majority opinion said the Colorado Supreme Court did have jurisdiction to decide the matter, that the presidency was clearly an office in the United States and that Trump's actions related to the Capitol attack fit the insurrection clause, in part because he urged his supporters during a rally beforehand to fight.

"President Trump asks us to hold that Section 3 disqualifies every oathbreaking insurrectionist except the most powerful one and that it bars oathbreakers from virtually every office, both state and federal, except the highest one in the land," the court's majority opinion said. "Both results are inconsistent with the plain language and history of Section 3."

It's worth noting that three of the judges on the Colorado high court agreed with some of Trump's arguments. They particularly chafed at the rushed and improvised nature of the groundbreaking case, which was heard by a district court judge in Denver judge in less than two months. That included a week of testimony from a handful of police and protesters who were at the Jan. 6 attack, two constitutional law professors and experts on a president's emergency powers and on right-wing political speech..

"I have been involved in the justice system for 33 years now, and what took place here doesn't resemble anything I've seen in a courtroom," Justice Carlos Samour wrote in a scathing dissent.

"If President Trump committed a heinous act worthy of disqualification, he should be disqualified for the sake of protecting our hallowed democratic system, regardless of whether citizens may wish to vote for him in Colorado," Samour concluded. "But such a determination must follow the appropriate procedural avenues. Absent adequate due process, it is improper for our state to bar him from holding public office."

Analysts say Ukraine's forces are pivoting to defense after Russia held off their counteroffensive

By VOLODYMR YURCHUK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's armed forces are taking up a more defensive posture, a military analysis said Wednesday, after their summer counteroffensive failed to achieve a major breakthrough against Russia's army and as winter weather sets in after almost 22 months of the war.

"In recent weeks, Ukraine has mobilized a concerted effort to improve field fortifications as its forces pivot to a more defensive posture along much of the front line," the U.K. Ministry of Defense said in an assessment.

The Kremlin's deep defenses held firm against Ukraine's monthslong assault, which employed Western-supplied weapons but did not have essential air cover along the front line that extends for around 1,000-kilometers (600 miles).

Most fighting in recent weeks has focused on artillery, missile and drone strikes as mud and snow hinder

troop movements.

"Russia continues local offensive options in several sectors, but individual attacks are rarely above platoon size," the U.K. analysis said. "A major Russian breakthrough is unlikely and overall, the front is characterized by stasis."

Russian President Vladimir Putin is hopeful that Kyiv's Western allies will grow weary of financing the costly Ukrainian war effort, allowing the Kremlin's forces to make a new offensive push next year against a weaker foe. He has put the Russian economy on a war footing to prepare for that.

But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Tuesday that he's certain the United States will make good on its promise to provide billions of dollars in further aid for Kyiv to continue its fight. The U.S. Congress has broken for vacation without a deal to send around \$61 billion to Ukraine.

Zelenskyy also noted that next year Ukraine plans to produce 1 million drones, which have become a key battlefield weapon. The relatively cheap drones can be used to destroy expensive military hardware.

Oleksandr Kamyshin, Ukraine's Minister of Strategic Industries, said the million new drones will be so-called first-person view, or FPV, drones, which have a real time video function.

In addition, he said in a Telegram post, Ukraine can manufacture next year more than 10,000 mid-range strike drones that can travel hundreds of kilometers (miles) as well as more than 1,000 drones with a range of more than 1,000 kilometers (600 miles). They will allow Ukraine to hit targets well behind the front line and in Russia.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian air defenses intercepted 18 of 19 Russian Shahed-type drones overnight, the Ukraine air force claimed Wednesday.

Moscow also fired two S-300 ballistic missiles at Kharkiv in the northeast of Ukraine, the air force said. No casualties were reported.

In Russia, air defenses shot down a drone in the country's western Belgorod region, the Russian Defense Ministry said. It also reported no casualties.

Cocoa grown illegally in a Nigerian rainforest heads to companies that supply major chocolate makers

By TAIWO ADEBAYO Associated Press

OMO FOREST RESERVE, Nigeria (AP) — Men in dusty workwear trudge through a thicket, making their way up a hill where sprawling plantations lay tucked in a Nigerian rainforest whose trees have been hacked away to make room for cocoa bound for places like Europe and the U.S.

Kehinde Kumayon and his assistant clear low bushes that compete for sunlight with their cocoa trees, which have replaced the lush and dense natural foliage. The farmers swing their machetes, careful to avoid the ripening yellow pods containing beans that will help create chocolate, the treat shoppers are snapping up for Christmas.

Over the course of two visits and several days, The Associated Press repeatedly documented farmers harvesting cocoa beans where that work is banned in conservation areas of Omo Forest Reserve, a protected tropical rainforest 135 kilometers (84 miles) northeast of the coastal city of Lagos in southwestern Nigeria.

Trees here rustle as dwindling herds of critically endangered African forest elephants rumble through. Threatened pangolins, known as armored anteaters, scramble along branches. White-throated monkeys, once thought to be extinct, leap from one tree to the next. Omo also is believed to have the highest concentration of butterflies in Africa and is one of the continent's largest and oldest UNESCO Biosphere Reserves.

Cocoa from the conservation zone is purchased by some of the world's largest cocoa traders, according to company and trade documents and AP interviews with more than 20 farmers, five licensed buying agents and two brokers all operating within the reserve.

They say those traders include Singapore-based food supplier Olam Group and Nigeria's Starlink Global

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 58 of 74

and Ideal Limited, the latter of which acknowledged using cocoa supplies from the forest. A fewer number of those working in the forest also mentioned Tulip Cocoa Processing Ltd., a subsidiary of Dutch cocoa trader and producer Theobroma.

Those companies supply Nigerian cocoa to some of the world's largest chocolate manufacturers including Mars Inc. and Ferrero, but because the chocolate supply chain is so complex and opaque, it's not clear if cocoa from deforested parts of Omo Forest Reserve makes it into the sweets that they make, such as Snickers, M&Ms, Butterfinger and Nutella. Mars and Ferrero list farming sources on their websites that are close to or overlap with the forest but do not provide specific locations.

Government officials, rangers and the growers themselves say cocoa plantations are spreading illegally into protected areas of the reserve. Farmers say they move there because their cocoa trees in other parts of the West African country are aging and not producing as much.

"We know this is a forest reserve, but if you are hungry, you go to where there is food, and this is very fertile land," Kumayon told the AP, acknowledging that he's growing cocoa at an illegal plantation at the Eseke farming settlement, separated only by a muddy footpath from critical habitat for what UNESCO estimates is the remaining 100 elephants deep in the conservation zone.

Conservationists also point to the world's increasing demand for chocolate. The global cocoa and chocolate market is expected to grow from a value of \$48 billion in 2022 to nearly \$68 billion by 2029, according to analysts at Fortune Business Insights.

The chocolate supply chain has long been fraught with human rights abuses, exploitative labor and environmental damage, leading to lawsuits, U.S. trade complaints and court rulings. In response, the chocolate industry has made wide-ranging pledges and campaigns to ensure they are sourcing cocoa that is traceable, sustainable and free of abuse.

Companies say they have adopted supply chain tracing from primary sources using GPS mapping and satellite technology as well as partnered with outside organizations and third-party auditors that certify farms' compliance with sustainability standards.

But those working in the forest say checks that some companies rely on are not done, while one certifying agency, Rainforest Alliance, points to a lack of regulations and incomplete data and mapping in Nigeria.

AP followed a load of cocoa that farmers had harvested in the conservation zone to the warehouses of buying agents in the reserve and then delivered to an Olam facility outside the entrance of the forest.

Staffers at Olam's and Tulip's facilities just outside the reserve, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they're not authorized to discuss their companies' supplies, confirmed that they source cocoa from farmers in the conservation zone.

AP also photographed cocoa bags labeled with the names and logos of Olam and Tulip in farmers' warehouses inside the conservation zone.

'THEY BUY EVERYTHING'

The Omo reserve consists of a highly protected conservation zone ringed by a larger, partially protected outer region. Loggers, who are also a major source of deforestation, can get government licenses to chop down trees in the outer areas, but no licenses are given anywhere for cocoa farming. Agriculture is banned from the conservation area, except for defined areas where up to 10 indigenous communities can farm for their own food.

Nigeria is one of Africa's biggest oil suppliers and largest economy; after petroleum, one of its top exports is cocoa. It's the world's fourth-largest producer of cocoa, accounting for more than 5% of global supply, according to the International Cocoa Organization. Yet it's far behind the world's largest producers, Ivory Coast and Ghana, which together supply more than half of the world's demand and are often singled out in companies' sustainability programs.

According to World Bank trade data and Nigeria's export council, more than 60% of Nigeria's cocoa heads to Europe and about 8% to the United States and Canada.

It passes through many hands to get there: Farmers grow the cocoa beans, then brokers scout farms to buy them. Licensed buying agents purchase the cocoa from brokers and sell it to big commodity trading companies like Olam and Tulip, which export it to chocolate makers.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 59 of 74

In October, AP followed a blue- and white-striped van loaded with bags of cocoa beans along a road pitted with deep mud holes within the conservation zone to an Olam warehouse just outside the entrance of the forest. At the warehouse, which Olam confirmed was theirs, AP photographed the cocoa being unloaded from the van, whose registration number matched the one filmed in the forest.

Farmer Rasaq Kolawole and licensed buying agent Muraina Nasir followed the van to sell the cocoa, and neither expressed misgivings about the deforestation.

"We are illegal occupants of the forest," said farmer Kolawole, a college graduate and former salesperson.

AP also visited four cocoa warehouses in the forest belonging to licensed buying agents: Kadet Agro Allied Investments Ltd., Bolnif Agro-allied Farms Nigeria Ltd., Almatem and Askmana. Managers or owners all told AP that they buy from farmers growing cocoa in protected areas of the forest and that they sell that cocoa to Olam. Three of the warehouse managers told AP that they also sell to Tulip and Starlink.

"They do not differentiate between cocoa from local — that is farms outside the forest — and the reserve," said Waheed Azeez, proprietor of Bolnif, describing how "big buyers like Olam, Tulip and Starlink" buy cocoa sourced from deforested lands. "They buy everything, and most of the cocoa is from the reserve."

Despite AP's findings, Olam insists that it "forbids" members of its "Ore Agbe Ijebu" farmer group from "sourcing from protected areas and important natural ecosystems like forests." That Ijebu farmer group is listed as a sustainable supplier on Olam's website and is said to be in Ijebu Ife, a community near the reserve.

"Any farmers found not complying with the code and illegally encroaching on forest boundaries are removed from our supply chain and expelled from the OAIJ farmer group," the company said in a statement emailed to AP.

However, Askmana manager Sunday Awoke said, "Olam does not know the farmers. We buy from the farmers and sell directly to Olam, and no assessment against deforestation takes place."

Speaking to AP as a convoy of motorcycles brought bags of cocoa from the conservation area to his warehouse within the reserve, Awoke said he used to be a conservation worker who fought deforestation by farmers.

"But I am on the other side now. I wish to go back, but survival first, and this pays more," he said.

Others agreed.

"The place is not meant for cocoa farming, but elephants," said Ewulola Bolarinwa, who is both a broker and a leader of those who farm at the Eseke settlement inside the conservation zone. "We have a lot of big buyers who supply the companies in the West, including Olam, Tulip and many more."

COCOA TO CHOCOLATE

Ferrero, which makes Ferrero Rocher hazelnut balls, Nutella chocolate hazelnut spread and popular Baby Ruth, Butterfinger and Crunch candy bars, lists a farming group in a community near the forest as the source of its cocoa supplied by Olam, the Italian company says on its website.

McLean, Virginia-based Mars Inc., one of the world's largest end users of cocoa with brands from Snickers to M&Ms, Dove, Twix and Milky Way, uses Nigerian cocoa from both Olam and Tulip, according to online company documents.

Ferrero, Mars and Tulip say they're committed to their anti-deforestation policies, use GPS mapping of farms, and their suppliers are certified through independent standards.

Ferrero also says it relies on satellite monitoring to show that its "cocoa sourcing from Nigeria does not come from protected forest areas." Mars says its preliminary findings show that none of the farms it's mapped overlap with the reserve.

Tulip's managing director, Johan van der Merwe, said in an email that the company's cocoa bags, which AP photographed in farmers' warehouses inside the conservation zone, are reused and distributed widely so it's possible they're seen across Nigeria. He also said "field operatives" complete digital questionnaires about sourcing with all farmers and suppliers.

On the ground, however, farmers and licensed buying agents who said they supply Tulip told AP that they were not required to complete any questionnaire before their cocoa is purchased.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 60 of 74

"Though we know they depend on our cocoa, we don't directly sell cocoa to the exporters like Olam and Tulip, middlemen do, and there are no questions about deforestation," said farmer Saheed Arisekola, 43, also a college graduate who said he turned to farming because he could not get a job.

As farmers, brokers and buying agents say cocoa from the conservation area flows into Olam's export supply, U.S. customs records show a slice of where it might be going.

Olam's American arm, Olam Americas Inc., received 18,790 bags of Nigerian cocoa shipped by its Nigerian subsidiary, Outspan Nigeria Limited, between March and April 2022, according to trade data from ImportGenius.

Olam and Tulip are both licensed to trade Nigerian cocoa certified by the Rainforest Alliance. However, Olam told AP that its license does not cover the Ijebu area, where it sources the cocoa it sends to Ferrero and is near Omo Forest Reserve. Ferrero says Olam's sustainability standard in the area is verified by a third-party body.

Farmers who told AP that their cocoa heads to Olam and Tulip said they are not Rainforest Alliance certified. Tulip has only one farm with active certification in Nigeria, the nonprofit's database shows.

The Rainforest Alliance says it certifies that farms operate with methods that prohibit deforestation and other anti-sustainability practices. It says farmers must provide GPS coordinates and geographic boundaries for their plantations, which are checked against public forest maps and satellite data.

The Rainforest Alliance told AP that Nigeria has "unique forest regulation challenges," including incomplete or outdated data and maps that can "lead to discrepancies when comparing forest data with real on-ground conditions."

It said it is working to get updated data from Nigerian authorities and would decertify any farms found to be operating illegally in conservation areas following a review. The organization also says companies it licenses can buy cocoa certified by other agencies or that isn't certified at all.

Starlink Global and Ideal Limited — the Nigerian cocoa exporter that the farmers and buying agents said they sell to — doesn't have its own farmland in the reserve, "only suppliers from there," spokesman Sambo Abubakar told AP.

Starlink does not make sustainable sourcing claims on its website, but it supplies at least one company that does — New York-based General Cocoa Co., U.S. trade data shows.

Between March and April 2023, Starlink shipped 70 containers, each loading 4,000 bags of dried cocoa beans, to General Cocoa, according to ImportGenius trade data.

General Cocoa, which is owned by Paris-headquartered Sucden Group, supplies Mars, according to online company documents.

Jean-Baptiste Lescop, secretary general of Sucden Group, says the company manages risks to forest conservation by sourcing Rainforest Alliance cocoa, mapping farms and using satellite images but that it's a "continuous process" because most farmers in Nigeria don't have official land ownership documents.

Sucden investigates reports of problems and is working on a response to AP's findings about Starlink, Lescop said.

WHERE'S THE ENFORCEMENT?

The conservation zone, which spans about 650 square kilometers (250 square miles), is the only remaining vital rainforest in Nigeria's southwest, conservation officials say. Such forests help absorb carbon from the atmosphere and are crucial for Nigeria to meet its pledges under the Paris climate agreement.

Besides helping fight climate change, the forest is designated an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area by BirdLife International, with significant populations of at least 75 bird species.

"There are now more than 100 illegal settlements of cocoa farmers, who came from other states because the land here is very fertile," said Emmanuel Olabode, a conservation manager who supervises the reserve's rangers in the protected areas. "But after some years, the land becomes unproductive."

The farmers know this.

"We'll then find another land somewhere else or go back to our original homes to start new businesses," said Kaseem Olaniyi, who acknowledges that he farms illegally in the conservation zone after moving in 2014 from a neighboring state.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 61 of 74

The government in Ogun state, which owns the forest, said in a statement to AP that the “menace of cocoa farming” in the reserve dates back decades and that “all the illegal farmers were forcefully evicted” in 2007 before they found their way back.

“Arrangements are in the pipeline to engage the services of the Nigerian Police Force and the military to evict them from the Forest Reserve,” the government statement said.

However, Omolola Odutola, spokeswoman for the federally controlled police, said they do not have records of such a plan.

The farmers have been ordered not to start new farms, and those who spoke with AP said they are complying. But forest guards said new farms are sprouting up in remote areas that are difficult to detect.

Rangers — who work for the government’s conservation partner, the nonprofit Nigerian Conservation Foundation — and forest guards who are employed by the state government both told AP that lax government enforcement has made combating cocoa expansion a challenge.

They told AP that previous arrests have done little to stop the farmers from returning and that has led to a sense of futility when they encounter illegal farming.

The state government said it “has never compromised regulations” but acknowledged that farmers are in the forest despite its efforts. Homes and other buildings at farming settlements visited by AP have been marked for removal, including warehouses like that of licensed buying agent Kadet, one of the biggest there.

Farmers’ homes lack running water and toilets, forcing women and children to collect water from narrow streams to use while the men work.

The removals have not taken place because officials make money from the cocoa business in the forest, according to farmers and buying agents, who lament the difficult living conditions, with mud roads filled with holes creating high transportation costs that eat away their already meager profits.

The state government declined to comment about making money from illegal cocoa farming in the forest.

The agents have formed a lobby group that has “rapport with government officials” to ensure farmers remain in the conservation zone despite threats to evict them, said Azeez, the owner of buying agent Bolnif who is also chairman of a committee that monitors risks against cocoa business in the forest.

The European Union, the largest destination of cocoa from West Africa, has enacted a new regulation on deforestation-free products that requires companies selling commodities like cocoa to prove they have not caused deforestation. Big companies must ensure they’re following the rules by the end of 2024.

Experts at the Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria are launching a “Trace Project” in six southern states — though it doesn’t include Ogun state where Omo Forest Reserve is located — to advance efforts against deforestation in cocoa production and ensure Nigeria’s cocoa is not rejected in Europe.

“From the preliminary data collected, major exporters are implicated in deforestation, and it is their responsibility to ensure compliance with standards,” said Rasheed Adedeji, who leads the institute’s research outreach.

But farmers say they’ll keep finding places to work.

“The world needs cocoa, and the government also gets taxes because the cocoa is exported,” said Olaniyi, one of the farmers.

Oklahoma judge rules a man who wrongfully spent nearly 50 years in prison for murder is innocent

By KEN MILLER Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — An Oklahoma judge has exonerated a man who spent nearly 50 years in prison for murder, the longest serving inmate to be declared innocent of a crime.

Glynn Simmons, 71, who was released in July after prosecutors agreed that key evidence in his case was not turned over to his defense lawyers, was ruled innocent Tuesday.

“This court finds by clear and convincing evidence that the offense for which Mr. Simmons was convicted, sentenced and imprisoned... was not committed by Mr. Simmons,” according to the ruling by Oklahoma County District Judge Amy Palumbo.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 62 of 74

Simmons served 48 years, one month and 18 days since his conviction, making him the longest imprisoned U.S. inmate to be exonerated, according to data kept by The National Registry of Exonerations.

Simmons said afterward that he feels vindicated after his time in prison that included initially being sentenced to death row.

"It's a lesson in resilience and tenacity," Simmons said during a brief news conference following the ruling. "Don't let nobody tell you that it (exoneration) can't happen, because it really can."

Simmons has maintained his innocence, saying he was in Louisiana at the time of the 1974 slaying of Carolyn Sue Rogers inside an Edmond liquor store.

He and co-defendant Don Roberts were both convicted in 1975 of the murder and initially sentenced to death. Their sentences were reduced to life in prison in 1977 after U.S. Supreme Court rulings related to capital punishment. Roberts was released on parole in 2008.

Palumbo in July ordered a new trial for Simmons after District Attorney Vicki Behenna said prosecutors had failed to turn over evidence in the case, including a police report that showed an eyewitness might have identified other suspects in the case.

Behenna in September said there is no longer physical evidence in the case against Simmons and announced she would not retry him, though she opposed declaring him actually innocent.

A spokesperson for Behenna declined immediate comment on Wednesday.

The ruling makes Simmons eligible for up to \$175,000 in compensation from the state for wrongful conviction and opens the door for a federal lawsuit against Oklahoma City and law enforcement involved in Simmons' arrest and conviction, defense attorney Joe Norwood said Wednesday.

Compensation, though, is likely years away, Norwood said and Simmons is currently living on donations while undergoing treatment for cancer that was detected after his release from prison.

"Glynn is having to live off of GoFundMe, that's literally how the man is surviving right now, paying rent, buying food," Norwood said. "Getting him compensation, and getting compensation is not for sure, is in the future and he has to sustain himself now."

Parents of children sickened by lead linked to tainted fruit pouches fear for kids' future

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

When Cora Dibert went for a routine blood test in October, the toddler brought along her favorite new snack: a squeeze pouch of WanaBana cinnamon-flavored apple puree.

"She sucked them dry," recalls her 26-year-old mother, Morgan Shurtleff, of Elgin, Oklahoma.

Within a week, the family got an alarming call. The test showed that the 1-year-old had lead poisoning, with nearly four times as much lead as the level that raises concern. Only later did Shurtleff learn that that the fruit puree Cora's grandmother bought at a Dollar Tree store may have been the cause.

"That was the scariest thing that ever happened to me," Shurtleff says.

Cora is among dozens of young kids across the U.S. poisoned by lead linked to tainted pouches of the cinnamon-and-fruit puree.

The exact number of affected children is unclear. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports at least 205 confirmed, probable or suspected cases from 33 states. Using a different reporting method, the Food and Drug Administration counts at least 69 kids ages 6 and younger sickened in 28 states as of Dec. 14.

Tests show victims had blood lead readings up to eight times higher than the federal reference level of concern, health officials said. Samples of the puree showed lead contamination more than 200 times higher than the FDA allows.

The pouches were sold under three brands — WanaBana, Schnucks and Weis. The products were produced at a plant in Ecuador and first imported to the U.S. in November 2022, the officials said.

Testing of cinnamon samples supplied to the factory showed "extremely high" levels of lead — more than 2,000 times higher than a proposed FDA maximum, the agency said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 63 of 74

FDA officials have raised the prospect that the contamination was intentional. One possibility is that the cinnamon was contaminated for economic reasons, the agency said. That could mean an ingredient such as lead may have been added to boost the value of the cinnamon.

Spices such as turmeric, cinnamon and paprika have been known to be mixed with lead chromate or lead oxide, compounds that mirror the spices' colors, said Karen Everstine, technical director for FoodchainID, a company that tracks food supply chains.

"The intent is not to make people sick. Nobody wants to do that because then they get caught," Everstine said. "What they want to do is make money."

That angers Shurtleff.

If it's true, "they made my child sick for a dime," she said. "The more I think about it, the angrier I get."

At the same time, she and other parents are most concerned about the lasting effects on their kids.

"I'm pretty worried, considering the effects are irreversible," said Shurtleff, who works as a nurse.

No amount of lead exposure is safe for children and the effects on brain development can show up years later, said Dr. Jennifer Sample, a pediatric toxicologist who consults for industry and academics.

"It's irritability. It's behavioral concerns. It's learning difficulties," she said.

When kids ingest lead, the heavy metal travels through the bloodstream and spreads to organs, including the brain, Sample explained. Once there, the lead substitutes inside cells for vital nutrients such as calcium and iron, causing permanent damage.

Because kids' brains are flexible and still growing, early detection and changes in diet may offset the harm, experts said. The children nevertheless will likely need years of monitoring and intervention.

"The effects in the brain at the cellular level are irreversible, but the downstream effects don't have to be," Sample said.

Lead poisoning can be treated with chelation, a therapy that uses drugs that bind to metals in blood to remove them from the body. But it's only used with higher lead levels and it's usually difficult to administer to the very young.

Instead, affected kids should eat a diet high in vitamin D, calcium and iron and be given a stimulating environment that encourages brain development.

The prognosis is sobering for families whose children were sickened.

Mustafa Al-Khaled, a Norfolk, Nebraska, civil engineer, sued WanaBana LLC because his 17-month-old son, Arian, was diagnosed with acute lead poisoning after eating the pouches regularly since August.

"As a parent, it's really hurtful to be in this situation," said Al-Khaled, who is among about a dozen parents of affected kids who contacted Ron Simon, a Houston food-safety lawyer who filed the case. "Why I'm here is to protect this child."

Al-Khaled and his wife, Dania, rushed Arian for testing in early November after learning that the WanaBana products had been recalled. They were already worried because Arian had been crying uncontrollably, losing weight and passing white-colored stool.

A test showed the boy's blood lead level was 15.3 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. That's more than four times higher than the 3.5 micrograms per deciliter that the CDC uses to identify children with elevated lead levels.

Health officials in Nebraska retrieved samples of the WanaBana pouches from Al-Khaled's home. Test results are still pending.

"We're really worrying about the future," Al-Khaled said. "Is this going to harm him later?"

That fear is shared by Talia Hurdle, 29, of Mount Vernon, New York. Her 18-month-old son, Jamari, ate WanaBana apple cinnamon pouches two or three times a day for months, she said.

He's a picky eater, she explained, and the pouches that sold at the Dollar Tree for \$1.25 for a pack of three were an inexpensive way to give him food he liked. Jamari's blood level was 17.5 micrograms when he was first tested in September.

"It's sad because you give your baby stuff to help them continue to be healthy, but look what happened," Hurdle said.

A few weeks after Jamari stopped eating the puree, his lead level was down to 10.5 micrograms per

deciliter. Levels dropped for Cora Dibert and Arian Al-Khaled, too, once they quit eating the pouches.

That's a good sign, said Sample, the toxicologist.

"These parents can breathe a sigh of relief that they're not going to be as harmed as they could have been with a longer exposure," she said.

Shurtleff worries that not all families know about the danger. The FDA said some Dollar Tree stores still have the fruit pouches on their shelves, weeks after they were recalled. Dollar Tree Inc. officials said in a statement they have added register locks to prevent sales of the products, instructed stores to destroy the affected packages and are working with a third party to confirm they're removed from shelves.

After Cora's diagnosis, Shurtleff was at work, preparing to give a vaccination, when she noticed her young patient was eating a WanaBana apple cinnamon pouch. She immediately told the parent about the recall.

"They were just in shock. They hadn't heard anything about it," Shurtleff said. "Then they were like, 'We still have some in our pantry. I guess we should throw it out.'"

Feds raided Rudy Giuliani's home and office in 2021 over Ukraine suspicions, unsealed papers show

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Federal agents raided Rudy Giuliani's home and office in 2021 because they suspected the former New York City mayor had sought the removal of the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine partly because of the prospect of a financial reward from a Ukrainian official, according to documents made public Tuesday.

The documents provide new detail on the since-concluded investigation into Giuliani's dealings with Ukrainian figures in the run up to the 2020 presidential election. Giuliani, a longtime ally of former President Donald Trump, was not charged with a crime as a result of the inquiry.

In a search warrant application, federal agents seeking to seize Giuliani's cell phones, laptop and other electronic devices raised the possibility that he and three other people could be charged with acting as unregistered foreign agents.

The documents, unsealed at the request of The New York Times, confirmed past news reports that federal prosecutors in Manhattan were examining whether Giuliani had gotten anything of value in return for lobbying the Trump administration to fire then-U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch.

The warrant application said Giuliani had been "incentivized" to lobby for the ambassador's removal in two ways.

First, it said, the prosecutor general in Ukraine who wanted the ambassador fired, Yuriy Lutsenko, had offered to hire Giuliani to lobby the Trump administration for help recovering Ukrainian assets he believed had been misappropriated by a U.S. investment firm.

"Giuliani was interested in being engaged to do that work, and proposed a retainer with a \$200,000 upfront payment," the warrant application said. "Thus, it appears that Giuliani took steps to cause the firing of the Ambassador to prove ... what he could achieve."

Secondly, the application said, Giuliani wanted Lutsenko's help launching an investigation that might hurt Trump's Democratic rival, Joe Biden.

Both Lutsenko and Giuliani have previously denied there was anything inappropriate about their interactions.

Prosecutors noted that the proposed \$200,000 retainer was never paid, but federal agents wrote that they believed Giuliani's worsening finances may have motivated him to consider the deal.

In their search warrant application, they cited bank records and other information showing he'd gone from having about \$1.2 million in the bank and \$40,000 in credit card debt in January 2018 to about \$288,000 in cash and \$110,000 credit debt in February 2019.

Giuliani has said he also never lobbied the Trump administration on Lutsenko's behalf. A message seeking comment was left Tuesday with Giuliani's spokesperson.

The search warrant application included an excerpt from a 2019 text exchange in which Giuliani expressed frustration about his lack of progress, at the time, in ousting Yovanovitch as ambassador.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 65 of 74

"Boy, I am so powerful I can intimidate the entire Ukrainian government," Giuliani told Lev Parnas, an associate who was serving as a liaison to Ukrainian officials. "Please don't tell anyone I can't get the crooked Ambassador fired or I did three times and she's still there."

Trump ordered Yovanovitch removed from her post later that month.

In November 2022, federal prosecutors revealed in a letter to a federal judge that Giuliani would not face criminal charges in the investigation.

"Based on information currently available to the Government, criminal charges are not forthcoming," they wrote. They said the grand jury probe that led to the seizure of Giuliani's electronic devices had concluded.

Giuliani tweeted soon afterward that it was a "COMPLETE & TOTAL VINDICATION."

The contours of the investigation were broadly known even before its conclusion, but details of what evidence prosecutors were acting on when they sought to search Giuliani had not been revealed.

The Times wrote to the judge in October seeking copies of the search warrants, warrant applications, supporting affidavits and other documents.

Giuliani consented to releasing the search warrant documents, according to U.S. District Judge J. Paul Oetken's order unsealing them.

The documents contained numerous redactions, with many names and other identifying information blacked out. Trump's name appeared in the documents more than two-dozen times, mainly pertaining to Giuliani's alleged lobbying efforts. There was no suggestion that investigators suspected Trump of wrongdoing.

In an affidavit filed with Manhattan federal magistrates to secure search warrants, investigators wrote it appeared Giuliani had been aware of FARA registration requirements for some time and had publicly stated that he believed he was not required to register because he has never lobbied the U.S. government on behalf of his clients.

The disclosure of the search warrant documents comes amid a tangle of recent and ongoing legal challenges for the Republican ex-mayor.

Giuliani was indicted in August in Georgia on charges he acted as Trump's chief co-conspirator in a plot to subvert Biden's victory. He was also described as a co-conspirator but not charged in special counsel Jack Smith's federal election interference case against Trump.

Last week, a jury in Washington, D.C. ordered Giuliani to pay \$148 million in damages to two former Georgia election workers who sued him for defamation over lies he spread about them in the wake of Trump's 2020 election loss.

The former workers, Wandrea "Shaye" Moss and her mother Ruby Freeman, sued Giuliani again on Monday, alleging he continued to defame them during the trial.

The April 2021 raid on Giuliani's Manhattan apartment and office was seen at the time as a major escalation of the Justice Department's yearslong investigation of his dealings in Ukraine.

At the same time, agents also served a warrant for a phone belonging to Washington lawyer Victoria Toensing, a former federal prosecutor and close ally of Giuliani and Trump. Her law firm said she was informed she was not a target of the investigation. She was not charged.

Giuliani accused federal authorities at the time of "running rough shod over the constitutional rights of anyone involved in, or legally defending" Trump.

Giuliani was central to the then-president's efforts to press Ukraine for an investigation into Biden and his son, Hunter.

Hunter Biden was charged by U.S. authorities in September with federal gun crimes and is scheduled to be arraigned next month on tax charges.

The federal Foreign Agents Registration Act requires people who lobby on behalf of a foreign government or entity to register with the Justice Department.

The once-obscure law, aimed at improving transparency, has received a burst of attention in recent years — particularly during Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe of foreign election interference, which revealed an array of foreign influence operations in the U.S.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 66 of 74

The checkered history of the poinsettia's namesake and the flower's origins get new attention

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Like Christmas trees, Santa and reindeer, the poinsettia has long been a ubiquitous symbol of the holiday season in the U.S. and across Europe.

But now, nearly 200 years after the plant with the bright crimson leaves was introduced in the U.S., attention is once again turning to the poinsettia's origins and the checkered history of its namesake, a slaveowner and lawmaker who played a part in the forced removal of Native Americans from their land. Some people would now rather call the plant by the name of its Indigenous origin in southern Mexico.

Some things to know:

WHERE DID THE NAME POINSETTIA COME FROM?

The name comes from the amateur botanist and statesman Joel Roberts Poinsett, who happened upon the plant in 1828 during his tenure as the first U.S. minister to the newly independent Mexico.

Poinsett, who was interested in science as well as potential cash crops, sent clippings of the plant to his home in South Carolina and to a botanist in Philadelphia, who affixed the eponymous name to the plant in gratitude.

A life-size bronze statue of Poinsett still stands in his honor in downtown Greenville, South Carolina.

However, he was cast out of Mexico within a year of his discovery, having earned a local reputation for intrusive political maneuvering that extended to a network of secretive masonic lodges and schemes to contain British influence.

IS THE 'POINSETTIA' NAME LOSING ITS LUSTER?

As more people learn of its namesake's complicated history, the name "poinsettia" has become less attractive in the United States.

Unvarnished published accounts reveal Poinsett as a disruptive advocate for business interests abroad, a slaveholder on a rice plantation in the U.S., and a secretary of war who helped oversee the forced removal of Native Americans, including the westward relocation of Cherokee populations to Oklahoma known as the "Trail of Tears."

In a new biography titled "Flowers, Guns and Money," historian Lindsay Schakenbach Regele describes the cosmopolitan Poinsett as a political and economic pragmatist who conspired with a Chilean independence leader and colluded with British bankers in Mexico. Though he was a slaveowner, he opposed secession, and he didn't live to see the Civil War.

Schakenbach Regele renders tough judgment on Poinsett's treatment of and regard for Indigenous peoples.

"Because Poinsett belonged to learned societies, contributed to botanists' collections, and purchased art from Europe, he could more readily justify the expulsion of Natives from their homes," she writes.

A CHRISTMAS FLOWER OF MANY NAMES

The cultivation of the plant dates back to the Aztec empire in Mexico 500 years ago.

Among Nahuatl-speaking communities of Mexico, the plant is known as the *cueltlaxochitl* (kwet-la-SHO-sheet), meaning "flower that withers." It's an apt description of the thin red leaves on wild varieties of the plant that grow to heights above 10 feet (3 meters).

Year-end holiday markets in Latin America brim with the potted plant known in Spanish as the "flor de Nochebuena," or "flower of Christmas Eve," which is entwined with celebrations of the night before Christmas. The "Nochebuena" name is traced to early Franciscan friars who arrived from Spain in the 16th century. Spaniards once called it "scarlet cloth."

Additional nicknames abound: "Santa Catarina" in Mexico, "estrella federal," or "federal star" in Argentina and "penacho de Incan," or "headdress" in Peru.

Ascribed in the 19th century, the Latin name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, means "the most beautiful" of a diverse genus with a milky sap of latex.

SO WHAT IS ITS PREFERRED NAME?

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 67 of 74

"Cuetaxochitl" is winning over some enthusiasts among Mexican youths, including the diaspora in the U.S., according to Elena Jackson Albarrán, a professor of Mexican history and global and intercultural studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

"I've seen a trend towards people openly saying: 'Don't call this flower either poinsettia or Nochebuena. It's cuetlaxochitl,'" said Jackson Albarrán. "There's going to be a big cohort of people who are like, 'Who cares?'"

Most ordinary people in Mexico never say "poinsettia" and don't talk about Poinsett, according to Laura Trejo, a Mexican biologist who is leading studies on the genetic history of the U.S. poinsettia.

"I feel like it's only the historians, the diplomats and, well, the politicians who know the history of Poinsett," Trejo said.

THE MEXICAN ROOTS OF U.S. POINSETTIAS

Mexican biologists in recent years have traced the genetic stock of U.S. poinsettia plants to a wild variant in the Pacific coastal state of Guerrero, verifying lore about Poinsett's pivotal encounter there. The scientists also are researching a rich, untapped diversity of other wild variants, in efforts that may help guard against the poaching of plants and theft of genetic information.

The flower still grows wild along Mexico's Pacific Coast and parts of Central America as far as Costa Rica.

Trejo, of the National Council of Science and Technology in the central state of Tlaxcala, said some informal outdoor markets still sell the "sun cuetlaxochitl" that resemble wild varieties, alongside modern patented varieties.

In her field research travels, Trejo has found households that preserve ancient traditions associated with the flower.

"It's clear to us that this plant, since the pre-Hispanic era, is a ceremonial plant, an offering, because it's still in our culture, in the interior of the county, to cut the flowers and take them to the altars," she said in Spanish. "And this is primarily associated with the maternal goddesses: with Coatlicue, Tonantzin and now with the Virgin Mary."

A LASTING FIGURE IN HISTORY

Regardless of his troubled history, Poinsett's legacy as an explorer and collector continues to loom large: Some 1,800 meticulously tended poinsettias are delivered in November and December from greenhouses in Maryland to a long list of museums in Washington, D.C., affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution.

A "pink-champagne" cultivar adorns the National Portrait Gallery this year.

Poinsett's name may also live on for his connection to other areas of U.S. culture. He advocated for the establishment of a national science museum, and in part due to his efforts, a fortune bequeathed by British scientist James Smithson was used to underwrite the creation of the Smithsonian Institution.

Health officials push to get schoolchildren vaccinated as more US parents opt out

By DEVI SHASTRI AP Health Writer

When Idaho had a rare measles outbreak a few months ago, health officials scrambled to keep it from spreading. In the end, 10 people, all in one family, were infected, all unvaccinated.

This time, the state was lucky, said the region's medical director Dr. Perry Jansen. The family quickly quarantined and the children were already taught at home. The outbreak could have been worse if the kids were in public school, given the state's low vaccination rates, he said.

In Idaho last year, parents opted out of state-required vaccines for 12% of kids entering kindergarten, the highest rate in the nation.

"We tend to forget that diseases like measles and polio used to kill people," said Jansen, medical director of the Southwest District Health Department, which handled the outbreak in September.

All states require children to have certain routine vaccines to go to public school, and often private school and day care, to prevent outbreaks of once-common childhood diseases like measles, mumps, whooping cough, chickenpox and polio. All provide exemptions for children who have a medical reason for avoiding

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 68 of 74

the shots. Most also offer waivers for religious beliefs. Fifteen allow a waiver for any personal belief.

Last school year, vaccination waivers among kindergartners hit an all-time high: 3% in total, according to a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report. Waivers for religious or personal beliefs have been on the rise, driven by some states loosening laws, in others by vaccine misinformation and political rhetoric amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Idaho, "a parent only has to provide a signed statement," to get a waiver, the state's health department said. A change in state law before the 2018-19 school year made it easier to get waivers. The state's exemption rate that year was 7.7%.

September's measles outbreak started when a resident of Nampa, the state's third largest city, returned home from a trip abroad. Measles is usually brought into the U.S. through travel since widespread vaccination has all but eliminated local spread of the disease.

It takes a very high level of vaccination — around 95% — to protect against the spread of measles and other diseases, experts say. During the pandemic, the national rate for vaccinations among kindergartners dropped to 93%.

Health experts say interventions on every level are needed to get more kids immunized: doctors talking to parents, social media campaigns, easier access to vaccines in some areas, enforcement by schools in others.

Last year, most states had an increase in waivers. Hawaii, which allows medical and religious waivers, saw rates double from the previous school year. Nearly 6.5% of kindergartners have an exemption for at least one required vaccine.

It's impossible to know the reasons behind a waiver, said Ronald Balajadia, immunization program manager for Hawaii State Department of Health. But misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines "has bled through to routine vaccines" that people wouldn't normally question, Balajadia said.

While some states have made it easier to opt out, others have clamped down. Connecticut eliminated its longstanding religious waiver for vaccinations in 2021, joining California, West Virginia, New York and Maine in allowing only medical exemptions. The change drew protests and lawsuits. With only a medical waiver now, the kindergartner vaccination rate reached 97% or above last year; waiver rates dropped to less than 1%.

The state is still working to get more parents on board by answering their questions "and not just dismiss them. It's our best shot at trying to bring people along," said Dr. Manisha Juthani, commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Public Health.

Georgia had the second largest drop in vaccine waivers last year — from 4.7% to 3.8%. State health officials cited a steady post-pandemic return to partnerships between schools, public health and pediatricians as possible reasons for the improvement.

Dr. Angela Highbaugh-Battle has cared for kids in rural Georgia for 17 years, now in the small coastal community of St. Mary's. She said she spends more time now talking to parents wary about routine childhood vaccines.

Every connection, every conversation, is a chance to educate, she said.

"It's not about winning or losing," she said.

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States are trashing troves of masks and pandemic gear as huge, costly stockpiles linger and expire

By JENNIFER PELTZ and DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

When the coronavirus pandemic took hold in an unprepared U.S., many states like Ohio scrambled for masks and other protective gear. Supplies were so limited in 2020 that the state bought millions of medical gowns from a marketing and printing company and spent about \$20 million to try to get personal protec-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 69 of 74

tive equipment made in-state.

Three years later, as the grips of the pandemic have loosened, Ohio and other states are now trying to deal with an excess of protective gear, ditching their supplies in droves.

With expiration dates passing and few requests to tap into the stockpile, Ohio auctioned off 393,000 gowns for just \$2,451 and ended up throwing away another 7.2 million, along with expired masks, gloves and other materials. The now expiring supplies had cost about \$29 million in federal money.

A similar reckoning is happening around the country. Items are aging, and as a deadline to allocate federal COVID-19 cash approaches next year, states must decide how much to invest in maintaining warehouses and supply stockpiles.

An Associated Press investigation found that at least 15 states, from Alaska to Vermont, have tossed some of their trove of PPE because of expiration, surpluses and a lack of willing takers.

Into the trash went more than 18 million masks, 22 million gowns, 500,000 gloves, and more. That's not counting states that didn't give the AP exact figures or responded in cases or other measurements. Rhode Island said it shredded and recycled 829 tons of PPE; Maryland disposed of over \$93 million in supplies.

"What a real waste. That's what happens when you don't prepare, when you have a bust-and-boom public health system," where a lack of planning leads to panicked over-purchasing in emergencies, said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association. "It shows that we really have to do a better job of managing our stockpiles."

The AP sent inquiries about PPE stockpiles to all 50 states over the past several months. About half responded.

States emphasize that they distributed far more gear than they discarded and have gone to lengths to donate the leftovers. Washington state sent hundreds of thousands of supplies to the Marshall Islands last year. Pennsylvania says it offered PPE to 10,000 cities, health facilities and more throughout the pandemic. Both states still ended up throwing out loads of expired items.

Some states found limited post-expiration uses, such as training exercises.

Many states are keeping at least a portion, and sometimes all, of their remaining protective gear. Some, such as Minnesota, even plan to update their stockpiles.

But others say the vagaries of the pandemic and the PPE supply left no choice but to acquire the items, and now to throw them out, however reluctantly. Expiration dates are set because materials can degrade and might not work as intended. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has set the fair market value of expired supplies at zero dollars.

"Anytime you're involved in a situation where you're recalling how difficult it was to get something in the first place, and then having to watch that go or not be used in the way it was intended to be used, certainly, there's some frustration in that," said Louis Eubank, who runs the South Carolina health department's COVID-19 coordination office. The state has discarded over 650,000 expired masks.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, health care product distributors typically kept 20 to 30 days of supplies. That wasn't enough when the pandemic struck and demand skyrocketed for N95 masks, gloves and gowns. They became so scarce that some health care workers wore homemade masks and used trash bags for gowns.

Hampered by years of underfunding and expanded responsibilities, the U.S. government's Strategic National Stockpile "was not equipped to handle the COVID-19 pandemic," according to an inspector general's report. As the federal stockpile dwindled, states plunged into global bidding wars and anything-goes arrangements. Massachusetts even used the New England Patriots' team plane to collect masks from China.

The explosive demand triggered a surge — and ultimately a hard crash — for American PPE manufacturers. The AP found in 2020 that states spent over \$7 billion in a few months on PPE, ventilators and some other high-demand medical devices in a seller's market. Ultimately, the federal government paid for many of the supplies.

"There was no way to know, at the time of purchase, how long the supply deficit would last or what quantities would be needed," Ohio Department of Health spokesperson Ken Gordon said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 70 of 74

Ohio distributed more than 227 million pieces of protective equipment during the pandemic. But as the supply crunch and the health crisis eased, demand faded, especially for gowns.

Now, "states, hospitals, manufacturers – everybody in the whole system -- has extra product," said Linda Rouse O'Neill of the Health Industry Distributors Association.

Given the glut, stockpiled items are selling for bargain prices, if at all. Vermont got \$82.50 for 105,000 boot covers and 29 cents apiece for thousands of safety goggles.

The glut extends beyond states. Georgia's Fulton County, which encompasses Atlanta, dispensed gloves, hand sanitizer and other supplies by the dozens of boxes at a public PPE giveaway in March.

New York City said it auctioned a heap of "non-medical-grade" PPE that was expiring or supplanted by better versions. Health Commissioner Dr. Ashwin Vasani told local lawmakers in May that officials would focus on enhancing supply contracts for future emergencies, rather than prioritizing "a static stockpile of commodities."

Missouri's mental health department planned but scrapped an auction of thousands of extra masks, gowns and other protective items bought with federal coronavirus relief money. The agency cited a belief that federal rules barred such a sale, but the U.S. Treasury Department later told the AP that states can sell excess PPE.

Supply chain chaos prompted some governments to place multiple orders, resulting in surpluses when the shipments belatedly arrived.

A New York state-run veterans' home was so deluged by PPE deliveries in early 2021 that it stashed them under tarps in a parking lot. By the time a warehouse was arranged four months later, between \$560,000 and \$1.6 million of supplies were too damaged to use — and cost another \$21,000 to incinerate, according to a state inspector general's office report. Another \$779,000 in expired items have been discarded.

Striking a balance between preparedness and surpluses is "a major dilemma" for governments, said Scott Amey of the Project on Government Oversight, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog group. And while politicians vowed in 2020 never to be caught off guard again, "memories are short, budgets are tight," Amey noted.

In Wisconsin, a legislative committee axed from the budget \$17.2 million that would have funded a warehouse with an ongoing 60-day supply of PPE for two years.

The state Department of Health Services said it is now "demobilizing the warehouse" and trying to donate the supplies. Already, Wisconsin has tossed nearly 1.7 million masks and almost 1 million gowns.

In Michigan, a 2021 state law requires the state health department to keep a stockpile of up to two months of medical supplies, and the department's website shows more than 38 million items on hand.

But one of the law's sponsors, Republican state Rep. John Roth, said he now thinks "we have to take another look at it," suggesting a one-month supply might mean less waste.

The Health Industry Distributors Association recommends that product distributors maintain a 60-to-90-day supply to guard against demand spikes. But the group says it's probably unnecessary for everyone in the system — from manufacturers to doctors' offices — to have such a large cushion.

Some government officials concur.

"It's not really practical for most local health departments to have a large stockpile of materials for 'just in case,'" said Adriane Casalotti of the National Association of County and City Health Officials. "They have limited budgets. They also have limited space."

Pennsylvania officials are aiming for a 15-day stockpile after frank conversations about what they can afford not only to keep, but to keep replacing. Tens of thousands of cases of PPE already have expired and been slated for disposal.

"If we had unlimited federal funding, or even significantly more federal funding, for public health preparedness, that 60-day stockpile or 90-day stockpile would be a fantastic idea," said Andy Pickett, the Health Department's emergency preparedness and response director.

Meanwhile, Missouri's health department has maintained a 90-day supply of PPE, based on the highest-demand months of the pandemic. It's keeping even expired materials, presuming the federal government

will OK their use in an emergency as it did for COVID-19. Missouri has insured the stockpile at \$19 million.

"If you don't make the investment – and perhaps the investment that is never used – then you may not be prepared to assist the public when it's needed," Missouri health director Paula Nickelson said.

Minnesota's Department of Health was allocated some money this year for retaining and restocking PPE and is figuring out how much, while trying to condense the cache. For now, emergency response official Deb Radi says the agency expects to dispose of a few expiring gowns — items once so elusive that the state bought disposable raincoats instead.

"People might be critical that we have some excess supply right now, but they would have been way more critical if we were not trying to procure supplies at the time we needed them," Radi said.

She hopes the federal government will examine how expiration dates are determined and whether they can be extended.

Chris Emory, who runs New Mexico's Bureau of Health Emergency Management, suggests incentivizing suppliers to expand their stocks. Still, his state is hanging onto its PPE cache, after using masks left over from fighting the H1N1 flu when COVID-19 struck.

Nevada, meanwhile, can't give its aging PPE away fast enough. Pallets of it are at or approaching expiration in a leased warehouse, Department of Administration Director Jack Robb lamented.

Nevada is endeavoring to shed expiring supplies safely and efficiently and not waste money, "but the bulk of this is going to end up in a landfill," he said. Some already did.

But Robb said officials "made the best decisions that they could" when confronted with a disease that has killed nearly 7 million people worldwide, including some of his close friends.

"And I hope we never see anything like that again in our lifetime," he said.

US Catholic leadership foresees challenges after repeated election defeats for abortion opponents

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

Repeatedly in recent years, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has stipulated that "the threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority." In the face of recent election setbacks for abortion opponents, leading bishops and their lay allies are reassessing how to move forward with that stance.

The latest rebuff came Nov. 7 in Ohio, when voters decisively approved a constitutional amendment that ensures access to abortion and other forms of reproductive health care. It was the seventh consecutive state where voters decided to protect abortion access since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the nationwide constitutional right to abortion in June 2022.

The Ohio result was particularly stinging for abortion opponents, coming in a state where tough anti-abortion measures had been approved by the Republican-controlled legislature.

"Today is a tragic day for women, children, and families in Ohio," the state's Catholic bishops said in a joint statement as the outcome became clear.

"We must look ahead," the bishops added. "Despite the obstacles this amendment presents, the Catholic Church in Ohio will continue to work for policies that defend the most vulnerable, strengthen the child-parent relationship, and support women in need."

Brian Hickey, executive director of the Catholic Conference of Ohio, noted that support for the abortion-rights amendment was particularly strong among younger voters, signaling that it could take many years to build an anti-abortion majority in the state's electorate. Exit polls suggested that more than 75% of voters aged 18 to 29 backed the amendment.

"How do we reach this next generation of Ohioans?" Hickey asked during an interview with The Associated Press. "We know there is a lot of work to do."

The chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pro-life Activities, Bishop Michael Burbidge of Arlington, Virginia, recalled how he and his colleagues celebrated 18 months ago after the Supreme Court — in its so-called Dobbs decision — struck down the much-debated Roe v. Wade ruling of 1973. The result was to

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 72 of 74

end the nationwide right to abortion, and leave it to individual states to decide whether to ban it or allow it.

"There was a moment to celebrate, but we also knew it was only a brief moment, because rightfully this issue is back in the states," Burbidge said. "These ballot-measure results are very unsettling."

Burbidge said the Catholic leadership needed to convey more clearly that it is "pro-women" -- even as it supports state legislation aimed at limiting their options regarding unwanted pregnancies.

"Not even our parishioners are aware of all of the support the Catholic Church will give to single moms in need — counseling, financial assistance, housing — so mothers know they are being accompanied," he told the AP. "We will be with them every step of the way."

"We look at the results, and they are not favorable," Burbidge added. "We have a good message to convey. ... Even if it hits some more bumps in the road, some disappointments, eventually we believe that what is true, what is just, will triumph."

2024 will bring many opportunities for disappointments and triumphs. Abortion is sure to be a key issue in many political contests, and efforts are underway in several states — including Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Missouri and Nebraska — to get Ohio-style abortion-rights measures on the ballot.

Burbidge and Hickey said the Catholic leadership, as it moved ahead in the abortion debate, should avoid sounding harsh and punitive. Hickey, for example, suggested that abortion restrictions would receive greater public support if they offered exceptions, perhaps allowing abortions for women impregnated by rape.

"We need to have those conversations," Hickey said. "The Catholic Church is a place for refuge. It's not a place for condemnation."

Some Catholic abortion opponents favor an aggressive approach, whether or not it sways voter sentiment.

"The church will never compromise, it cannot compromise. It will always stand for the truth that every single human life is sacred," said Brian Burch, president of the conservative advocacy group CatholicVote.

"But it's very clear the public is completely divided on this," he added. "Recent trends show the public is not willing to go where many pro-life entities had hoped to go in the wake of Dobbs."

Burch said state legislatures with anti-abortion majorities should avoid punishing women who get abortions. But he approves of penalties against medical personnel who provide abortions, and favors new laws that could punish people for pressuring a woman to get an abortion.

"The abortion divide has become more heightened because of Dobbs," he said. "There is no question the Democrats will use the issue next year. It's a political gamble and I hope they're wrong."

Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life, hopes the Democrats do highlight the issue — and says abortion opponents should engage head-on in the ensuing debate, rather than skirting the issue.

"We need an honest debate about abortion — a debate that starts with a clear, objective and public description of what the abortion procedure is," Pavone says in a strategy memo he's distributing to political candidates. "Abortion supporters refuse to describe what they defend ... abortion itself is the last thing they want to talk about."

Pavone was a Catholic priest from 1988 until 2022, when the Vatican removed him from the priesthood for "blasphemous communications" on social media, and persistent disobedience of his bishop. Over many years, he had drawn attention for partisan political activities that accompanied his anti-abortion activism.

In common with Burbidge, Hickey and Burch, Pavone advocates showing compassion for women considering abortion.

But Catholics who support abortion rights question how this rhetoric can be reconciled with a stance that would deny these women the freedom to choose for themselves how to proceed.

"Solidarity with women — what does that mean?" asked Jamie Manson, president of Catholics for Choice.

"Women do not have equality in the church. We're not allowed to lead, to be ordained," she said. "I don't know what 'solidarity' means when you have an entrenched second-class status for women."

Manson would like to see a new kind of conversation within Catholic ranks.

"Many Catholic women have had an abortion — they have a story to tell," she said. "What I'm hoping and pushing for is for Catholic leaders to listen to why women made that choice and have no regrets."

For now, the U.S. bishops conference has signaled it will press ahead with existing strategies on abor-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 73 of 74

tion. Last month, a week after the abortion-rights amendment was approved in Ohio, the bishops elected Daniel Thomas, the bishop of Toledo, Ohio, to succeed Burbidge in November 2024 as chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities.

Thomas had forcefully appealed for Ohioans to defeat the amendment, calling it “extreme, dangerous and unacceptable.”

Manson depicted the election of Thomas as “ironic,” given that Catholic dioceses in Ohio had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars unsuccessfully opposing the amendment.

“The Catholic bishops are doubling down on their losing abortion strategy through 2024,” she said. “The Catholic Church will continue to spend big in elections — and they will continue to lose.”

Today in History: December 21

Gen. Sherman concludes ‘March to the Sea’ during Civil War

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 21, the 355th day of 2023. There are 10 days left in the year. Winter begins at 10:27 p.m. EST.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On Dec. 21, 1864, during the Civil War, Union forces led by Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman concluded their “March to the Sea” as they captured Savannah, Georgia.

On this date:

In 1620, Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower went ashore for the first time at present-day Plymouth, Massachusetts.

In 1891, the first basketball game, devised by James Naismith, is believed to have been played at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts. (The final score of this experimental game: 1-0.)

In 1913, the first newspaper crossword puzzle, billed as a “Word-Cross Puzzle,” was published in the New York World.

In 1914, the U.S. government began requiring passport applicants to provide photographs of themselves.

In 1945, U.S. Army Gen. George S. Patton, 60, died in Heidelberg, Germany, 12 days after being seriously injured in a car accident.

In 1976, the Liberian-registered tanker Argo Merchant broke apart near Nantucket Island off Massachusetts almost a week after running aground, spilling 7.5 million gallons of oil into the North Atlantic.

In 1988, 270 people were killed when a terrorist bomb exploded aboard a Pam Am Boeing 747 over Lockerbie, Scotland, sending wreckage crashing to the ground.

In 1991, eleven of the 12 former Soviet republics proclaimed the birth of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the death of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

In 1995, the city of Bethlehem passed from Israeli to Palestinian control.

In 2009, the Obama administration imposed a three-hour limit on how long airlines can keep passengers waiting inside planes delayed on the ground.

In 2015, the nation’s three-decade-old ban on blood donations from gay and bisexual men was formally lifted, but major restrictions continued to limit who could give blood in the U.S.

In 2017, the U.N. General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to denounce President Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, largely ignoring Trump’s threat to cut off aid to any country that went against him.

In 2020, President-elect Joe Biden received his first dose of the coronavirus vaccine on live television as part of a growing effort to convince the American public the inoculations were safe.

In 2022, Franco Harris, the Hall of Fame running back whose “Immaculate Reception” is considered the most iconic play in NFL history, died at age 72.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 21, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 180 ~ 74 of 74

Today's Birthdays: Talk show host Phil Donahue is 88. Actor Jane Fonda is 86. Actor Larry Bryggman is 85. Singer Carla Thomas is 81. Musician Albert Lee is 80. Conductor Michael Tilson Thomas is 79. Actor Josh Mostel is 77. Actor Samuel L. Jackson is 75. Rock singer Nick Gilder is 73. Movie producer Jeffrey Katzenberg is 73. Actor Dennis Boutsikaris is 71. International Tennis Hall of Famer Chris Evert is 69. Actor Jane Kaczmarek is 68. Country singer Lee Roy Parnell is 67. Former child actor Lisa Gerritsen is 66. Actor-comedian Ray Romano is 66. Former Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin is 61. Country singer Christy Forester (The Forester Sisters) is 61. Rock musician Murph (The Lemonheads; Dinosaur Jr.) is 59. Actor-comedian Andy Dick is 58. Rock musician Gabrielle Glaser is 58. Actor Michelle Hurd is 57. Actor Kiefer Sutherland is 57. Actor Karri Turner is 57. Actor Khristyne Haje is 55. Country singer Brad Warren (The Warren Brothers) is 55. Actor Julie Delpy is 54. Contemporary Christian singer Natalie Grant is 52. Actor Glenn Fitzgerald is 52. Singer-musician Brett Scallions is 52. World Golf Hall of Famer Karrie Webb is 49. Rock singer Lukas Rossi (Rock Star Supernova) is 47. French President Emmanuel Macron is 46. Actor Rutina Wesley is 45. Rock musician Anna Bulbrook (Airborne Toxic Event) is 41. Country singer Luke Stricklin is 41. Actor Steven Yeun is 40. Actor Kaitlyn Dever is 27.